

Making Kin

Anthropocene, Capitalocene,
Plantationocene, Chthulucene

There is no question that anthropogenic processes have had planetary effects, in inter/intra-action with other processes and species, for as long as our species can be identified (a few tens of thousand years); and agriculture has been huge (a few thousand years). Of course, from the start the greatest planetary terraformers (and reformers) of all have been and still are bacteria and their kin, also in inter/intra-action of myriad kinds (including with people and their practices, technological and otherwise).¹ The spread of seed-dispersing plants millions of years before human agriculture was a planet-changing development, and so were many other revolutionary evolutionary ecological developmental historical events.

People joined the bumptious fray early and dynamically, even before they/we were critters who were later named *Homo sapiens*. But I think the issues about naming relevant to the Anthropocene, Plantationocene, or Capitalocene have to do with scale, rate/speed, synchronicity, and complexity. The constant questions when considering systemic phenomena have to be, When do changes in degree become changes in kind? and What are the effects of bioculturally, biotechnically, biopolitically, historically situated people (not Man) relative to, and combined with, the effects of other species assemblages and other biotic/abiotic forces?

No species, not even our own arrogant one pretending to be good individuals in so-called modern Western scripts, acts alone; assemblages of organic species and of abiotic actors make history, the evolutionary kind and the other kinds too.

But is there an inflection point of consequence that changes the name of the “game” of life on earth for everybody and everything? It’s more than climate change; it’s also extraordinary burdens of toxic chemistry, mining, nuclear pollution, depletion of lakes and rivers under and above ground, ecosystem simplification, vast genocides of people and other critters, et cetera, et cetera, in systemically linked patterns that threaten major system collapse after major system collapse after major system collapse. Recursion can be a drag.

Anna Tsing in a recent paper called “Feral Biologies” suggests that the inflection point between the Holocene and the Anthropocene might be the wiping out of most of the refugia from which diverse species assemblages (with or without people) can be reconstituted after major events (like desertification, or clear cutting, or, or, . . .).² This is kin to the World-Ecology Research Network coordinator Jason Moore’s arguments that cheap nature is at an end; cheapening nature cannot work much longer to sustain extraction and production in and of the contemporary world because most of the reserves of the earth have been drained, burned, depleted, poisoned, exterminated, and otherwise exhausted.³ Vast investments and hugely creative and destructive technology can drive back the reckoning, but cheap nature really is over. Anna Tsing argues that the Holocene was the long period when refugia, places of refuge, still existed, even abounded, to sustain reworlding in rich cultural and biological diversity. Perhaps the outrage meriting a name like Anthropocene is about the destruction of places and times of refuge for people and other critters. I along with others think the Anthropocene is more a boundary event than an epoch, like the K-Pg boundary between the Cretaceous and the Paleogene.⁴ The Anthropocene marks severe discontinuities; what comes after will not be like what came before. I think our job is to make the Anthropocene as short/thin as possible and to cultivate with each other in every way imaginable epochs to come that can replenish refuge.

Right now, the earth is full of refugees, human and not, without refuge.

So I think a big new name, actually more than one name, is warranted—hence Anthropocene, Plantationocene,⁵ and Capitalocene (An-

dreas Malm's and Jason Moore's term before it was mine).⁶ I also insist that we need a name for the dynamic ongoing symchthonic forces and powers of which people are a part, within which ongoingness is at stake. Maybe, but only maybe, and only with intense commitment and collaborative work and play with other terrans, flourishing for rich multispecies assemblages that include people will be possible. I am calling all this the Chthulucene—past, present, and to come.⁷ These real and possible time-spaces are not named after SF writer H. P. Lovecraft's misogynist racial-nightmare monster Cthulhu (note spelling difference), but rather after the diverse earthwide tentacular powers and forces and collected things with names like Naga, Gaia, Tangaroa (burst from water-full Papa), Terra, Haniyasu-hime, Spider Woman, Pachamama, Oya, Gorgo, Raven, A'aku-luujjusi, and many many more. "My" Chthulucene, even burdened with its problematic Greek-ish rootlets, entangles myriad temporalities and spatialities and myriad intra-active entities-in-assemblages—including the more-than-human, other-than-human, inhuman, and human-as-humus. Even rendered in an American English-language text like this one, Naga, Gaia, Tangaroa, Medusa, Spider Woman, and all their kin are some of the many thousand names proper to a vein of SF that Lovecraft could not have imagined or embraced—namely, the webs of speculative fabulation, speculative feminism, science fiction, and scientific fact.⁸ It matters which stories tell stories, which concepts think concepts. Mathematically, visually, and narratively, it matters which figures figure figures, which systems systematize systems.

