CHAPTER 1

The Anthropocene
A Literary Career

Pieter Vermeulen

An Unlikely Critical Concept

What's in a name? Not as much as we expect – when we expect too much. In the humanities, expressions of dissatisfaction with the term "Anthropocene" have by now become a cliché. In retrospect, the decision to identify a historical period with "the human" (literally, "Anthropocene" means "the epoch of the human" or, less gender-consciously, "the epoch of man") made a backlash unavoidable. A whole range of critical discourses that have in the last half-century cut their teeth on critiques of "the human" and all it entails (anthropocentrism, logocentrism, phallocentrism, Eurocentrism . . .) were bound to exhaust themselves in critiques of the term. Some of these critiques reject the term outright, other call for "pluralizing" or "breaking up" the Anthropocene.[1] The Anthropocene's focus on human agency, one line of criticism goes, obscures the uniquely impactful role of global capitalism – a critical tendency that has spawned alternative notions like the Capitalocene (popularized by Andreas Malm and Jason Moore) and the Plantationocene (launched by Anna Tsing and Donna Haraway). It homogenizes a diversity of human experiences into one image of "the human," even while it misrecognizes the agency of nonhuman agents (which Donna Haraway tried to correct by coining the playful notion of the Chthulucene). It is, moreover, culturally and historically myopic, in that it privileges a contemporary awareness of planetary change that emerged in the industrialized West at the expense of historically and culturally diverse (not to say Indigenous) forms of ecological awareness. Indeed, so many alternative "-cenes" have been coined that Steve Mentz even ironically came up with the alternative name of the "Neologismcene."[2] The name of the Anthropocene, it seems safe to conclude, does not satisfy anyone.

Yet once we factor in what we expect from the term, this dissatisfaction is unavoidable. It is, I think, unrealistic to expect one term to adequately capture the near-infinite cluster of concerns that are customarily covered by

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. Aarhus Universitets Biblioteker, on 15 Jul 2026 at 15:15:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009537780.003

the word. We can turn to Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer's first written definition of the concept (in May 2000, three months after Crutzen found himself uttering the word at a conference in Mexico) to get a sense of this vast scope. Crutzen and Stoermer mention the recent increase in population, growing urbanization, increasing output of sulfur dioxide, booming use of synthetic nitrogen, the loss of mangroves, and an increasing impact of human action on large freshwater systems.[3] Phenomena from such diverse domains cannot be expected to be adequately rendered by one term (even if we note that Crutzen does not even foreground the momentous issue of climate change, which he would in later descriptions of the term). I believe that it is more productive to consider the Anthropocene as a *necessary misnomer*: a term that, because it can never live up to expectations of accuracy and comprehensiveness, serves as a catalyst for debate, dissent, and creativity in coining alternatives that are themselves bound to disappoint – and generate further debate in their turn.

Rather than bemoaning its inevitable insufficiency, this chapter tracks the undeniable *productivity* of the term across different domains, with a special focus on literature. Crutzen's ceaseless advocacy for the term allowed it to enter the cultural mainstream, at the very latest in 2011 (although we will see that literary studies already began to engage with it in 2009), when both *National Geographic* (under the title "Enter the Anthropocene – Age of Man") and *The Economist* ("Welcome to the Anthropocene") profiled the term. In 2013, Berlin's Haus der Kulturen der Welt started a ten-year program of artistic, pedagogical, and research engagements with the Anthropocene – the first of many prominent artistic institutions centering on the notion. In the second half of the 2010s, the prepositional phrase "in the Anthropocene" (attached to such disparate terms as "architecture" and "wildlife" to "the human condition" and "life and death") became an increasingly unavoidable (and eminently search engine friendly) part of the titles of scholarly publications. In these contexts, the Anthropocene serves less as a name with a stable referent than as a term signaling ecological concerns, interdisciplinary endeavors, and expansive methodologies.

