

Historicising Ambergris in the Anthropocene

Erin Hortle



Figure 1: 'Ambergris'. Photo: Erin Hortle, 2017.

THIS PIECE OF WRITING IS AN EXPERIMENTAL HISTORY OF A NUGGET OF AMBERGRIS that washed up on the south west coast of Tasmania. It's also a confession.

When it's fresh, ambergris smells like briny cow shit, or it smelt like that to me when I sniffed this piece, pictured here. This wasn't what I expected, given the fact that ambergris is an integral ingredient of perfume. In the twenty-first century its value has dwindled slightly because many perfume makers are now brewing their wares from synthetic substances; however, it remains unsurpassed as a scent stabiliser and fixer and thus is still a much sought-after product that has, at times, been worth more than its weight in gold (Clarke 10). And there it was, sitting on the shoreline of a beach in the remote south west of Tasmania.

The shoreline: remote, but not so remote in this globalised world. If you are human, you can only get there by boat or days on foot. But if you are buoyant ambergris, or if you are marine debris—perhaps carelessly tossed into the ocean, or perhaps inadequately fastened to a ship—you can ride the Roaring Forties across the Indian Ocean to arrive on Tasmania's shores.

I've struck gold, I thought to myself, when I spied the black little mass. But later I found out that I hadn't. Under Australian law, sperm whales are a protected species; humans are not allowed export their products and thus cannot capitalise upon ambergris's monetary worth ('Ambergris').

I didn't see any whales when I was in the Southwest National Park, but I did see a piece of ambergris and I picked it up, shoved it in my pocket and brought it home with me. In doing so, I unwittingly committed a crime. In this article, I will explain myself to you, via an experimental history of that piece of ambergris, in which I will situate the ambergris that washes up on Tasmania's south west coast in relation to a set of intersecting histories: colonial whaling industry, subsequent legislation and associated, contemporary affective economies; specific moments of local outrage and activism in the face of anthropogenic environmental degradation; speculative imaginings of the whale's life and death, of ambergris's formation, and of the journeying object, post-whale-death and pre-human-'discovery'.

Before doing so, I want to clarify my use of the term 'Anthropocene' in this essay. Rather than referring to a strictly geological phenomenon, my usage of the words draws heavily on Timothy Clark's theorisation and deployment of the Anthropocene as

a loose, shorthand term for all the new contexts and demands—
cultural, ethical, aesthetic, philosophical and political—of

environmental issues that are truly planetary in scale, notably, climate change, ocean acidification, effects of overpopulation, deforestation, soil erosion, overfishing and the general and accelerating degradation of ecosystems. (*Ecocriticism* 2)

To this list, I would add explicitly, species extinction.

The Anthropocene is fast becoming the threshold concept of our age (Clark 15)—a threshold concept being ‘the singular philosophical issue that defines the present’ (Grosz 70). It is for this reason, that, in the words of Eugene Thacker, ‘the world is increasingly unthinkable’ (1), or, in David Farrier’s terms, ‘uncanny’, as we grapple to comprehend the dizzying scale of deep time, and our position on it; ‘such timescales resist the imagination’, Farrier writes, ‘but exist as a haunting presence in our daily lives’. We cannot ignore the monumental ways in which the Anthropocene reframes the human and its relation to the more-than-human world, nor the fact that now, more than ever, we have to engage with the earth as a spatio-temporal whole, rather than with its composite parts. Complicating this imperative is the fact that, as Clark argues, the Anthropocene is ‘an emergent event’: ‘one whose novelty meets no available, matching or adequate discourse in representation, discussion or judgment’ (47). This emergent event is in the process of redefining everything, but we do not yet have the technological, political and intellectual institutions capable of grappling effectively with this redefinition. As Thom Van Dooren argues, there is ‘work to be done’ (143). This work, first and foremost, is ‘the task of “getting it” ... that the world we know is changing; and that new approaches are necessary if life in its diversity is to go on’ (143).

