Introduction
The Anthropocene and Literature

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There is no Anthropocene. That, at least, is the case if we accept the decision reached by the International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS) in 2024. After long deliberations, the ICS's Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy (SQS) voted against the proposal to ratify the Anthropocene as an official term for a new geological epoch in the history of our planet. Yet this formal rejection stands in stark contrast to the term's widespread adoption across the humanities and social sciences, where it has become a powerful lens for understanding human impact on the planet. This book explores how literature has both anticipated and responded to the Anthropocene, regardless of its formal geological status.

The notion of the Anthropocene was famously proposed by Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer in 2000 in a brief note in the International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme (IGBP)'s *Global Change News Letter*, where they argued that the activities of humankind during the Holocene era had left such an indelible impact on the planet that humans had turned into a "significant geological, morphological force."[1] They accordingly suggested that we have entered a new geological epoch that they proposed to label the Anthropocene. Even though the term had been used previously by Stoermer and others, the brief note of just over a page along with the publication of Crutzen's follow-up piece in *Nature*, "The Geology of Mankind," allowed the concept to reach a much wider audience, and it is difficult to think of other recent concepts with a similar impact. In that sense, the Anthropocene proposal was a fitting inauguration of a new millennium, where climate change and other human-made impacts on the planet are rapidly escalating beyond control.

In a first attempt to date this new epoch, Crutzen and Stoermer suggested that the so-called golden spike (i.e., a stratigraphically significant moment marking the beginning of a geological epoch) was to be located in the second half of the eighteenth century, the pinnacle of the Enlightenment, where James Watt invented the steam machine that turned out to be a driving

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force during the Industrial Revolution. At the same time, Crutzen and Stoermer admitted that this dating of the period is "somewhat arbitrary" and that "alternative proposals can be made."[2] Such alternatives have indeed been suggested, most notably perhaps the "Orbis Spike" (the year 1610), where the European colonization of America and the resultant transfer of crops and species left a measurable global dip in atmospheric carbon dioxide levels; and the years following World War II, where the combined impact of the first nuclear bombs and The Great Acceleration (a massive postwar surge in human activities) left lasting traces in Earth's geological layers.[3] These frequently proposed golden spikes are regarded as the so-called Big Three, but yet others have located the beginning of the period as far back as to the human-led extinction of mammoths 15,000 years ago.[4] In their widely cited article in *Nature*, Lewis and Maslin have pointed out that these various starting dates give rise to different stories about the Anthropocene, and literary critics such as Seth Reno, Steve Mentz, Tobias Menely, and Jesse Oak Taylor have advanced similar arguments, thereby stressing the narrative component of the Anthropocene. But the Anthropocene is not just stories, and on a higher level of abstraction, these different narratives all revolve around humanity's longstanding utilitarian relationship with nature and resultant predatory practices.

Since Crutzen and Stoermer's original note, the debate about both the dating and the general validity of the Anthropocene proposal has raged back and forth, culminating in the much-publicized vote in 2024. The stated reason for the rejection of the proposal by the SQS was that the lake in Canada, Crawford Lake, which had been selected as a key site, did not yield measurements that were accurate and containable enough to decide the case. Accordingly, the majority of the panel voted against the proposal, but the decision was far from uncontroversial, and several members of the committee, including Jan Zalasiewicz, argued that the decision ought to be annulled.[5] Their dissatisfaction with the decision derives from the fact that the Anthropocene is clearly everywhere. By now, there is a strong consensus in the scientific community that climate change is anthropogenic, and so many species are currently facing extinction due to for instance predation, rising temperatures, or destruction of their habitats that researchers are speaking of a Sixth Mass Extinction. At the same time, the level of acidity and the amount of plastic in the oceans are increasing, with detrimental effects for most ocean life. We have long known that humans leave lasting traces in nature, but with the advent of the Great Acceleration, the process has advanced to such a degree that it is hard to ignore, unless you are politically predisposed to do so, and many see the

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decision of the committee as a potentially harmful disregard of these facts in favor of disciplinary chauvinism and definitory hairsplitting. In justice, it should be mentioned that the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS) issued a statement after ratifying the decision where they said: "Despite its rejection as a formal unit of the Geologic Time Scale, Anthropocene will nevertheless continue to be used not only by Earth and environmental scientists, but also by social scientists, politicians and economists, as well as by the public at large. It will remain an invaluable descriptor of human impact on the Earth system."[6]

The statement clearly acknowledges the continued relevance of the term, just as it emphasizes that the Anthropocene concerns much more than geology. What is at stake is nothing less than a severe crisis in the Earth system – a shorthand for the many interdependent systems of our planet, including the atmosphere, the biosphere, the geosphere, the hydrosphere, and the noösphere. The Earth system has long been in a state of relative equilibrium, but as argued by for instance Clark and Szerszynski, "human activity is tipping the whole Earth system into a new state, with unpredictable consequences."[7] As will be made clear by the present book, we have long been discussing phenomena such a pollution, global warming, overpopulation, and non-sustainable use of resources, but according to Earth System Science, the previous gradual changes can suddenly interact in unforeseen ways, speed up, and spin out of control.