It is a mistake to see these extended uses of the term as metaphorical distortions of an essentially geological concept. While it is often assumed that the Anthropocene is a geological term, the first decade of the term's career in fact took place in the interdisciplinary field of global change research, where it encompassed a large swathe of phenomena, both in human action and in the Earth System. While Crutzen coined the term in explicit contrast to the chronostratigraphic unit of the Holocene, it is only in 2009 that the process of the formalization of the term as the next geological epoch in Earth history took off. For over a decade after, it looked

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. Aarhus Universitets Biblioteker, on 15 Jul 2026 at 15:15:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009537780.003

like the efforts of the Anthropocene Working Group (AWG) of the Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy (SQS) of the International Commission on Stratigraphy were heading for a successful conclusion and the official recognition of the term, especially when, in the summer of 2023 after a painstaking vetting process, the AWG identified a so-called golden spike. The identification of a geological profile indicating the onset of planetary-scale change is a prerequisite for the recognition of a new unit of the chronostratigraphic timescale. The small Canadian Lake Crawford fit the bill, as its sedimentary layers contained evidence of atmospheric nuclear bomb testing and biotic changes taking place around 1950, the proposed starting date for the so-called Great Acceleration, and thus also for the Anthropocene.[4] With its homework complete, the effort of the AWG was taken to a vote by SQS, which resulted in fifteen years of scientific and bureaucratic work being thrown into the dustbin. As far as the geological community is concerned, we are not living in the Anthropocene after all.

The most striking thing about this well-publicized dismissal is how irrelevant it is. The shunning of the term as a chronostratigraphic unit is no more than an anecdote and, arguably, another reminder that *naming* things, particularly episodes in planetary history, is a complex endeavor where a neat referential fit or a literal meaning uncorrupted by semantic drift are simply not available. It is a testament to the productivity of the term that its trajectory seems hardly affected by the byzantine procedures of geological science. The announcement of the negative decision was met with a series of journalistic assessments that affirmed that, whatever the geological community decides, the Anthropocene is here to stay – as a reality, as a signifier. It is this fact that scholars of literary studies have to come to terms with. In the next section, I survey the rise of the concept in the field of literary studies; after that, I show how literature and literary studies have helped shape the concept of the Anthropocene by drawing on specific literary affordances: literature's power to manipulate affect, to reflect on the ontology of writing, to juxtapose different historical moments, to narrate life at different scales at once. The Anthropocene as it is filtered through literature and literary studies, I argue, is not exactly the same as we find outside of these domains. I conclude by speculating that the affinity between literature and the Anthropocene is linked to literature's peculiar place in the modern world.

The Strange Career of the Anthropocene in Literary Studies

The development of the *literary* Anthropocene to a large extent confirms the overall career of the term since 2000. The years 2009 and 2015 are two threshold moments – the former introducing the term in the field, and the

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. Aarhus Universitets Biblioteker, on 15 Jul 2026 at 15:15:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009537780.003

latter marking the beginning of its consolidation, also beyond the confines of more strictly *environmental* literary studies. A look at the trajectory of the term in literary studies makes this clear. In September 2024, a search in the *MLA International Bibliography* (the most comprehensive database of literary scholarship) yields 1,404 hits through the search term "Anthropocene." The first handful of publications appeared in 2009, and the output remained small until 2013 (nine publications that year), and then grew to thirty-six a year (both 2014 and 2015) to increase to more than a hundred after 2017, and more than 200 in 2021 and 2022.[5] Remarkably, in the years before the first important book publications in literary Anthropocene studies appeared (in 2015, which saw the publication of Timothy Clark's *Ecocriticism on the Edge* and Adam Trexler's *Anthropocene Fictions*),[6] the main interventions at the interface of literature and the Anthropocene took shape as special journal issues (or sections). The first two of these did not really theorize the notion of the Anthropocene and instead borrowed the label to describe an enlarged understanding of ecology. Under the title "Writing in the Anthropocene," a special section in the November 2009 issue of the *Australian Humanities Review* (in a recurring section of the journal entitled "The Ecological Humanities") takes inspiration from Australian ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood, who had died earlier that year, to explore "the role of writers in our current time of crisis," and marshals the label of the Anthropocene to "awaken . . . us to new and more enlivened understandings of the world, our place in it, and the situated connectivities that bind us into multi-species communities."[7] A 2011 special section of *Colloquia Germanica* co-edited by Caroline Schaumann and Heather Sullivan and entitled "Dirty Nature: Grit, Grime, and Genre in the Anthropocene" mobilizes the signifier to advertise a push beyond the complacent green aesthetics of customary ecocriticism toward the dirty and the ugly; the Anthropocene, the guest editors note, reveals nature as "a composite of material interactions on many scales including activities of bodies, species, and energy politics in which we human beings are full participants along with our fellow species on the planet."[8] As these two early examples show, the Anthropocene first emerged in literary studies to underline ethical urgencies[9] and to announce an expansive understanding of ecological responsibility.