This article is divided into three sections, all of which take up Van Dooren’s call to arms and recasts it in different ways. In the first, I detour along with a southern right whale into the Derwent River and through a potted history of human/whale interactions in that same estuary, from colonial invasion up until the very near past. I examine a moment in which one whale impels a group of people, if only momentarily, to experience the scale effects of the Anthropocene. The second section is my confession: it tells the story of me committing my crime, and then coming to the realisation that in committing that crime, I participated in an anthropocentric regime of capitalism, humanism and colonialism, which rendered the earth and its inhabitants a ‘reservoir of tractable commodities’ (Cohen and Duckert 4). If, in the Anthropocene, the actions of individual humans are subsumed by the effects of the collective human across time and space, then everything—including *my* actions—must be, contextualised and historicised. By coming to this realisation, I too experience the scale effects of the Anthropocene. The first two sections, then, explore specific moments of ‘getting it’ (Van Dooren 143).

The third section takes up Van Dooren's call for 'new approaches' (143) and does two things. Firstly, it argues that there is value in writing against the capitalist anthropocentrism that casts the earth and its inhabitants as commodities; in doing this, it suggests that this writing itself—this writing being a tradition of story-telling, of theorising and of historicising—needs to tackle the anthropocentric tradition from which it emerges. Convention needs to be flouted. Writings need to whet an uncanny edge. We need to rethink not just what we think, but how we structure our thinking and how we narrate ourselves and the world. And secondly, it puts that argument into practice by telling the onto-history of the piece of ambergris that tripped my attention in Tasmania's south west.

Part One: A Whale's Detour

But first, as promised, a detour: a whale's detour.

A southern right whale, on its way from the warmer waters in the north to the summer feeding grounds near Antarctica, detoured into the mouth of the Derwent River and lounged for a while at Kingston Beach on 22 November 2017. It was not acting out of character with its species' typical behaviour; the mouth of the Derwent is a stopover on a migratory path used by southern right whales presumably for millenia. And yet, for the local humans, this whale was a contemporary novelty because whales generally, and southern right whales particularly, were hunted so extensively in these same waters in the nineteenth century that they became near to extinct.

Every Tasmanian knows the story. The whale population was so large you used to be able to walk across the Derwent River on their backs. You used to be able to skip from rounded leviathan spine to rounded leviathan spine, from the eastern shore to the western shore of Hobart, without getting a single drop of water on you. Unless, that is, you tripped on a dorsal fin and slid face first into the then-pristine Derwent, or were unlucky enough to be hit by a jet of watery exhale. And, such a racket they made! At certain times of year Hobartians couldn't sleep at night for the whales' yowling, their groaning and moaning, their clicking, the whoosh of their spraying breaths. Or so the story goes.

Desperate nostalgia drives this hyperbolic folklore. Nostalgia for what colonial Tasmanians lost—for what they, or we, ruined. One only has to look as far as Reverend Robert Knopwood's diary for a glimpse of the wonder and the source of the devastation. On the 31 July 1807, he writes that there were '17 whales' out the front of his house in Battery Point (on the western shore of the Derwent, upstream of Kingston Beach), 'making great noise' ('Diary' 91). Another entry describes how, in crossing the Derwent, 'we passed so many whales that it was dangerous for the boat to go up the river unless you kept very near to the shore' ('Hobart' 39). And

frequently, Knopwood records incidences of whales being successfully hunted out the front of his house. ‘The morn remarkably fine’, he writes on the 2 August 1807. ‘At 1 pm eight boats belonging to the Aurora Elizabeth and Albion were after whales opposite my House and at ½ past they killed one [;] at two they towed the whales down the river to the ships’ (‘Diary’ 91).

Whale products were one of Australia’s first primary industries. Whale oil twinkled in London streetlights, and whale bone from baleen whales killed in the Derwent River gave shape to the bodices and skirts of the ladies, who strolled through those pools of oily light on their way to, or from, some social engagement or another. It kept men’s collars stiff and neat during business dealings (‘History of Shore-Based Whaling’).