Besides this enormous and for the individual incomprehensible complex of interacting systems, the Anthropocene very much also concerns the private sphere. Individual daily consumer choices, such as the selection of vacation forms or of vegetables in the supermarket (is it unethical to eat an avocado grown thousands of miles away or to buy tomatoes out of season? Should we stop flying?), bring the Anthropocene close to home, into our own lives. As Timothy Clark has argued, in our current reality it is not irrational to connect a patio heater in London with the inundation of Pacific islands.[8] The Anthropocene is so removed that we cannot relate to it or even understand it, and at the same time it is so close to us that we have a challenging time focusing on it. As a result of this, the Anthropocene gives rise to emotions spanning from awe and impotence to irritation, resignation, confusion, and anger.

Aside from the fact that the massive amount of observable human-made changes in the Earth system intuitively gives lie to the decision that there is no Anthropocene, the concept itself has also – as hinted at in IUGS's statement – torn loose from the field of geology and migrated to a number of other disciplines within both the natural and social sciences and the

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humanities, where it has had a significant impact during the past fifteen years. The Anthropocene is thus a concept with unusually fuzzy disciplinary borders, but as Pieter Vermeulen argues in the first chapter of this book, in spite of (or perhaps because of) this fuzziness, the term has proven to be extremely productive. The extraordinarily complex concept calls for explanations from many branches of knowledge, and the resultant multidisciplinary discussions of the concept have allowed us to understand and describe the world in new ways.

This is also the case within literary studies, where the concept seems to have left particularly significant traces. A number of the most influential texts about the Anthropocene from outside of the natural sciences are thus related to the field of literary studies, whether they are written by literary scholars, such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal text on planetarity,[9] or appear in literary critical contexts, like historian Dipesh Chakrabarty's oft-cited articles in *Critical Inquiry* and *New Literary History*. The concept has had an enormous impact on literature itself and on the studies of it, on several fronts. First of all, it has provided fiction writers with a new set of issues to write about and a new political rallying point. Fiction about climate change (cli-fi) and related phenomena such as flooding or global warming is probably the most prominent example, but the Anthropocene has also led to an increased interest in topics such as infrastructure, deep time, extinction, and our co-existence with other species and organisms. Moreover, the concept has given both critics and writers a new vocabulary; or perhaps it has rather aggregated existing vocabularies into a new supervocabulary, which allows us to speak with confidence of technical terms like golden spikes, stratigraphy, extraction, and fracking, not to mention abstract concepts such as planetarity and the Anthropocene itself. In the Anthropocene, according to Menely and Oak Taylor, all scholars are called upon to become interdisciplinary Earth system humanists.

These developments are also evident in the current volume, which is an attempt to take stock of the relation between the Anthropocene, literary studies, and literature itself. The contributions in the volume show that literature has not only anticipated the Anthropocene but has also become one of its most vital arenas of reflection, critique, and imagination. By tracing the literary career of the Anthropocene across genres, geographies, and scales, the book offers a comprehensive and interdisciplinary account of how literature engages with planetary crisis.

Other books have revolved around similar themes, including important works by Vermeulen, Menely and Oak Taylor, and Parham, and readers who wish to delve even further into the topic can profitably also seek out those books.[10] The current volume supplements the many other books on

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the topic by combining an overview of early developments in the relation between literature and the Anthropocene with an elaborate introduction to recent developments in this rapidly evolving field, with completely up-to-date theories and cases. The Anthropocene (and its relation to literature) is very much a moving target, but in concert the contributions in this volume provide an understanding of both the history of the field and its current condition, and it thus has something to offer for both newcomers and seasoned veterans in the debates of the Anthropocene and its relation to literature and literary studies.

Of Whales and Men: Anticipating the Anthropocene

When powerful new concepts like the Anthropocene are introduced, it is often possible to observe a certain critical evolution of the concept through different phases: Initially, critics eagerly latch onto the new concept and argue that it lets us see things we have never seen before – a clear boon in a field where newness is a valuable currency.[11] The next phase often marks a counter-reaction, where other critics gleefully point out that the phenomena described by the concept are not new at all: We have seen it all before, and any attempt to claim originality is misguided. This is usually followed by a third phase, where the critical establishment reaches a more nuanced understanding that allows it to discuss both differences from and continuities with earlier concepts.