The year 2009 saw the first use of the term in literary studies, and also the publication of the first of historian Dipesh Chakrabarty's conceptual and methodological explorations of the notion of the Anthropocene.[10] "The Climate of History" eschewed ethicized and ecological registers, and foregrounded the conceptual and methodological challenges of the notion

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. Aarhus Universitets Biblioteker, on 15 Jul 2026 at 15:15:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009537780.003

of the Anthropocene for the humanities and for our understanding of modernity. Chakrabarty's 2012 follow-up article also highlighted the paradoxical nature of the notion (naming the triumph of the very species that finds itself degraded by the developments the concept names) in a way that broadened its appeal to literary scholars *beyond* the remit of ecocriticism.[11] Three special issues that appeared before (what we might want to call) the great acceleration in literary Anthropocene studies testify to this broader theoretical appeal. A 2012 special issue of the *Oxford Literary Review* explored "Deconstruction in the Anthropocene" and brought together Timothy Morton, Claire Colebrook, and Timothy Clark as key theorists at the interface of literature, theory, and the Anthropocene. A 2014 focus section of the *Minnesota Review* edited by Tobias Boes and Kate Marshall developed the enormously productive insight that "the Anthropocene can best be understood as a form of writing, a process by which humankind inscribes permanent messages into the geological, climatological, and biochemical records of our planet and is forced, in turn, to study those records for messages pertaining to its future."[12] Also in 2014, the *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* featured an essay on the Anthropocene in its inaugural issue (on "New Topographies of the Postcolonial") that was followed by a forum in its second issue. This theoretical and interdisciplinary exploration of the notion *beyond* the confines of ecocriticism was consolidated by the publication in 2016 of writer and academic Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement*, whose argument about the fundamental disconnect between the traditional novel form and Anthropocene reality became a compulsory reference point for literary Anthropocene studies in the years after (even if almost nobody agreed with Ghosh's diagnosis).[13]

Since 2015, the notion of the Anthropocene, whether indexing a measure of ecological urgency or theoretical complexity, has become a fairly unremarkable part of the critical toolbox of literary studies. Already in 2016, the *MLA International Bibliography* shows how the Anthropocene provides a new context to assess the work of such diverse authors as Tennyson and Margaret Cavendish; between 2019 and 2022, volumes with titles such as *The Anthropocene: Key Issues for the Humanities*, *Literature and the Anthropocene*, the *Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Anthropocene*, and *The Anthropocene: Approaches and Contexts for Literature and the Humanities* confirmed the consolidation of the term as a key critical concept.[14] The program of the yearly *MLA* convention (arguably the most important and wide-ranging indicator of literary critical developments) shows a very similar picture. Since 2015, over twenty-five

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. Aarhus Universitets Biblioteker, on 15 Jul 2026 at 15:15:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009537780.003

panels have been focused on the Anthropocene (before 2015, there is one lonely panel on literary history and the Anthropocene from 2012). These are typically devoted to updating different research (sub)fields for this new context: We find panels on the Anthropocene and/in media studies and the eighteenth century (2015), digital humanities, memory studies, and the Middle Ages (all 2017). One notable shift is that since 2020, the label has drifted to contexts where nondominant literatures and cultures are studied: the Global South and Indigeneity (2020), Latin American and the Caribbean (2022, 2024), East and Southeast Asia (2021, 2023). It seems safe to say that the career of the Anthropocene in literary studies no longer only indexes ecological emergency and theoretical complexity, but also cultural difference. The career of the Anthropocene in literary studies, then, illustrates how the term has internalized its own criticism – how, that is, it has shifted from an *object* of critique for its alleged cultural homogeneity to a conceptual *tool* for interrogating cultural difference.