In 1805, two years after the bush that fringed the shore of the Derwent was remodelled into the first colonial settlement on the island, the first of sixty whaling stations was established in Tasmania. Over the next seventy years, it was recorded that 7,745 southern right whales were killed in Tasmania (‘Southern’). Unsurprisingly, the whale population dwindled to near-catastrophic levels. Despite the fact that an aerial census of the species in southern Australia recorded its highest ever count in 2017 (Collins)¹, southern right whales are still classified as endangered and are still not a common occurrence in the Derwent River, hence the excitement on the part of the humans who spotted the visiting leviathan on 22 November 2017.

Kingston Beach is a council approved dog-friendly beach, and the resident humans and their companion canines were out and about, basking and frolicking in the early-season balmy weather *en masse*. As such, the whale had an audience: hundreds gathered to watch it laze just metres from the shore (Bhole). Some humans, eager for a more intimate interaction, took to the water, swimming out to touch the whale’s flanks, while others circled it on stand-up paddle boards, kayaks and jet skis (Dunlevie). Their actions were in direct breach of the National Guidelines for Whale and Dolphin Watching, which stipulate that humans in the water should not approach closer than 100 metres to a whale. The outrage brought forth by these humans’ actions was instantaneous, palpable, and was scribbled all over whale-spotting forums on social media. The stories that were uploaded on, and published by, local media outlets quickly came to reflect this sentiment, as they drew quotes from these forums and discussion threads to bolster their reportage. The ABC, for instance, ran an article titled: “‘Idiot’ Spectators Blasted for Touching Southern Right Whale during Hobart Visit’, while *The Mercury* published a story, titled “‘I’d Like to See Those P***ks on Jetskis

¹ The annual census is funded by the Federal Government’s marine biodiversity hub and has been running since 1993 (Collins).

Prosecuted”, which pulled its headline directly from Ros Barnett’s post on the Whale Spotting Tasmania Facebook page, which was the main online arena for the outrage.²

As the whale lolled and the humans loved it properly and improperly, what became increasingly impossible to ignore was that fact that we, as a postcolonial society, do not simply harass whales by loving them too eagerly here (in Tasmania) and now (in the twenty-first century); we endangered them by hunting them to the brink of extinction here (in Tasmania) and then (in the nineteenth century). The haunting presence of this place-specific history did not escape the attention of the local media. In an article published in the *Mercury*, titled ‘Gentle Giants Hide Grim Past’, Simon Bevilacqua writes,

It is sobering to think Kingston Beach, where people turned out this week to watch a southern right whale at play, was once home to a whaleboat crew. Putrid stinking blubber pots once boiled down the day’s whale slaughter where the joyful onlookers stood on the beach last week to marvel at the ocean giant. (Bevilacqua)

Bevilacqua’s article juxtaposes the sheer number of whales that frequented the same waters, 150 years ago, with the frenzy evoked by the presence of the one whale that visited in 2017. ‘The harbour master reported 50 or 60 in the river at one time’, he writes; ‘imagine the media frenzy if that was the case today’. Although, if that were the case, and the Derwent were still clotted with whales, the media would likely not frenzy; its, or our, excitement, is born, to a degree, from the consequences of our forebears’ actions—our, or their, guilt: from the fact that we humans rendered this species endangered, and so scarce, and so novel. And thus, we rendered ourselves in need of biopolitical controls, such as the designated illegality of whaling in Australian waters and documents such as The National Guidelines for Whale and Dolphin Watching,³ designed to safeguard the remaining members of the species from us.

Matthew Chrulew argues that ‘the closer a species to extinction... the stronger then is the grip in which the bodies of the last remaining individual animals are held’ (147-48), while Thom Van Dooren urges us to embrace this approach to endangered species, arguing that if we, humans, are to become truly cognizant of our position in a ‘shared world’, then the lives and deaths of specific members of endangered species need to be put to work (143). I’ve detoured along with the

² It should be noted that the National Guidelines for Whale and Dolphin Watching are enshrined in this Facebook group’s ‘about’ section, thus the 100-metre rule is common knowledge within this community.