All the thousand names are too big and too small; all the stories are too big and too small. As Jim Clifford taught me, we need stories (and theories) that are just big enough to gather up the complexities and keep the edges open and greedy for surprising new and old connections.⁹

One way to live and die well as mortal critters in the Chthulucene is to join forces to reconstitute refuges, to make possible partial and robust biological-cultural-political-technological recuperation and re-composition, which must include mourning irreversible losses. Thom van Dooren and Vinciane Despret taught me that.¹⁰ There are so many losses already, and there will be many more. Renewed generative flourishing cannot grow from myths of immortality or failure to become-with the dead and the extinct. There is a lot of work for Orson Scott Card's *Speaker for the Dead*.¹¹ And even more for Ursula Le Guin's worlding in *Always Coming Home*.

I am a compostist, not a posthumanist: we are all compost, not post-

human. The boundary that is the Anthropocene/Capitalocene means many things, including that immense irreversible destruction is really in train, not only for the 11 billion or so people who will be on earth near the end of the twenty-first century, but for myriads of other critters too. (The incomprehensible but sober number of around 11 billion will only hold if current worldwide birth rates of human babies remain low; if they rise again, all bets are off.) The edge of extinction is not just a metaphor; system collapse is not a thriller. Ask any refugee of any species.

The Chthulucene needs at least one slogan (of course, more than one); still shouting “Cyborgs for Earthly Survival,” “Run Fast, Bite Hard,” and “Shut Up and Train,” I propose “Make Kin Not Babies!” Making—and recognizing—kin is perhaps the hardest and most urgent part.¹² Feminists of our time have been leaders in unraveling the supposed natural necessity of ties between sex and gender, race and sex, race and nation, class and race, gender and morphology, sex and reproduction, and reproduction and composing persons (our debts here are due especially to Melanesians, in alliance with Marilyn Strathern and her ethnographer kin).¹³ If there is to be multispecies ecojustice, which can also embrace diverse human people, it is high time that feminists exercise leadership in imagination, theory, and action to unravel the ties of both genealogy and kin, and kin and species.

Bacteria and fungi abound to give us metaphors; but, metaphors aside (good luck with that!), we have a mammalian job to do, with our biotic and abiotic sympoietic collaborators, collaborators. We need to make kin symchthonically, sympoetically. Who and whatever we are, we need to make-with—become-with, compose-with—the earth-bound (thanks for that term, Bruno Latour—in-Anglophone-mode).¹⁴

We, human people everywhere, must address intense, systemic urgencies; yet so far, as Kim Stanley Robinson put it in *2312*, we are living in times of “The Dithering” (in this SF narrative, lasting from 2005 to 2060—too optimistic?), a “state of indecisive agitation.”¹⁵ Perhaps the Dithering is a more apt name than either the Anthropocene or Capitalocene! The Dithering will be written into earth’s rocky strata, indeed already is written into earth’s mineralized layers. Symchthonic ones don’t dither; they compose and decompose, which are both dangerous and promising practices. To say the least, human hegemony is not a symchthonic affair. As ecosexual artists Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle say on a sticker they had made for me, composting is so hot!

My purpose is to make “kin” mean something other/more than en-

tities tied by ancestry or genealogy. The gently defamiliarizing move might seem for a while to be just a mistake, but then (with luck) appear as correct all along. Kin making is making persons, not necessarily as individuals or as humans. I was moved in college by Shakespeare's punning between *kin* and *kind*—the kindest were not necessarily kin as family; making kin and making kind (as category, care, relatives without ties by birth, lateral relatives, lots of other echoes) stretch the imagination and can change the story. Marilyn Strathern taught me that “relatives” in British English were originally “logical relations” and only became “family members” in the seventeenth century—this is definitely among the factoids I love.¹⁶ Go outside English, and the wild multiplies.

I think that the stretch and recomposition of kin are allowed by the fact that all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense, and it is past time to practice better care of kinds-as-assemblages (not species one at a time). Kin is an assembling sort of word. All critters share a common “flesh,” laterally, semiotically, and genealogically. Ancestors turn out to be very interesting strangers; kin are unfamiliar (outside what we thought was family or gens), uncanny, haunting, active.¹⁷

Too much for a tiny slogan, I know! Still, try. Over a couple hundred years from now, maybe the human people of this planet can again be numbered 2 or 3 billion or so, while all along the way being part of increasing well-being for diverse human beings and other critters as means and not just ends.

So, make kin, not babies! It matters how kin generate kin.¹⁸