Literary Anthropocenes

The Anthropocene acquires different meanings in different contexts; as we have seen, not even its geological meaning is referentially stable, and the Anthropocene emerged in 2000 as a term that clustered a decidedly promiscuous list of phenomena. As Jan Zalasiewicz, the former chair of the AWG has remarked, the term has been used in different scholarly fields, many of them situated in the social sciences and the humanities, where it is "often flexibly interpreted" and encompasses "wide ranges and levels of human impact and interactions with the environment."[15] This implies that the particular shape that the Anthropocene takes in particular domains of knowledge depends on the particular affordances of that domain. And while Zalasiewicz and his colleagues do not discuss literature, the currency of the notion of the Anthropocene in contemporary literature and literary studies invites the question of how the notion and the field have co-constituted one another. How, in other words, have the particular affordances of literature (even instances that predate the popularity of the notion) inflected the notion of the Anthropocene? To what extent have literary mediations of the Anthropocene revealed a certain literariness in the notion? In this section, I want to highlight five elements that, I argue, are more pronounced in the *literary* than in the nonliterary Anthropocene: literature has made visible the Anthropocene as, in a sense, a process of writing (1); it has constituted it as a multi- or even transscalar reality (2) and as an essentially interdisciplinary object (3); and it has anchored the

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. Aarhus Universitets Biblioteker, on 15 Jul 2026 at 15:15:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009537780.003

Anthropocene in an embodied experience (4) and in the context of disaster (5). While none of these five elements are precisely missing from non-literary uses of the Anthropocene, I want to argue for a particular affinity between this face of the phenomenon and literature – including, as my choice of examples below aims to clarify, instances of literature that are not directly committed to ecological themes.

1. *The Anthropocene as a Form of Writing*. First, there is the fact that the Anthropocene's insistence on the ineradicable imprint of human action on the planet resembles processes of writing. Especially in poststructuralist theory, writing (often rendered as *écriture*) is conceived as a process of leaving traces that, once deposited, escape the control of their author. Writing, on this conception, is not a marker of human sovereignty, but rather entangles human life in uncontainable interactions with nonhuman forces.[16] Boes and Marshall have imagined the Anthropocene in these scriptural terms: as they note, the Anthropocene "is not simply something that is written *about*; it is also something that is actively shaped and created through acts of human inscription." Human actions, in other words, do not function as denotative speech acts but are "performative interventions in which humankind functions as both subject and object."[17] If we understand literature as a particularly self-reflexive form of writing (and that is surely one way to understand it!), it is unsurprising that this connection between writing and forms of nonhuman agency has featured in contemporary writing. In Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy, for instance, one of the most studied and taught Anthropocene texts, a scientist encounters a disturbing nonhuman organism that has the power to "writ[e] living words" among which "[w]hole ecosystems had been born and now flourished."[18] This power to write foregrounds the agency of nonhuman actors, even as human writing, in the form of research reports, turns into compost (in the second book in the trilogy), which further destabilizes the distinction between human and nonhuman agency. Or take Evelyn Reilly's 2009 poetry collection *Styrofoam*, which evokes the colorless ubiquity of polystyrene (of which coffee cups, egg cartons, plastic cutlery, and so on are made) in everyday life in a language that is afflicted by glitches ("heap-like & manifold.of") and the agglutination of words ("All this.information / anddeformation") to underscore that human writing, like human life, in the Anthropocene finds itself situated in saturated ecologies full of waste and toxic elements.[19]

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. Aarhus Universitets Biblioteker, on 15 Jul 2026 at 15:15:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009537780.003

In *Styrofoam* also, the particular affordances of literature (in this case, the poetic license to write ungrammatically) are marshaled to shape a particularly *literary* Anthropocene.

2. *The Anthropocene as a Multiscalar Reality*. Literary iterations of the Anthropocene have also imagined it as a multiscalar (or transscalar) reality. The notion of the Anthropocene invites us to think of human life in relation to the vaster timescales of geology (an idea that is often referred to as "deep time") and the extended scope of the planet.[20] When Amitav Ghosh back in 2016 contended that serious fiction had not met the challenge of imagining these larger scales, one of the literary developments he overlooked was what we could call the multiscalar novel:[21] a genre that deploys the novel genre's infamous formlessness to juxtapose different storylines with different temporal rhythms and spatial coordinates. David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* is an instance of the genre: in thirteen sections, it occupies six different temporal and spatial settings, ranging from the "Pacific Journal" of an American traveler in the Pacific Ocean in the middle of the nineteenth century to a hi-tech future Korea around 2100 and a far-future form of human community in a post-catastrophe Hawaii (or "Ha-Why," as the chapter's diminished language calls it). The novel engages different aspects of the Anthropocene on a *thematic* level: the impact of colonization, the violence of capitalism, the simultaneous destruction of ecological habitats and human societies. *Formally*, it deploys the affordances of the novel form (not least the ability to juxtapose different storylines and to speculate about the future) to train the reader's attention to different scales of life simultaneously: the short reach of a human life, the deathlessness of silicon-based life, as well as the larger rhythms in which civilizations rise and collapse.[22] Jeanette Winterson's 2007 novel *The Stone Gods* roams even more capaciously: it connects carbon- and silicon-based life forms (the latter called "robo sapiens") across speculative pasts (sixty-five million years ago) and futures (after a future third World War) and assesses the material impacts of climate change in these different environments. Across different planets, loss occurs on cosmic, social, ecological, as well as interpersonal scales, and by bringing these together in one novel, Winterson (whose novel directly engages with Earth sciences as it is deeply concerned with "materializing the litho-, chemo-, and biostratigraphic signals that index human activity in both pre- and postindustrial societies")[23] invites us to think the connection between those scales – as all equally constitutive of Anthropocene reality. That the complexities of scale have become a key concern in Anthropocene