³ These guidelines explicitly ‘provide a framework that allows people to observe and interact with whales and dolphins in a way that does not cause harm *to the animals*’ (my emphasis).

southern right whale, not only because it led me through a potted history of Tasmania's human/whale politics up until the very recent past, but because this *specific* whale can be—and indeed *was*—put to intellectual and affective work in the context of the Anthropocene. As Van Dooren writes, 'the work to be done here is, first and foremost, the task of "getting it", that these deaths of individuals and of species, matter; that the world as we know it is changing; and that new approaches are necessary if life in its diversity is to go on' (143). As parochial and non-critical (in the game of life, death and extinction) as the example of some humans swimming with a whale is, I read the events that occurred at Kingston Beach as indicative of a culture working to 'get it' in a way that resonates with Van Dooren's argument.

In this example, biopolitical controls designed to prevent humans from encroaching invasively on the nonhuman were internalised by the whale enthusiasts, and then manifested as vigilantism facilitated by social media. The driving sentiment of the criticism of the swimmers and watercraft operators was that humans cannot simply continue to act self-indulgently where the lives of the nonhuman are concerned. Underpinning this was a recognition of the fact that the problem is not so much the actions of individual humans, but the threat of the human-as-species: if 'everyone in Hobart who wanted to get close to a whale and take footage did, what would be the result?', Bronwyn Scanlon asked on the Facebook page. 'A disaster. It must be managed' (quoted in Dunlevie). However, subject management did not simply come in the guise of top-down biopolitics, but in the horizontal movements of power channelled through the overt circulation of affect—specifically, of shame. The ABC quoted Mani Baker's post from the same Facebook page: 'If you're one of the kayakers off Crayfish Point this evening 7pm-ish chasing the whale from 10 metres behind in a big group, I hope you read this: You should be bloody ashamed of yourselves!' (quoted in Dunlevie). Echoing a similar sentiment was Rick Kean's comment, also quoted in the ABC coverage: 'At Kingston Beach they swam out and touched the whale. So many idiots in our society. Think they have a right to do whatever they want. I hope they are identified and shamed publicly' (quoted in Dunlevie).

For Van Dooren, attending to affect is one channel through which human cultures might 'get it' (or work to 'get it'). He suggests such an approach might 'work across and break down' the 'human exceptionalism' and anthropocentrism that 'holds us distant, intellectually and emotionally, from the more-than-human world' (126). I agree with Van Dooren, that attending to affect has the potential to do important ethical and intellectual work in the era of the Anthropocene. This is both because, as he suggests, it allows us to open ourselves to the more-than-human world and so recognise the extent to which the human and nonhuman 'are at stake in one another, all the ways in which [they] share a world' (140), evidenced in this example by the outpouring of whale-love (we contemporary Tasmanians *want* to

share the Derwent with whales). However, it is also because affects can function as tools to think through, and *experience* the complexities of the human in the Anthropocene. As Sara Ahmed argues, affects ‘align individuals with communities... sticking figures together (adherence), a sticking that creates the very effect of a collective (coherence)’ (119).⁴ This was one of the effects of the circulation of shame at Kingston Beach: it adhered humans and their actions across history into a coherent entity.

In his discussion of the relationship between guilt and shame, Philip Wüschner suggests that ‘Affects—like feeling ashamed—are distributed to mark spaces and situations in which to feel ashamed, and at the same time this distribution of shame creates adherences of bodies to norms and institutions’ (94). Wüschner suggests that guilt is a ‘distributing factor of shame’ (94). In this context, a specific whale in a specific location brought forth an awareness of the guilt of the collective human across time and this impelled the circulation of shame (while not operated on the scale of deep time, such an awareness is arguably a version of the collective human of the Anthropocene). The shame circulating here worked across a range of scales as the relatively benign actions of the individuals in the water were compounded by the history of the damage inflicted by humans on whales in that same estuary. Affect here, adhered postcolonial Tasmanians to colonial Tasmanians and, if only momentarily, a coherent image of the collective human of the Anthropocene emerged. This is significant. I argue that this thinking across a range of scales and affective economy *together* signifies a moment of ‘getting it’ as the enormity of human impact across time was acknowledged and experienced by humans viscerally in the present.