The same development has to a wide extent characterized the adoption of the Anthropocene term by the humanities, where after the initial enthusiasm (we have gained a completely new way of understanding the relation between humans and the planet!) and subsequent critical backlash (it is all old hat!) we have reached a fruitful phase characterized by an awareness of both historical precedents and new departures. After a certain latency period, the Anthropocene has shifted the terms of the critical debate and let us engage in new discussions, or at the very least engage in old discussions in new ways, and the contributions in this volume are all evidence of this. But in our praise of the explanatory power of the concept it is important to remember that both the many phenomena gathered under the notion of the Anthropocene, literature's treatment of these phenomena, and literary studies' discussions of these literary treatments all grow out of a long history that the concept has no doubt made us even more aware of.

The connection between fossil fuels and global warming was already discussed in newspapers in the beginning of the twentieth century, and overpopulation and the depletion of the planet's resources have also long been part of the public debate. Literature has noticed this right from the

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beginning. As Ezra Pound said, artists are the antennae of the race, and literature and other art forms are accordingly rife with early depictions of and reflections on humanity's impact on the natural world. The environmental sensibilities of the Romanticists are thus considered by many, including scholars such as Seth Reno, David Higgins, and Tess Somervell, as a precursor to cli-fi and modern Anthropocene thought. Many centuries before this, prominent authors of Antiquity, including Seneca, reflected on our relation to nature in ways that anticipate current debates, and to push the point to its extremes, several cave paintings exhibit a strong awareness of our complex entanglement with Earth, as argued by for instance Scott Slovic in the present book.

A very concrete example of the presence in literature of the Anthropocene before the Anthropocene is Herman Melville's masterpiece *Moby-Dick* (1851), whose publication originally went largely unnoticed, but which since its renaissance after World War I has achieved an undisputed status as a central novel in the history of western literature. At its rediscovery in the 1920s, the work was especially regarded as a precursor to modernism's monstrous experiments with the novel form, but like many literary classics, its reputation has managed to keep up with the times. The novel has thus subsequently been praised for its visionary depiction of humanity's predation on nature, a theme addressed by for instance Leo Marx in his seminal *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), which laid the foundation for much later ecocriticism. Here he shows how the whaling ship *Pequod* is described as an ocean-going factory, "a composite image of industrial technology in the Age of Steam," where the crew in the service of capitalism processes noble maritime creatures into base commodities.[12] On the basis of such reflections, which have later been elaborated by for instance Lawrence Buell,[13] Melville's novel has come to be regarded as a forerunner of the blue humanities, an offshoot of the green humanities, which takes off from the incontrovertible fact that our planet is more blue than green (see Søren Frank's "The Sea," Chapter 12 in this volume). At the same time, due to the narrator's encyclopedic and diligent attempt to understand every aspect of the whale and its essence, *Moby-Dick* has also been seen as a significant *Ur*-text within the field of animal studies (see Keita Hatooka's Chapter 9 in the present book).[14]

As an example of these proto-Anthropocene interests, the narrator of *Moby-Dick* actively addresses the question of extinction in chapter 105, "Does the Whale's Magnitude Diminish – Will He Perish?" The possibility of extinction is not least something Melville was aware of because of the American buffalo, which were famously hunted to something close to

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extinction during Melville's time. In the chapter, Ishmael wonders whether the whaling industry will cause something similar to happen to the sperm whale:

> Comparing the humped herds of whales with the humped herds of buffalo, which, not forty years ago, overspread by tens of thousands the prairies of Illinois and Missouri, and shook their iron manes and scowled with their thunder-clotted brows upon the sites of populous river-capitals, where now the broker sells you land at a dollar in inch; in such a comparison an irresistible argument would seem furnished, to show that the hunted whale cannot now escape speedy extinction.[15]

Through these reflections, the narrator demonstrates a clear awareness of the relation between capitalist expansion, predation, and the possibility of extinction. The chapter concerns typical Anthropocene questions and therefore points ahead to our own time, but Ishmael's reflections at the same time obviously hail from a time before the Anthropocene proposal. After deliberating for a bit, Ishmael concludes that the whale (characteristically of the period described as a "he") will surely survive as a species. The oceans are simply too abundant, he argues, and the whales are too fast for the ships to catch them all. Moreover, the noble creatures can always hide beneath the ice: "whales can at last resort to their Polar citadels, and diving under the ultimate glassy barriers and walls there, come up among the icy fields and floes: and in a charmed circle of everlasting December, bid defiance to all pursuit from man."[16] Full of confidence and rhetorical panache, Ishmael therefore postulates that the sublime whale will survive the next Flood: "if ever the world is again to be flooded . . . then the eternal whale will still survive, and rearing upon the topmost crest of the equatorial flood, spout his frothed defiance to the skies."[17]