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. Aarhus Universitets Biblioteker, on 15 Jul 2026 at 15:15:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009537780.003

literary studies is not a coincidence; this focus is fostered by literature's capacity to modulate and multiply scales.

3. *The Anthropocene as an Interdisciplinary Object*. Literature (or literary studies for that matter), with its ingrained insistence on the complexity, provisionality, and positionality of understanding, is not a form of knowledge that enjoys the disciplinary prestige that the "hard" sciences have. For literature and literary studies, the Anthropocene offers an occasion to assert their own relevance in interdisciplinary debates – the context in which these formations that have lost much of their legitimacy in contemporary knowledge production have so far managed to survive (think of interdisciplinary domains like the environmental humanities, the digital humanities, and the medical or health humanities). To be sure, the Anthropocene, even in its earliest formulations, is a reality that presumes interdisciplinary expertise; the Anthropocene working group counted humanists, social scientists, and an international lawyer alongside geologists and stratigraphers – but not literary scholars. Given this disciplinary envy, it is unsurprising that literary studies time and again return to the insight, formulated most influentially by Chakrabarty, that the Anthropocene collapses "the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history"[24] and that Anthropocene fiction insistently returns to the encounter between science and other knowledge domains – an encounter that typically ends in a sobering reminder of limitations. In VanderMeer's *Annihilation*, the cast of female characters are known only by their disciplinary labels: a biologist, an anthropologist, a psychologist, and a surveyor. The novel takes shape as the field journal of the biologist, the only member of the expedition who survives long enough to encounter the strange reality of "Area X," where she discovers the inadequacy of her training in the face of "a vast biological entity that might or might not be terrestrial."[25] Two of the most accomplished Anthropocene novels feature deep ocean researchers, only to contrast the exotic forms of knowledge that pertain to these foreign domains with the ineluctable appeal of a more grounded existence. J. M. Ledgard's 2011 novel *Submergence* recounts the relation between a male spy and a female biomathematician. As if to suggest that these epistemologies are irreconcilable, the novel ends with the female protagonist's excursion to "the largest uncharted hydrothermal vent field in the world," at a far remove from her ex-lover, who finds himself captured by Jihadis.[26] Martin MacInnes' *In Ascension* from 2023 also features a female deep ocean researcher, this time a marine microbiologist; the novel juxtaposes a fascination

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. Aarhus Universitets Biblioteker, on 15 Jul 2026 at 15:15:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009537780.003

with the origin of life in thermal deep-sea vents with the new frontier of space travel and the promise of impending extraterrestrial encounter. At the same time, it insistently grounds these vast scales mapped by different disciplines in the embodied experience of its characters – as if to assert literature's authority to capture embodied experience over and against the abstractions of science.

