

Introduction: Uncanny Objects in the Anthropocene

Hannah Stark, Katrina Schlunke and Penny Edmonds

THE ANTHROPOCENE HAS RENDERED THE FAMILIAR STRANGE AND THE STRANGE familiar. As David Farrier suggests, ‘Surely the “sublime” is not the right way to characterise our visceral response to [the Anthropocene]. The “uncanny” might serve us better’ (np). The papers in this interdisciplinary collection consider what the era of the Anthropocene means for how we critically, artistically and affectively approach objects. In line with contemporary critical re-evaluations of the liveliness of objects (Bennett, *Vibrant*; Brown), this collection brings together things which are dead and/or alive, human and/or nonhuman, sensate and/or insensate, fantastical and/or historical, natural and/or cultural, spectacular and/or mundane. These objects are here re-enlivened in order to expose alternative ways of knowing the past, understanding this anthropocentric present, and imagining the role of humans in shaping environmental futures. In this way, the collection interrogates present and future problems—species mass-extinction, climate change, anthropogenic environmental impact—in relation to how the past is re-imagined, interpreted, commemorated, subverted and displayed. The collection considers human history in relation to the deep histories of nonhuman time and the more-than-human effects that a human-centred approach have often ignored or hidden. We are interested not only in objects as

products of the Anthropocene, but in how the Anthropocene uncanny invites us to re-consider histories and objects in new and unexpected ways.

In *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh writes of the 'environmental uncanny', a condition that acknowledges the dispersed impacts of climate change on our daily lives. He writes 'we are now in an era that will be defined precisely by events that appear, by our current standards of normality, highly improbable: flash floods, hundred-year storms, persistent droughts, spells of unprecedented heat, sudden landslides, raging torrents pouring down from breached glacial lakes, and, yes, freakish tornadoes' (32). Taking the notion of the uncanny from Freud's *unheimlich*, that which is unhomely or unfamiliar (4), Ghosh here evokes the idea of a strange yet familiar haunting of the present by that which has previously been repressed. 'No other word', Ghosh writes, 'comes close to expressing the strangeness of what is unfolding around us. For these changes are not merely strange in the sense of being unknown or alien; their uncanniness lies precisely in the fact that in these encounters we recognize something we had turned away from: that is to say, the presence and proximity of non-human interlocutors' (40). Authors in these essays consider the uncanny aspects of a range of things that have been afforded the status of 'object' in order to problematise the distinctions between human and nonhuman and to challenge the idea of objects as mute or passive. The uncanny provides a theoretical touchstone for the authors to consider the way in which objects perplex us, energise our thinking, and hold us to account in new ways in the Anthropocene.

The Anthropocene has caused a profound reorientation from the anthropocentrism that has characterised the history of thought and the organisation of knowledge. While the Anthropocene provides us with a framework for thinking about human impact and responsibility; it also signals a crisis in the human condition. According to Dipesh Chakrabarty, the anthropos of the Anthropocene reconfigures the human as a nonhuman geological force (15). It also signals the collapse of the distinction of human and natural history (10). Instead of human time-scales, the Anthropocene requires that we think about deep or geological time and invites contemplation of vast and less-human time scales and subjects. Conceptually, as we come to reconcile ourselves with human impact on the environment at a planetary scale, the Anthropocene is shaping philosophical understandings of the human and its place in a broader nonhuman context. The human emerges as an ambivalent figure in the Anthropocene. The now widely discussed transformation of the human into a (nonhuman) geophysical force has led to uncertainty about human and nonhuman agency, human exceptionalism, human stewardship as a solution to earth futures, and the homogenising and normative vision of the human that inheres in biopolitical species-thinking. Radical and counter-colonial Indigenous epistemologies also rightly point out the genealogies of colonial violence that inhere in and contribute

to the production of the Anthropocene, and such thinking forces the examination of who is the 'we' we speak of when 'the human' is evoked. Despite the continued talk of 'the human' by natural and social scientists the human has never been constitutively 'one' (Chakrabarty 2), nor is anthropocenic violence ever evenly dispersed. The Humanities, with its 'reflexive access to species self-definition' (Boes and Marshall 60), is uniquely positioned to address the crisis in the human that has been precipitated by the Anthropocene. This special issue is committed to Greg Garrard, Gary Handwerk and Sabine Wilke's assertion that the role of the Humanities is to 'help to make visible, tangible, and morally salient the narrative, historical, philosophical, and aesthetic dimensions' of the Anthropocene so as to engender meaningful change (150).