Seen from the present day, Ishmael's cocksure prophesies seem sadly disheartening. Even though Melville, according to Marx, depicts the *Pequod* as a floating factory, in the middle of the nineteenth century he could not imagine the technological developments that with fast engines and explosive torpedoes turned the whaling industry into a much more efficient and lethal machine than the one we find in *Moby-Dick*; he could not envision the exponential growth of the global population, where the 1.2 billion inhabitants on Earth in 1850 have by now multiplied to more than 8 billion; and he could not imagine that the ultimate glassy barriers of the Poles would not last forever. In an age of global warming and melting ice caps, the poetical description of the whales' hiding place "in a charmed circle of everlasting December" is tinged with tragic irony. So is the fact that even while the market's appetite for whale oil for lamps (described by

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Ishmael in another chapter in *Moby-Dick*) has long been superseded by the advent of electricity, the hunting of whales continued until 1985, where a more or less global commercial whaling moratorium went into effect. Today, the sperm whale is categorized as a vulnerable species, something Melville could not foresee in 1851. The reflections of extinction in the novel are accordingly reflections with a difference.

If we jump a couple of decades ahead, to Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* (1869–70), it has suddenly become possible to think that whales might actually become extinct. When the whaler Ned Land spots a school of whales in the Red Sea and asks for permission to harpoon them just for the sport of it, Captain Nemo soundly rebukes him:

> I'm well aware that's a privilege reserved for mankind, but I don't allow such murderous pastimes. When your peers, Mr. Land, destroy decent, harmless creatures like the southern right whale or the bowhead whale, they commit a reprehensible offense. Thus they've already depopulated all of Baffin Bay, and they'll wipe out a whole class of useful animals. So leave these poor cetaceans alone.[18]

The first-person narrator of the novel, professor and marine biologist Pierre Aronnax, subsequently reflects that "the captain was right. Thanks to the mindless, barbaric bloodthirstiness of fishermen, the last baleen whale will someday disappear from the ocean."[19] Later in the novel, Aronnax considers that the extinction of the animals on a large scale can have unpredictable consequences for the larger eco-system. He thus warns of "the scourge that will strike our descendants once the seas are depopulated of whales and seals. By then, crowded with jellyfish, squid, and other devilfish, the oceans will have become huge centers of infection, because their waves will no longer possess these huge stomachs that God has entrusted with scouring the surface of the sea."[20] In spite of such forebodings, there are limits to Captain Nemo's respect for nature, and when the submarine *Nautilus* shortly after his scolding of Ned Land encounters a school of a different whale species, the tone becomes different: "Those are sperm whales, dreadful animals that I've sometimes encountered in herds of two hundred or three hundred! As for them, they're cruel, destructive beasts, and they deserve to be exterminated."[21] It is a callous statement, but also an expression of humanity's awareness of its own technological capabilities and ability to intervene permanently in the order of nature. As Lewis and Maslin argue in their article in *Nature*, "the power that humans wield is unlike any other force of nature, because it is reflexive and therefore can be used, withdrawn or modified."[22]

Elsewhere in Verne's novel we find descriptions of disappearing coal reserves that anticipate current discussions on climate change and depleted

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resources.[23] In that way, *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* expresses an early awareness that the balance in the Earth system can suddenly shift, and the novel contains prescient reflections on the fact that if the Gulf Stream were to change directions and force, "the climates of Europe would undergo disturbances whose consequences are incalculable."[24]

In this micro-history of the relation between whales and humans in literary history, we can finally skip ahead to Cormac McCarthy's unpublished screenplay *Whales and Men* that is partly written in dialogue with McCarthy's favorite novel *Moby-Dick*. The screenplay was written around 1980, two decades before the Anthropocene proposal, but after the advent of environmentalism, which can clearly be traced in many of the dialogues in the text. Once again, the characters reflect explicitly on the possibility of whales becoming extinct, and like in Verne's novels this prospect seems all too likely. But while Verne occasionally depicts the killing of animals as a necessity (in the case of the sperm whale) or as a regrettable side effect of technological progress, McCarthy (recalling Nemo's scolding of Ned Land) renders it as a consequence of humanity's inherent desire to destroy and of our lacking respect for our natural surroundings. As one of the characters speculate: "I think that's why we kill them. I think their value as produce is secondary to their sacrificial value. It's our inadequacy to the overwhelming fact of the whale's existence that will doom the whale."[25]

From Melville's nineteenth-century optimism to Verne's cautious foresight and McCarthy's bleak fatalism, these literary depictions of whales, though separated by more than a century, collectively trace the contours of a proto-Anthropocene consciousness. Some of the themes that we today discuss as central aspects of the Anthropocene have been addressed for centuries already in literary fiction, even though the treatment of the themes has developed over time. When discussing the Anthropocene, it is just as necessary to be aware of the long history of these discussions as of the newness of the concept, and it is equally important to acknowledge that the newness of the concept may be precisely what allows us to notice the parallels between the long history and the current situation. The Anthropocene is both brand new and exceedingly old, and the contributions in this volume range from its deep history to its present.