4. *The Anthropocene as Embodied Experience.* In the past quarter century, as the environmental crisis and especially the effects of climate change have increasingly stopped being the stuff of science fictional futures and have become a threatening part of everyday life, the Anthropocene has gradually shifted from being a form of science fiction (as in the popular but contested label of "cli-fi") to a kind of realism. The Anthropocene, as Ursula Heise observes, "cast[s] the present as a future that has already arrived."[27] While science has at times deployed the science fictional device of a future historian or reader to talk about the impact of our actions from an imagined future perspective, literary fiction has seen a countermovement from speculation to embodiment and groundedness. In recent years, Octavia Butler's 1993 near-future dystopia *Parable of the Sower* (set, distressingly, in 2024) has acquired the status of classic for its imaginative projection of the effects of environmental dereliction. The novel is set in a near-future California where social structures have crumbled and where Butler's young female protagonist is bodily exposed to the violence and danger of an inhospitable lifeworld where murder and rape run rampant. Butler's protagonist is afflicted by "hyper-empathy," an uncontrollable exposure to the sensations she witnesses in others, making her unable not to feel the pain and suffering around her in her own body. While officially a form of speculative fiction (on account of its near-future setting and the *novum* of hyper-empathy), *Parable* is distinctive because it grounds its account of the Anthropocene in the gendered, racialized, and embodied experience of its protagonist. It recounts what critic Stephanie LeMenager has called "the everyday Anthropocene," "the present tense, lived time of the Anthropocene" that attends to "what it means to live, day by day, through climate shift and the economic and sociological injuries that underwrite it."[28] If science fiction often primarily exploits literature's potential to produce knowledge (think, for instance, of the centrality of Darko Suvin's notion of "cognitive estrangement" in SF studies as evidence for this cognitive a priori), the literature of the everyday Anthropocene, while it often deploys genre fiction's capacity for contextual alienation, is more fully invested in

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. Aarhus Universitets Biblioteker, on 15 Jul 2026 at 15:15:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009537780.003

literature's capacity to generate and communicate (often weird and unsettling) affective experiences.

5. *The Anthropocene as Disaster.* These disturbing sensations are often unleashed in post-catastrophe (often also referred to as post-apocalyptic) settings. A remarkable number of literary Anthropocene texts reflect on the human impact on the environment by imagining a breakdown of civilization – often after a cataclysmic event. The Anthropocene idea implies that traces of human action will long survive the stability of human societies; the literary elaboration of this idea converts this insight into a pervasive mood of impermanence and loss. Cormac McCarthy's contemporary classic *The Road* is paradigmatic. It was hailed as the "most important environmental book ever written" even though it depicts a post-catastrophe world where all flora and fauna (except for humans and one dog) have disappeared, as an unidentified event has abandoned an unnamed father and son to an infertile and lawless North American continent, without either electricity or hope.[29] The removal of modern contraptions condenses the storyworld and charges it with epic, even biblical meaning, inviting quasi-spiritual questions about the meaning of life and the ethics of survival. This is also the case in post-apocalyptic fictions that do not indulge in horror and cannibalism the way *The Road* does. Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*, for instance, skips the decade of horror that is bound to follow a global pandemic and fast forwards to a near future where the remainders of civilization are preserved – in a museum installed in a defunct airport terminal and in the Shakespeare performances of a traveling band of actors.[30] In this novel, life in the wake of disaster is not without its attractions. Still, the semiotics of post-catastrophe fiction are such that it portrays characters who mourn a lost lifeworld, even as it invites the readers who inhabit that (as yet still available) lifeworld to anticipate its future loss. In this respect also, literature's narrative and fictional affordances cast the Anthropocene in an affectively charged light – as an experience of imminent obsolescence that, I argue, constitutes a particularly *literary* face of the Anthropocene.

Conclusion: Anthropocene, Literature, Modernity

The Anthropocene provides a new account of how human life comports itself in the present. Even if it shows that the human reshaping of the planet has been going on for a long time (at least since the time of European colonization and the Industrial Revolution, and more frantically

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. Aarhus Universitets Biblioteker, on 15 Jul 2026 at 15:15:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009537780.003

since the postwar Great Acceleration), it is especially used as a name for the more recent period when the fallout of human interventions has become unmistakable. Some critics refer to this epoch of awareness as the "self-conscious Anthropocene" or "the Anthropocene's reflexive phase."[31] Overwhelmingly, the affect besetting that awareness is one of worry and desolation. Paul Crutzen's deadpan summary of human impacts in his 2002 *Nature* essay (one of the most cited statements of the meaning of the term) gives a sense of this downbeat vibe (I am only quoting part of his litany):

> The methane-producing cattle population has risen to 1.4 billion. About 30–50% of the planet's land surface is exploited by humans. Tropical rainforests disappear at a fast pace, releasing carbon dioxide and strongly increasing species extinction. Dam building and river diversion have become commonplace. More than half of all accessible fresh water is used by mankind. Fisheries remove more than 25% of the primary production in upwelling ocean regions and 35% in the temperate continental shelf. Energy use has grown 16-fold during the twentieth century, causing 160 million tonnes of atmospheric sulphur dioxide emissions per year, more than twice the sum of its natural emissions.[32]