Part 2: A Human’s Confession

I am on a beach, picking up rubbish. The Roaring Forties tease my hair into frayed cords and chap my lips, and I wonder: is what I’m doing futile? Then I spy it on the tideline and I commit a crime.

To fill some gaps in my potted history of human/whale politics in Australia: The southern right whale became a protected species in Australia in 1935 and the humpback in 1965, although the whaling of humpbacks ceased in Australia two years earlier, in 1963. In 1979, sperm whales became legally ‘protected’ in Australian waters, the year *after* commercial whaling stopped. The closure of the Cheyne Beach Whaling Station and the sperm whale industry in 1978 marked the

⁴ Van Dooren broadens this to suggest that these affective communities may comprise individuals from a variety of species (see *Flight Ways*—in particular, chapter 5, ‘Mourning with Crows: Grief in a Shared World’).

end of whaling in Australia, and in 1979 Australia actively ‘adopted an anti-whaling policy, permanently ending whaling in Australian waters. At the same time, Australia started to focus heavily on working towards the international protection and conservation of whales’ (‘History of Whaling’). In most cases these were easy laws to enact; the whaling industry of each species ended before the legislation came into effect, in large part because the decline of the whale population, along with advances in other technologies, meant that the industry was economically unviable. In any case, by the time anti-whaling legislation was enacted, public sentiment had, by-and-large, already shifted to the side of the whales, who had somehow found a place in our national heart. The majority of Australians wanted—want—to save them from extinction, to the extent that this desire has become written into Australia’s national narrative. In his historical overview of Australia’s legal attempts to protect whales in the Southern Ocean, Donald K. Anton characterises Australia’s anti-whaling attitude as having ‘harsh overtones of nationalism and a desire to win against Japan in some sort of international “competition”’ (332). Over the course of the second half of the twentieth century, Australia has styled itself as a ‘middle-power’, Anton writes, who has taken a variety of ‘unilateral actions... for the protection of whales’ in the Southern Ocean (319).

However, one country cannot control a globalised ocean, and the oceans *are* globalised—globalised by many things: by human-operated ships; by the migratory patterns of nonhuman animals like whales; by currents of acidification; and by the movements of insentient things, like ambergris, or, like rubbish and debris, that stagnate in gyres or journey on currents and surf storms. (And here’s something to really mull over when thinking about the ‘work’ matter might do in the context of the Anthropocene: the oceans aren’t simply globalised, they *globalise*: they collectivise the careless actions of individual humans, who toss plastic into them, or fail to properly secure ropes and buoys to sides of their ships, and then globalise those actions with their currents. The oceans remind us that we are a collective, and that the lines we have drawn between states are arbitrary. As Clark argues, ‘Policies and concepts relating to climate change invariably seem undermined or even derided by considerations of scale: a campaign for environmental reform in one country may be already effectively negated by the lack of such measures on the other side of the world’ [‘Scale’ 149]. The oceans argue this, too.) And so, aided by the Roaring Forties, much of the rubbish from the Indian Ocean Gyre winds up on the south west coast of Tasmania, which brings us to the matter at hand:

While she tidies the beaches, the human who is volunteering on a grassroots clean-up program finds a piece of ambergris in and amongst the choking debris. She is me. She—or, I—and the other volunteers on this program are driven in equal parts by an urge to protect and maintain the supposedly pristine local, and shame born

from the awareness of the damage inflicted if not by us, personally, then by the human-as-species: the human of the Anthropocene. Intellectually, I get the bigger picture—the problem of scale (I’ve read Clark)—but what I don’t experience, in that moment, as I slide the little black nugget into my pocket, is the visceral shame of my own complicity.