A Game of Names: Contested Terminologies and Critical Alternatives

The question of humanity's damaging impact on the planet is so acute that it asks us to take a stand and turns many fiction writers and critics into

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activists. Rather than merely describing the state of the world in a neutral fashion, much of the fiction and literary criticism about the Anthropocene call for action. It contains imperatives, passionate exclamations, and sometimes even instructions on how to blow up a pipeline.[26] As such, the topics gathered under the concept of the Anthropocene are highly political.

In addition to denoting a political set of topics, the name of the Anthropocene in itself has also been very much politicized, and as soon as the term had gained some traction, it began to be criticized from several directions. One point of critique is the inherently gendered nature of the term – the fact that *Anthropos* (man) is universally made to stand for all of humankind. We can recognize this universalized masculine gender from Melville's whale (Will He Perish?), just as it surfaces in the name of the discipline of anthropology, but in an age increasingly preoccupied with diversity, equity, and inclusion, the inherent masculinity of the term does seem to have aged rapidly.[27]

In continuation hereof, others have criticized the anthropocentrism of the term (and here it is worth noting that the prefix is used unproblematically to denote humankind as opposed to just Man). Donna Haraway is one of many critics to have pointed out the arrogance of putting humanity at the center of the planet's 4.5-billion-year history. As an alternative to the Anthropocene, she has suggested the term *Chthulucene*, which in tentacular fashion stresses our kinship with rather than dominion over the Earth.[28] On the same occasion, she makes a plea that we strive for new forms of relation to both each other and nonhuman beings, a practice she describes as *making kin*. Similar ideas shape Timothy Morton's *Ecology without Nature*, which argues that the very concept of nature enforces a dualistic perspective where we consider nature to be something apart from us, which makes it easier to treat it as an object meant to fulfill our needs. To achieve a truly ethical relation to our natural surroundings and emphasize our non-hierarchical entanglement (a keyword in the Anthropocene) with them, we need to abolish this division in both our nomenclature, our thinking, and our actions, Morton argues.

Other critics, including Jason W. Moore, Andreas Malm, Anna Tsing, and once again Haraway, have singled out the racialized, hierarchical, and asymmetrical aspects of the Anthropocene concept. They all argue that not all of humankind is responsible for the damage to our planet, and that a particular geographical and political subset of the human species is mostly to blame. In for instance Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Anne Stewart's *Angry Planet*, and my own *Planetary Pynchon* it has been pointed out how European modernity and

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related phenomena like capitalism and colonialism have been especially instrumental in doing harm to the planet and its many species.[29] Such arguments are expressed through competing terms like Eurocene, Capitalocene, and Plantationocene that all indicate that the western world and its values (or blatant lack of same) are to blame, and argue that the legacies of empire are usually felt most urgently in the Global South – an asymmetry that has been astutely addressed in Kathryn Yusoff's *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, and that is also discussed by for instance Senayon Olaoluwa, Stacey Balkan, and Henry Ivry in the present volume.[30]

Rather than making the concept of the Anthropocene extinct, such criticisms and alternative names have enriched our understanding of the various processes and phenomena denoted by the term and have injected energy into the discussions, all of which speaks of the productivity and resilience of the concept. In a simultaneous recognition of the validity of the critique and defense of the term's *raison d'être*, Pieter Vermeulen's contribution to this volume describes the Anthropocene as a "necessary misnomer." The fact that we still speak widely of the Anthropocene thus in no way annuls the many objections against the term. The objections can also be traced in many of the chapters in this volume, whose contributors do not always agree with each other, but anything else would also be misleading in a book about the literary Anthropocene's history and current status, and in my selection of contributors I have found it particularly important to include different voices and attitudes rather than pretending harmonical consensus. The Anthropocene denotes a battle zone, the challenged Earth system, but it is also in itself a dynamical battlefield where both the combatants and the location of the frontline are in constant flux.

Can Literature Save the Planet?