In this collection we are interested in positioning the human in a more-than-human world, through taking seriously the vitality of a range of objects which are both animate and inanimate. In this way it is motivated by Timothy Morton's idea of the 'radical intimacy' of all things (8), Cary Wolfe's insistence on a biopolitical frame in which 'human and nonhuman lives are deeply woven together' (48) and Val Plumwood's assertion that we need to develop an environmental culture which 'fully acknowledges the non-human sphere and our dependency on it' (3). In advocating for a profound relationality and interconnectedness of all things, this collection considers what it means to break down the hierarchies of subject and object and to situate the human in a broader material context. Jane Bennett, for example, places the human body (in its particularity) within a broader network or assemblage of other 'vibrant' things. She celebrates the 'nonhuman vitalities actively at work around and within us' ('Systems and Things' 231), and in this way she simultaneously challenges the stability of the human as a bounded and coherent entity, and the notion of the passivity of nonhuman matter. At the same time, this collection remains sensitive to the tension between the political imperative to move beyond anthropocentrism and the reality that '[w]hatever nonhuman turn we may make, we must make it as (versions of) the human' (Grosz in Roffe and Stark 23).

Many of the papers in this collection draw on human-object and human-animal encounters from the southern hemisphere, a realm once deemed Antipodean; an upside-down or disordered world. It is also the locale of 'second empire', where colonialism came to nestle and settle, rearranging and disordering the biota of Indigenous and animal worlds with violent effect. Taking Gabrielle Hecht's cue that the 'Anthropocene feels different depending on where you are', and 'both responsibility and vulnerability are unevenly distributed' (np), this collection also seeks to relocate colonial violence within understandings of the Anthropocene in the specific context of Australia. We recognise that deep genealogies of colonial violence have driven aspects of the Anthropocene, disordering worlds in a process

that has made the familiar unfamiliar, and thus unhomely, out of place and outside accepted orders of time.

In the rapid exchange of biota that took place as a result of colonisation and its devastating consequence for Indigenous worlds, we see the ‘important connections between European colonization [sic] and the current mass extinction event’ as part of the ‘tendency of colonial violence to resonate across species boundaries’ (Mitchell np). Homi Bhabha’s use of the concept of the uncanny thus has significance here, where one is in place and out of place at the same time. Bhabha refers to the ‘estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world’ when the ‘intimate recesses of the domestic space become sites for history’s most intricate invasions’ (141). The notion of the ‘unhomely’ assists in foregrounding the discomfiting tensions of the civilising domestic world of the colony, which was marked in Australia by the transformation of Indigenous space through rapid settlement, pastoral reorganisation, and ongoing industrial processes. In the resulting colonised spaces, both the valued *and* the abject subtend to bodies and material culture, and thus the material objects within them become artefacts of an anthropogenic horror. This, Bhabha explains, is the ‘unhomely moment’ which ‘creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow and suddenly you find yourself with Henry James’s Isabel Archer “taking the measure of your dwelling” in a state of “incredulous terror”’ (141). Here, the feelings of familiarity and safety that simultaneously rely on the repression of colonial violence show one form by which the Anthropocene has come into being.

In Australia we are on ground that has been violently settled and is thus profoundly unsettled, and this history of colonisation must be foregrounded in our approach to environmental problems. The Anthropocene is a vital new paradigm for thinking about the relationships between humans and nature, but it has been framed primarily in terms of the global and the species. For example, within literary studies, Timothy Clark insists that because climate change is a problem of global magnitude, we need to move beyond regionalism and “methodological nationalism” in our selection of objects of analysis (*Ecocriticism* 54). The papers in this collection, however, demonstrate the value of using a regional lens to think through global issues. Tom Griffiths suggests that Australia’s ‘roller-coaster of environmental history makes us think differently and more sharply than the rest of the world on many ecological matters’ (np). With its focus on the Antipodean Anthropocene, this special issue advances the significance of the regional for thinking about our current environmental situation. Developing out of a symposium held at the University of Tasmania, it speaks to the unique locality of this institution in relation to a series of overlapping regions—Australia, Antarctica, the Pacific, the Southern Ocean, Oceania, Australasia. The papers in this special issue focus on the unique cultures, Indigeneities, communities, and practices that emerge from these contexts. From this island at the bottom of

Australia, the effects of the Anthropocene become obvious on scales both intimate and far-reaching. Our situatedness challenges us to explore new ways of theorising the Anthropocene through objects, asking us to reconsider ways of writing that may better express engagements with the world. Not only does this explicitly challenge the monolithic vision of the human that is emerging in the Anthropocene, it also creates new resources for thinking experimentally about environmental pasts, presents and futures.