When I returned from the Southwest with the lump of ambergris clutched in my fist like a trophy, I looked into the legislation that monitors the trade of whale products and discovered that not only could I not export my find, I was not even allowed to possess it. This legislation is bound up with anti-whaling legislation; it is a biopolitical control designed to safeguard whales from humans such as myself. I spoke to someone who works at a museum about the collection of such specimens, and they explained to me the necessity of these controls, even in post-whaling Australia: if a whale beaches itself, it takes a long time for it to die and it is quite difficult for your average human to kill a whale; if it’s body is fair game what’s to stop people from cutting into the whale’s body while it’s alive to remove its valuable parts? This conversation resonated with something I read on the Whale and Dolphin Conservation website: ‘trade in whale products or by-products of any kind perpetuates the notion of whales as a commodity, with their parts to be consumed or used in some way by humans’ (‘Ambergris: Lucky’). Feeling slightly uneasy about my find, I placed it on top of my bookshelf and by-and-large, I forgot about it.

Months later, the ABC reveals graphic footage of a Japanese whaling operation in the Southern Ocean, shot by Australian customs personnel in 2008 (Webster). Up until then, the Australian Government had refused to make this footage public due to concerns that its release would harm diplomatic relations with Japan. However, after a five-year Freedom of Information battle (which was begun in 2012), the footage was released in November, 2017. Sea Shepherd Australia’s managing director, Jeff Hanson, describes the contents of the footage:

You see minke whales swimming at 16, 17 knots to try and outrun these harpoon ships, before being hit with an explosive harpoon that sends shrapnel through their bodies...Hooks come out, and they dive deep, you can see them diving to try and get away from this cable which they’re attached to and they’re slowly dragged back to the surface, before they’re met with the gunner on the harpoon ship who then shoots them...They take a long time to die before dying in a sea of their own blood. (Quoted in Webster)

I feel sick whilst watching, but then, I live in a culture where the space between meat production and everyday life is vast, so I’m not sure if it’s the fact I am

Australian in the twenty-first century and it's *whales* being killed, or if it is simply the scale of the carnage and suffering of sentient beings.

Around the same time, a whale noses into the mouth of the Derwent River, and I watch as people throw hissy fits on social media and righteously tout biopolitical documents like they might be our salvation. They circulate shame, distributed and compounded by past generations' guilt, and I look at the ambergris, squatting on my bookshelf.

When I found it, I imagined myself an individual, a subject of neo-liberal capitalism who might capitalise on her find. Now I am a fragment of a collective human who has rivers of blood and spermaceti on its hands.

I get it.

Part 3: An Object's Life

The task of 'getting it' is made monumentally easier when it is impelled by the plight of a charismatic animal, or a member of a species cherished in a particular cultural context, such as whales in contemporary Australia. Whether we do so effectively in the global context of the Anthropocene, Australians, generally, do care about whales to the extent that this caring has become engrained in our national psyche. We might also get that whale by-products matter, but I would hedge a supposition that we do this, mostly, as I have just done: through the lens of our whale-love. In contrast, the last section of this article will ask: How might *matter* impel humans to 'get it'? What new approaches might help us truly contemplate the significance and non-commercial value of inanimate things? What 'work' might such things then do? A caveat: my aim is not to remove the ambergris from its entanglement with its whale, but rather, to bring the ambergris to the forefront, and situate the whale as its (affectively charged) backdrop.

To begin, I want to return, briefly, to me sitting in front of my computer and looking into the legislation regulating the export of whale products. The ambergris sits on the table, beside my computer and while the *Department of Environment and Energy* website is loading, I look at it and wonder, vaguely: What, precisely *is* ambergris?

A moment later, the website informs me: 'Ambergris is a solid waxy material produced in the sperm whale' ('Ambergris').

How mysterious, I think. 'A solid waxy material produced in the sperm whale' ('Ambergris')? But produced *how*? I wonder, this time less vaguely as I start to think about what words *do*. Constructed in passive voice, this government-devised

description of ambergris is subject-less, or lacks an animate head-noun. According to this little onto-story, ambergris is its own passive production and the whale, its passive vessel. To return to two of my above questions—what new approaches might help us truly contemplate the significance and value of inanimate things? And, what work might such things do?—I would answer that a starting point might be: by not writing about matter in passive voice, because (on an admittedly overly simplistic and reductively cognitivist level) *things* can't do work, if *they* are not *doing*.