Human life has become too much; the natural environment has stopped being a welcoming home. This rift between the soothing cycles of nature and the overreach of the human is of course not a new idea: in a more upbeat version, it is foundational to the idea of modernity, through which we have distinguished the dynamism, restlessness, and exploratory drift that characterizes modernity from an earlier (and no longer available) life that we can call (negatively) static or (more positively) harmonious. In many ways, the notion of the Anthropocene has updated that of modernity (which, of course, had been a target of critique already long before postmodernism) as the main name for our epochal consciousness. If modernity understood itself as bravely shouldering a state of disenchantment and being committed to reason, secularism, technology, and progress, the more sobering tone of the Anthropocene (amply on display in Crutzen's dry catalog) reveals that proud embrace of disenchantment as itself a kind of enchanted illusion. The Anthropocene, then, casts modernity in a darker and fully disillusioned light.

I want to conclude with the suggestion that the link between modernity and the Anthropocene can help us understand the particular *literariness* of the Anthropocene. One way to understand the place of literature in modern life is as the place where the discontent and discomfort that the modern dispensation generated has been articulated, negotiated, amplified, and/or denied. Literature, that is, has traditionally served as the zone where

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. Aarhus Universitets Biblioteker, on 15 Jul 2026 at 15:15:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009537780.003

the fallout of modernity's refusal of transcendence, its relentless regimentation of human time, and its compulsive enlistment of all subjects in the social body was received – if not resolved. In his *Theory of the Novel*, Georg Lukács begins by (in an avowedly idealist way) measuring the distance between ancient Greece, "those ages when the starry sky is the map of all possible paths – ages whose paths are illuminated by the light of the stars," and the modern condition of "transcendental homelessness." Our modern world, he notes, "has become infinitely large and each of its corners is richer in gifts and dangers than the world of the Greeks, but such wealth cancels out the positive meaning – the totality – upon which their life was based." Without such a totality, all we can do is confront the "fundamental dissonance of existence."[33] For Lukács, the modern novel is tuned to this dissonance – to the disintegration of a world where meaning was more readily available. If Lukács' account is no longer in the vanguard of literary studies, the privileged place he assigns to modern literature in expressing modernity's discontent arguably still undergirds our discipline's self-understanding – as a field where questions of history and meaning have a place. For Lukács, modern literature (and especially the genre of the novel) expresses modernity's discontents; as the Anthropocene can be seen as modernity's disenchanted update, it is no surprise that literature has been one of the places where it has come to consciousness – and come to take the shape it has.

Notes

1 T. J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today* (Sternberg Press, 2017); Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018). Dipesh Chakrabarty notes that "[i]t must be of interest to scholars in the humanities that the word *human* has turned out to be one of the most contested and disputed categories of the social and political literature on climate change." Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Human Condition in the Anthropocene: The Tanner Lectures in Human Values*. Online at https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/-resources/documents/a-to-z/c/Chakrabarty%20manuscript.pdf, p. 156.

2 Steve Mentz, "The Neologismcene," *Arcade: The Humanities in the World*, April 3, 2017, online digital forum: The Neologismcene/Stanford Humanities Center.

3 Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer, "The 'Anthropocene,'" *IGBP Newsletter* 41 (2000), pp. 17–18.

4 In the early career of the notion of the Anthropocene, the imagined starting date for the Anthropocene was the onset of the Industrial Revolution in the

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. Aarhus Universitets Biblioteker, on 15 Jul 2026 at 15:15:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009537780.003

late eighteenth century. Paul Crutzen tended to single out James Watt's design of a functional steam engine in 1784 as the kickoff point. See Paul Crutzen, "Geology of Mankind," *Nature* 415 (2002), p. 23. Other proposals have situated the start of the Anthropocene some 8,000 years ago with the rise of agriculture (in paleoclimatologist William Ruddiman's "early Anthropocene" thesis) and in 1610 with the onset of colonialism and global trade (in the work of geographers Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin). See William Ruddiman, "The Anthropogenic Greenhouse Era Began Thousands of Years Ago," *Climate Change* 61 (2003), pp. 261–93; Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin, "Defining the Anthropocene," *Nature* 519 (2015), pp. 171–80.