Objects in the Anthropocene move, crossing borders and boundaries both material and non-material. They reorganise relationships in new and unexpected ways, and fold out into wider orders of materiality and connection. 'Objects' have also come to include material effects, such as weather, rust, microorganisms and hormones. In the midst of this perpetual movement—all these flows, all these palpable worlds—are humans of all kinds, still absolutely marked by gender, race and class and not all equally effected by the rising oceans and warming planet that most popularly characterise the Anthropocene. As Achille Joseph Mbembe clarifies:

The project is not to exclude humans, but to treat them as a particular type of object. It is to indicate non-human objects without treating them as vehicles for human contents. It is not a call to pay attention to objects rather than subjects. It is to transform the subject into one object among many others, undermining its privileged, central or foundational place within philosophy and ontology. Subjects are objects among objects. (43)

For Giovanni Aloi, challenging the intrinsic anthropocentrism embedded in our relationships with objects may show us their other forms and attributes, their 'histories that invite us to follow and retrieve agential engagements between human and nonhuman networks' (loc. 3425). Paradoxically the path that objects may lead us along can often begin with a deeply human-led fascination with an object that exercises its charisma and unsettles the seemingly settled boundaries of human and thing. Making the invented nature of the 'naturalised' objects explicit is a necessary political act in the Anthropocene but it is also an important aspect of any experimental history, which was a key provocation for the conference that gave rise to this collection. That objects occupy multiple times extending beyond a human imagining accounts in part for their capacity to convene diverse audiences and to call-in varied colleagues and allies. They can also help some hidden human histories to be seen in new ways, as the contributors to this volume demonstrate.

The contributions to this collection take a variety of objects as a prompt to consider the uncanny rupture of objects in the Anthropocene. Meg Samuelson examines a threatened species, the shark, as a potent figure for thinking through

the Anthropocene at the fault-lines of species universalism, racialised difference and human exceptionalism. Assembling a cultural archive to explore this object, Samuelson reveals how sharks can be shown to bring into view practices of colonial and neoliberal consumption and value, and the differential allocation of vulnerability across and within species. Embodying spectacles of terror as well as hidden histories or practices of remembrance, the sharks that surface into the works examined here, articulate colonial violence and the Anthropocene, expressing the unfinished project of humanism while unsettling human exceptionalism.

Erin Hortle considers the detritus of the world's largest mammal, the sperm whale, and how this can be read in the Anthropocene to consider extremes of scale, both intimate and global. Hortle situates the ambergris that washes up on Tasmania's remote, south west coast in relation to a set of intersecting histories: 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'; colonial whaling practices and subsequent legislation; and specific acts of local activism in the face of a globalised anthropogenic environmental degradation. Hortle makes the object immediate and visceral to draw attention to its significance: 'When it's fresh, ambergris smells like briny cow shit, or it smelt like that to me when I sniffed this piece.' She continues in a style imbued with the aural, legal, environmental life of the ambergris. Ambertextual, perhaps? Drawing upon Clark's contention that 'dominant modes of literary and cultural criticism are blind to scale effects in ways that [with the advent of the Anthropocene] now need to be addressed' ('Scale' 150), Hortle contends that reading and historicising objects in the Anthropocene requires us to read across scales (spanning from the local to the global), to think beyond what can be definitively known by the human and thus enter into a 'naïve moment' (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* 356) of speculative history.

Hannah Stark uses an extinct animal that has taken on mythical proportions to explore the afterlife of extinction. The thylacine (Specimen P762 in this case, suspended in alcohol in a museum collection for over 150 years), is an object of ongoing debate that highlights extinction as a result of human agency. The uncanny presencing of a thylacine pup in a museum spirit jar, is one of approximately 750 pieces of thylacine material that is held by institutions around the world. Stark explores what it means to look at images of P762 in relation to extinction and considers, in relation to Judith Butler's work on precarious life, how we think about the cultural politics of emotions in the Anthropocene.