This onto-story is characterised by a structural lack, which has broader ideological implications. Passive voice is not an uncommon grammatical convention when it comes to writing about insentient things. It's a structure that, as Mel Chen argues, reveals the 'intersection between meaning and grammar' (2), or grammar's structural complicity in maintaining a 'conceptual order of things' (3)—what Chen refers to as animacy hierarchies (animacy being the 'quality of liveness, sentience or humanness of a noun or noun phrase' [24]). The human⁵ subject of humanism has a particular stake in maintaining problematically normative animacy hierarchies, which, as Chen argues, position the 'adult male who is "free" (as opposed to enslaved), able-bodied, and with intact linguistic capacities... at the top of the hierarchy as the most "animate" or active agent within grammars of ordering' (27). Grammar is hence shown to sustain a specific breed of anthropocentrism, an observation that feeds Jane Bennett's argument that 'we need to cultivate a bit of anthropomorphism—the idea that human agency has some echoes in the nonhuman world—to counter the narcissism of humans in charge of the nonhuman world' (*Vibrant* xvi). Refraining from writing about matter in passive voice is one such anthropomorphic technique. Such a move has the potential to render matter of any sort uncanny, as stuff long known to us as passive becomes animated by active, or lively, noun phrases which lead us away from our readily imagined, anthropocentric conceptual order of things—which has the potential to be, I argue, one instance of what Van Dooren might describe as a 'new approach...[,] necessary if life in its diversity is to go on' (143).

Let me break it down further. In the context of the above quote—'ambergris is a solid waxy material produced *in* the sperm whale'—'ambergris' is a passively live noun; it is passively agent (to the verb, produce). Here, grammar stifles the productive power of the body of the whale, and the post-mortem resistance of the body of the squid, whose beaks make up the bulk of ambergris's substance. Grammar constricts this thing's potential animacy, and in doing so, it suppresses the ways in which, as Cohen and Duckert argue, matter itself 'is a precarious

⁵ My use of the signifier human here aligns itself with Claire Colebrook's definition of the category of the 'properly human', which 'not only constitutes a chauvinistic exceptionalism of the species' but 'enables an ongoing hegemony in which the label of "human" smuggles in historical, cultural, sexual, racial and class norms' (9).

system and dynamic entity' (5)—and an entity that acts in, and so shapes, history. Cohen and Duckert also argue that 'attending to matter and writing against the reduction of the world to commodity is a powerful aid to activism' (4). It seems to me that, for this 'writing against' to enact a deep shift in thinking, it is not enough for it to simply function as a critique of ideas and ideology (such as the interconnected regimes of humanism, capitalism and colonialism); it needs to tackle form, to tackle language's structural complicity with humanism and its anthropocentric grammars of ordering. Whether such writings lead one to become affectively entangled with matter is subjective. However, such writings have the capacity to carve out a space for materiality to be contemplated as active and activated rather than passive theatre or useable commodity, which may allow us to grapple more effectively with the emergent effects of the Anthropocene.

So I return, again, to the question: what is ambergris?

To answer this question, I want to tell you a history,⁶ a speculative onto-story, which ends in many ways, including with me, walking for days into the Southwest National Park, to return the ambergris to the shore on which I found it, and with you, reading this here.

The sperm whale inhales and dives. Beams of swaying sunlight curl about its body, then taper out into the opaque blue expanse, and the whale swims down. Blue turns to green turns to black as the reach of the light dwindles and still, the whale swims deeper. It begins clicking and chirruping and listening. Its calls fan out and slide through the water; they ricochet off the bodies of giant squid, and shudder back towards the whale. And so the whale murmurs to itself its prey's coordinates.

Strings of squid ink stain its teeth black and coat its throat.

The whale chews, swallows. Oesophageal muscles contract, rippling from throat to stomach, forcing the mash of squid down. Its stomach sifts and sorts the squid into a quagmire, teasing the beaks from the pulp, then passes the pulp to the next stomach, which refines the process, and then passes it the to the next stomach, then the next. The whale's stomachs know that its intestines can't absorb sharp solids, that its rectum can't expel them. Its stomachs are gatekeepers. They contract, one after the other; muscles tighten, rippling from gut to throat. The beaks are ejected. Vomit disperses in the water, curling slowly up towards the light.