5 There is marked drop-off from 2021 to 2022 (248 to 208), and a further decrease to 187 in 2023. Still, given the glacial pace of academic publishing and the backlog that many publications are still suffering after COVID-related disruptions, it is hard to consider these latest numbers as consolidated.

6 Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge* (Bloomsbury, 2015); Adam Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* (University of Virginia Press, 2015).

7 Deborah Rose, "Introduction: Writing in the Anthropocene," *Australian Humanities Review* 47 (2009), p. 87.

8 Caroline Schaumann and Heather Sullivan, "Introduction: Dirty Nature – Grit, Grime, and Genre in the Anthropocene," *Colloquia Germanica* 44 (2011), p. 105.

9 The *Australian Humanities Review* section situates the Anthropocene in relation to the work of Theodor W. Adorno and the Holocaust, while one of the editors of the *Colloquia Germanica* issue is also a scholar of Nazi remembrance in women's literature; a whole alternative trajectory for the Anthropocene in literary studies (as an update to the focus on trauma, Holocaust, and witnessing that was still prominent in the 2000s) can be imagined here.

10 Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009), pp. 197–222.

11 Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change," *New Literary History* 43 (2012), pp. 1–18.

12 Tobias Boes and Kate Marshall, "Writing the Anthropocene," *Minnesota Review* 83 (2014 Online).

13 Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (University of Chicago Press, 2016).

14 Eva Horn and Hannes Bergthaller, *The Anthropocene: Key Issues for the Humanities* (Routledge, 2020); Pieter Vermeulen, *Literature and the Anthropocene* (Routledge, 2020); John Parham, *Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Anthropocene* (Cambridge University Press, 2021); Seth Reno, *The Anthropocene: Approaches and Contexts for Literature and the Humanities* (Routledge, 2022).

15 Jan Zalasiewicz, Colin N. Waters, and Erle C. Ellis et al., "The Anthropocene: Comparing Its Meaning in Geology (Chronostratigraphy) with Conceptual Approaches Arising in Other Disciplines," *Earth's Future* 9 (2021), p. 1.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. Aarhus Universitets Biblioteker, on 15 Jul 2026 at 15:15:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009537780.003

16 Jacques Derrida's critique of Plato's (dismissal of) writing is paradigmatic here. Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, ed. and trans. Barbara Johnson (University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 61–171.
17 Boes and Marshall, "Writing," p. 64.
18 Jeff VanderMeer, *Annihilation* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), p. 90. For a more elaborate discussion of Anthropocene writing's "ontographic" operations, see Pieter Vermeulen, "Warped Writing: The Ontography of Contemporary Writing," *Style* 55 (2021), pp. 325–45.
19 Evelyn Reilly, *Styrofoam* (Roof Books, 2009).
20 While the notion of a geological timescale dates back to the eighteenth century, the term "deep time" was coined by nonfiction writer John McPhee in the 1980s. See John McPhee, *Basin and Range* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982), p. 20.
21 Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*.
22 David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* (Sceptre, 2004).
23 Nicole Merola, "Materializing a Geotraumatic and Melancholy Anthropocene: Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods*," *Minnesota Review* 83 (2014), p. 126. Jeanette Winterson, *The Stone Gods* (Mariner, 2009).
24 Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History," p. 201.
25 VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, p. 90.
26 J. M. Ledgard, *Submergence* (Vintage, 2012), p. 90.
27 Ursula Heise, *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species* (University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 203.
28 Stephanie LeMenager, "Climate Change and the Struggle for Genre," in *Anthropocene Reading: Literary History in Geologic Times*, eds. Tobias Menely and Jesse Oak Taylor (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), p. 225. Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (Headline, 2019).
29 George Monbiot, "Civilisation Ends with a Shutdown of Human Concern: Are We There Already?," *Guardian* October 30, 2007. Online. Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (Vintage, 2007).
30 Emily St. John Mandel, *Station Eleven* (Vintage, 2015).
31 Lynn Keller, *Recomposing Ecopoetics: North American Poetry of the Self-Conscious Anthropocene* (Virginia University Press, 2017); Kate Marshall, "What Are the Novels of the Anthropocene? American Fiction in Geological Time," *American Literary History* 27 (2015), p. 525.
32 Crutzen, "Geology of Mankind," p. 23.
33 Georg Lukács, *Theory of the Novel* (Merlin, 1971), pp. 29, 41, 34, 62.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. Aarhus Universitets Biblioteker, on 15 Jul 2026 at 15:15:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009537780.003