No matter where one chooses to stand in the debate, the heated discussions about the Anthropocene are in many ways heartening, since they bear witness to a strong belief that the concept in itself or the literature about it *matter*. And this realization leads us to the more general question of literature's role as either a passive reflection of or an active intervention in the Anthropocene: Does literature merely show us the state of the world, or can it actually contribute to changing it? Does it have agency? Or, with a slightly more granular reformulation of these questions: To what extent can literary fiction and the analysis of it affect our behavior and our attitude to the Anthropocene?

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On several occasions throughout literary history, works of fiction have galvanized public opinion and led to societal change. A well-known example is *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), which had a profound effect on the attitude to slavery in the US and helped pave the way for the American Civil War. Closer to our time, Joseph Heller's satirical depiction in *Catch-22* (1961) of the absurd bureaucracy of the army and the meaninglessness of war provided a gathering point for the burgeoning protests against the Vietnam War. In his essay "Perchance to Dream" about the declining social relevance of novels in the age of mass media, Jonathan Franzen singles out *Catch-22* as a successful example of social intervention. At the same time, and this is a crucial point, he argues that Heller's anti-war statement was perhaps the last novel that managed to shape public opinion in any significant way. Since the 1960s, the media ecology has changed, and other media have assumed a dominant role as shapers of opinion. When Franzen authored his essay in 1996, television was the dominant medium, but in the intervening decades, the internet and social media have taken over as the spheres where the majority of the population seek their news and form their opinions.

After being the dominant cultural medium for centuries, the book medium and the literature it carries have become increasingly marginalized, just as the ability to read long texts is in decline.[31] These statements should not be seen as an alarmistic rant (a Gutenberg Elegy, with Sven Birkerts' elegant formulation), but rather as a matter-of-fact description of the status quo in a media ecology where the battle for our attention has become fiercer, even while the number of hours in a single day has not increased.

In addition to this general transformation of the status and function of literature, something about the Anthropocene itself seems to constitute a representational challenge. This is not least a consequence of the question of *scale*. Scale has always featured prominently in the stories we tell each other – think of the stories about David and Goliath or about Gulliver's adventures in Lilliput and Brobdingnag – but the question has become more pertinent than ever in the Anthropocene, which moves across a wider range of temporal and spatial scales than we are used to. As a case in point, our daily shopping, a matter of minutes, can affect global warming, which we measure in centuries, just as humanity's relatively spoken brief history is suddenly held to the billion-year history of our planet. A key concept in the Anthropocene is thus deep time, which speaks of temporalities beyond our usual horizon of experience (see Noah Heringman's Chapter 5 about deep time in the present volume).

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In a similar fashion but on the spatial level, Timothy Morton speaks of so-called *hyperobjects*, gigantic entities that are so massively distributed across time and space that they evade human perception (such as global warming or styrofoam), but which we are still entangled with and have to relate to. In the Anthropocene, connections are forged between the individual and the Earth system, between the microscopical and the cosmic. In his influential essay "Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change," Dipesh Chakrabarty famously argues that the interweaving of human and natural history inscribes humans in "differently-scaled histories of the planet, of life and species" and leaves twenty-first-century critics "with the challenge of having to think of human agency over multiple and incommensurate scales at once."[32] This challenge has been taken up in different ways by critics such as Timothy Clark and Derek Woods (see Clark's Chapter 4 in this book for an up-to-date discussion of literature and scale in the Anthropocene).

Thinking across incommensurate scales is much harder to do than it is to say, and a frequently debated question in Anthropocene literary criticism is accordingly whether literature is even an apt medium to depict the challenges that face us. In his influential and polemical *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Amitav Ghosh has thus argued that the novel genre is not suited to undertake the discussions that are necessary to address the specter of climate change. The novel is especially geared toward domestic conflicts and the intimate sphere, Ghosh contends, and due to these shortcomings, the genre cannot adequately face the seriousness of our predicament.[33]

Finally, we can ask ourselves whether literature even has a duty to intervene when the planet suffers. Here we can once again reach back to one of the seminal studies of how literature depicts the fraught relation between humans and nature, namely Marx's *The Machine in the Garden*, which was published a few years after Rachel Carson's equally important *Silent Spring* (1962). In his foundational study, Marx identifies a recurring image in American literature, the sudden emergence of the machine in the pastoral landscape of the garden, and through careful analyses of several examples of this figure he develops a more general cultural analysis of the relation between humans, technology, and nature. After brilliant analyses of for instance *Moby-Dick* and *The Great Gatsby*, Marx concludes that there are after all limits to what fiction writers can do:

> By incorporating in their work the root conflict of our culture, they have clarified our situation. They have served us well. To change the situation we require new symbols of possibility, and although the creation of those

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> symbols is in some measure the responsibility of artists, it is in greater measure the responsibility of society. The machine's sudden entrance into the garden presents a problem that ultimately belongs not to art but to politics.[34]