In contrast, Penny Edmonds takes a confected creature, the Macleay Museum bunyip made from the cycloptic skull of a foal to highlight the nexus between the fabulous, the extinct, and acclimatisation movements of the Nineteenth century.

Her paper attends to an object held in a university museum and its entanglements with other species at a critical time when an aggressive settler colonialism and colonial science gave rise to and reconfigured the Australian environmental imagination. Edmonds reflects on the movement of animals and the rapid reorganisation of species and environment in the colonial period, in particular, the impact of the horse as a biopolitical animal of invasion. Likewise, she considers the 'material vibrancy', in Jane Bennett's words, of this strange assemblage of horse and hoax to explore its emergence within a 'political ecology of things'. (Bennett) The Macleay bunyip, confused as a deep-time megafaunal creature, or a living Gothic throwback, became native and yet horrendous. As Edmonds shows, the Macleay bunyip head is an ambivalent object that crosses frontiers and confounds time and place, a multitemporal and biopolitical artefact of invasion. The bunyip head performs the confusion of the Anthropocene, and thus choreographs a kind of 'bunyip time'; it is an object that in its curious unfolding marks the rupture and turmoil of the Anthropocene in the Antipodes.

Other objects in the Anthropocene are bought into play as representational workers that effect human thinking, often in a romantic vein but not granted their own order of complexity. Elizabeth Leane and Ben Maddison trace the importance of providing a more connective relationship in their individualising biography of Iceberg B9B that rescues all icebergs from mere metaphor. In the Anthropocene, icebergs have taken on a new repertoire of meaning, metonymically representing unstable icesheets, shrinking glaciers and rising seas. While their collective meaning is well established, icebergs are rarely treated as individual objects with their own histories, impacts and futures. To this end, Leane and Maddison trace the historical journey of the twenty-seven-year-old berg known as B9B, and its intersection with the human history of Antarctica. The still-unfolding Anthropocenic history of B9B is a reminder that the circumstances making objects historical are highly malleable, and that Antarctica's history is one in which natural and cultural objects and actions are closely entangled.

The unpeeling anthropocenic object not only occupies multiple times, but also diverse and contradictory discourses. The object is seen to materialise orders of power while suggesting something more than can be seen. The seeming 'quiet' of the object is also a gesture towards the ineffable, the way of knowing and being that is yet to come. In this way objects within the Anthropocene can suggest a kind of hopefulness that other orders of existence can be practiced that may not lead necessarily into extinction. Katrina Schlunke suggests such a possibility in relation to art objects within the Anthropocene. Her hopeful arguments reflect the reality that objects ordain orders of sociality or collective action. They speak of plural rather than single events and in so doing point to an order of gregariousness that may inspire new passions for the new order of tender collective life we are within. As Mitman et al. suggest, humans can use objects within the Anthropocene 'to

consider multiple scales of space and time. The fuller dimensions and rhetorical weight of such object-stories can generate resistance to a narrowing of our collective possibilities' (xi). This collection seeks to convene an expanded sense of collective possibilities that can be read, we hope, off the page.

HANNAH STARK is senior lecturer in English at the University of Tasmania. She is the Author of *Feminist Theory After Deleuze* (Bloomsbury, 2016), and the co-editor of *Deleuze and the Non/Human* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) and *Deleuze and Guattari in the Anthropocene* (Edinburgh, 2016).

KATRINA SCHLUNKE writes and researches about the interconnections between place, past and materiality. She is a co-editor of *Cultural Studies Review* and an Adjunct Associate Professor at the Universities of Tasmania and Sydney.

PENNY EDMONDS is Associate Professor of History and a recent ARC Future Fellow (2012-2017) in the School of Humanities, University of Tasmania. Her research interests include colonial/postcolonial histories, humanitarianism and human rights, Australian and Pacific-region transnational histories, performance, museums and visual culture. Her most recent book *Settler Colonialism and (Re)conciliation: Frontier Violence, Affective Performances, and Imaginative Refoundings* (Palgrave, 2016) was shortlisted for the 2017 Ernest Scott Prize.

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