⁶ This history begins with a creative interpretation of Clarke's widely regarded hypothesis, articulated in the 'Origins of Ambergris', as to how the substance forms.

Over the years, the sphincter between the last stomach and the intestine has slackened. On this day, a beak—no, two—sneak through it and into the intestines, where they cause a blockage. The slough of masticated squid builds up behind it, leaks around it. The whale's intestine can't deal with this indigestible matter, so it pushes the tangled mess into the rectum.

The rectum knows what to do. Its walls suck and suck at the solid matter, absorbing the moisture from the tangled mess of beaks and pens and from the normally liquid faecal flow, which streams against the mass, gushing into the fissures and cracks and setting like concrete. The dehydrated lump becomes smooth and hard. Faeces flows past it again, and it gathers gloss after gloss to its matter as the discharge courses by on its way to the anus then ocean. The ambergris grows slowly, then quickly as more beaks slip through the leaky sphincter, are dammed by the mass of ambergris, are smoothed in by the rectum which sucks at the following flow until it turns to cement.

The whale hunts, eats, digests, and the ambergris grows in bursts. So too, the whale's rectum grows, becoming increasingly distended, until, one day the ambergris ruptures its whale-case and births itself into the sea, leaving its host to die with its rectum in tatters.⁷

It floats to the surface, then rides the Roaring Forties and is placed on the south west coast of Tasmania.

I find it, put it in my pocket, bring it home. Google it. Discover that, not only can I not capitalise upon my find, but what I have done is illegal: I am not even allowed to possess this thing. I crawl into the Anthropocene which is a house built of guilt, and I huddle by the ever-hungry hearth with my species, shamed.

Clark suggests that 'environmental readings of literature and culture may need to engage more directly with delusions of self-importance in their practice, keeping alert to the need for more direct kinds of activism' (*Ecocriticism* 198), even as he acknowledges that 'the impersonal game space of the Anthropocene, its relentlessness intensified by the large numbers involved, is reducing the scope for the likely significance of any one action by any single group' (197-98). I share, but do not share, in his hopelessness and I share, but do not share, in his argument. I know that I cannot atone adequately for a phenomenon I did not enact, but in which I am nevertheless implicated to the point of complicity. I also know I cannot voluntarily do nothing. Perhaps I am naive. Perhaps I am an idealist. Perhaps I am simply, in Clark's words, 'self-importan[t]' (198). And yet, I cannot not think, not

⁷ Sometimes, the whale dies before the ambergris kills it, and the ambergris emerges into the world when its whale-case rots away.

hope, that animating matter with words has the capacity of evoke the limits of anthropocentrism, and so challenge the logic that rendered the earth and its inhabitants to raw commodity. I cannot not think that to attend to a thing's animacy might enliven it, even if it only enlivens it in the minds of the humans who read these words as I, the author, die (Barthes). Words do things, after all. In recognising this, I do not take a 'cognitivist approach that the world around us animates according to what we humans make of it' (Chen 8); rather, I urge that we consciously recognise the ways in which the more-than-human world animates alongside us and with us, and in doing so, that we weave this recognition into the tapestry of our ideological consciousness, its grammars of ordering and its institutions, as we remake them, as we must.

And so, I write. But before I write, pointless as it may seem, pointless as it may be, the ambergris rides in my pocket for days, over mountains, through vast tracts of rainforest and waist-deep quagmires of mud, until it reaches wind-streaked sand and an open horizon of roiling grey. I place the ambergris on the shore. The ocean shifts and heaves in slabs of green, capped with frothing white. It also placed the ambergris on this shore.

ERIN HORTLE is a Tasmanian-based writer of fiction and essay. An ongoing concern of her academic and freelance writing is the cultural inscription of the more-than-human world, and her work explores the ways in which creative approaches to writing might facilitate new ways of imagining the non/human. She recently completed her Creative Writing PhD through the University of Tasmania.

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