This argument is more relevant than ever, but politicians have generally been unusually reluctant to face the facts in spite of the general scientific consensus of humanity's impact on the planet, and the surprising reelection of Donald Trump in 2024 has hardly made the situation more tenable.[35] Even though the reflections above hardly make many promises about literature's ability to make a difference, literature therefore has to come to terms with the fact that it has to do some of the heavy lifting, however modest its contribution may be.[36]

The good news is that a sizable portion of fiction about the Anthropocene is not content with dwelling in its own impotence but insists on making a difference. There are many strategies for doing so. For instance, the monstrous and hybrid novel experiments which Ghosh and before him Watts tend to ignore provide rich possibilities for registering scale effects, operating beyond the usual temporalities, including nonhuman protagonists, and combining careful documentation with spellbinding fictionalization. A novel like Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* accordingly moves easily between the microscopical level and the uttermost reaches of outer space, just as it spans from the deep time before humanity and to a distant ruinous future, all in the service of depicting our continuing abuse of the planet.

Imagining the End: Apocalypse and the Anthropocene

A good example of the range of literature's attempts to make us change our behavior can be found in different apocalyptic imaginaries. The notion of apocalypse, a warning of things to come and an attempt to change our attitude, is a crucial aspect of much Anthropocene literature, but the particular nature of these apocalyptic imaginaries varies widely. Three examples will suffice: At one end of the spectrum, we find what may be labeled *strong apocalypse*, a shock-and-awe narrative strategy that seeks to shake us out of our complacency. With its memorable depictions of a ruined landscape after an unspecified planetary disaster, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) is a good example of such a strong apocalypse. Even though the novel never reveals the cause of the planetary destruction, this modern classic – one of the most canonized novels of the twenty-first-century – is frequently read through an ecocritical and Anthropocene lens. McCarthy's novel pushes the environmental crisis to

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its extreme in its depiction of a broken landscape where natural resources are practically depleted, without any hope of renewal. A boy and his father struggle through the cindered landscape in search of the few remaining cans of food, while they hide from roaming cannibals. If it is not The End, it is very close to The End, and when the boy in an attempt to find a smatter of hope in the depopulated ruins asks his father whether there may be life on other planets, the father simply states that humans "couldn't live anyplace else."[37] The father's reply is just as brutal as McCarthy's overall rhetorical strategy in *The Road*: See how wrong it may all go if we do not mend our ways.

Toward the middle of the spectrum, we find what may be termed *second-chance* stories, which include novels like Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014) and Peter Heller's *The Dog Stars* (2012). In such stories, most of humanity has died out as a result of different near-extinction events (usually pandemics caused by human activities), and the infrastructures of civilization have often been destroyed, even while nature and the planet are left relatively intact. This is the case in *Station Eleven*, where one of the survivors founds a Museum of Civilization. Among its exhibits we find credit cards and smartphones – objects whose functionality is dependent on a now defunct electronic network of communication, and which have therefore turned into inert matter. Surrounded by such dead technological remnants of late modernity, but with nature itself more or less intact and vibrant, the survivors get a second, post-apocalyptic chance, which redirects our attention to pre-industrial ways of life and carries a lesson about how we ought to live here and now.

Finally, we find a lowkey type of narrative that could be called *weak apocalypse*. Many will barely think of such stories as apocalyptic, and they might just as easily be called realistic. These stories tend to focus on a very recognizable reality, where the apocalypse hums like a vaguely annoying background noise, difficult to ignore, but equally difficult to do anything about. A particularly good example of weak apocalypse is Ben Lerner's *10:04* (2014), which introduces the irritating and unspectacular specter of climate change into the private sphere of the characters. Saul Steinberg's famous satirical drawing of the world as myopically seen from New York City is an excellent illustration of the narrative strategy in *10:04*. The Anthropocene crisis is depicted in all its apparent banality (with Heather Anne Swanson's fitting term); a slow violence that is difficult to really see and understand from everyday life in affluent Brooklyn. The gradual Anthropocene apocalypse primarily manifests itself as empty shelves before

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an announced superstorm (which fails to do much damage), or as the narrator's guilty conscience as he eats baby octopuses flown in from Portugal the same morning. The narrator is fully aware of "the majesty and murderous stupidity" of extractive capitalism, but still he fails to change his behavior.[38] Another example of weak apocalypse in the banal Anthropocene is Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), where chapters from the near future briefly mention a sea wall surrounding Manhattan and solar panels in the growing desert. In such works, we know that something is not quite right, but on the other hand it does not seem so urgent that it cannot wait. The poignant point in such novels is of course that it really cannot wait, but by presenting such very recognizable quandaries, the works represent a form of realism that makes the problem very present and may increase the likelihood that we will recognize our own co-responsibility for the state of affairs.

The examples above bear witness to a wide spectrum of apocalyptic imaginaries in the Anthropocene, ranging from speculative alarmism to quiet realism and drawing on various affective registers. I will not speculate here about which strategies are most effective or hold the most literary value but merely stress that the sum of them shows that the novel has an unusually large toolbox, which undermines Ghosh's attempt to reduce the genre to airless domestic dramas. In spite of the many representational challenges posed by the Anthropocene, literature can draw on a wide variety of poetic devices in its attempt to depict and negotiate the phenomenon, just as literary criticism has developed sophisticated tools to identify and discuss these devices. The aim of this volume is to provide a good impression of the dynamics and range of literature's and literary criticism's complex relation to the Anthropocene reality we all live in.

Mapping the Volume: Origins, Developments, and Applications

Like all volumes in the series Cambridge Critical Concepts, this book is divided into three sections: Origins, Developments, and Applications. The chapters in the first part provide a useful overview of and introduction to some of the key concepts and discussions that the concept of the Anthropocene initially gave rise to in literary studies and related disciplines. Like all successful concepts, the idea of the Anthropocene has also provoked a number of critical interventions, which, rather than dismantling the concept, have helped to reinvigorate it and taken it in new directions. The second part of the book presents some of the leading examples of these developments, and the contributions in this section thus

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complicate our conceptions of what the Anthropocene is. The third part contains a series of fresh analytical applications that show how the concept and its further development are thematized and can be brought into play critically in relation to various literary works, genres, and themes. Together, the contributions across the three parts combine historical depth with cutting-edge theoretical developments, just as they foreground the Anthropocene not merely as a thematic concern but as a formal and conceptual challenge.

The Anthropocene crosses borders and concerns all inhabitants of the planet, so in planning this volume I have strived to include contributors and examples from different continents, just as the volume contains contributions from both emerging scholars and established voices in the field. The analytical examples span from high to low (a distinction that makes less and less sense) and occasionally also include narrative genres from other media, and chronologically, the range of examples move from cave paintings to the most recent novels and works of literary criticism. As such, the book is both a map of the field and a provocation for future inquiry.

Pieter Vermeulen opens the book with Chapter 1 that presents a historical overview of what he calls the literary career of the Anthropocene, and which constitutes a strong defense of the concept's continued relevance and productivity. The chapter takes off from the criticisms of the Anthropocene proposal from many angles and then provides a useful overview of the concept's history in literary studies, from its introduction into literary criticism in 2009, over its consolidation in 2015, and to its current widespread presence. In his authoritative review, Vermeulen focuses on how the interactions of literary studies with the Anthropocene have been shaped by specific literary affordances, which means that the version of the Anthropocene we find within the literary and literary critical domains differs from those in other domains.

In Chapter 2 Scott Slovic shows how literature's thematization of humanity's relationship with nature is as old as literature itself. He also argues, however, that modern ecocriticism is largely a direct response to the human recognition of our impact on the biosphere, one of the hallmarks of the Anthropocene. At the same time, ecocriticism itself has not stood still, and in the chapter Slovic reviews what he describes as five waves of ecocriticism, from the initial movements from around 1980 that were broadly interested in nature writing, to the latest wave, which constitutes an explicit response to the Anthropocene and the current planetary crisis, and which in continuation of this felt urgency increasingly tries to communicate outside our usual forums of academic publication.

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Caren Irr (Chapter 3) picks up the thread and focuses on one of the most significant fictional manifestations of the planetary crisis, climate fiction.[39] In her review of cli-fi's origins and development, she shows that the genre has a long history, but also that taking the Anthropocene seriously has produced a major shift in environmental writing. To concretize this argument, she analyzes Charlotte McConaghy's *Migrations* (2020) in dialogue with Melville's *Moby-Dick*, which it directly invokes. Irr then zooms out and includes a larger corpus of cli-fi, from Frank Herbert's *Dune*, over works by Barbara Kingsolver and Octavia Butler, and on to completely new novels, and she concludes by pointing out that cli-fi's future lies in transcending the genre's origins in a religious sensibility and orienting itself more toward the muddy, dirty, unglamorous Earth and its many nonhuman species.

As already mentioned, one of the central concepts in the Anthropocene is scale. As Chakrabarty writes, the Anthropocene asks us to think along different temporal and spatial scales than we are used to – something that is easier said than done, as the scales over which the Anthropocene moves often exceed human comprehension and literature's usual remit. Timothy Clark (Chapter 4 in this volume) has previously written about this in *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, and in his chapter he provides an updated and authoritative overview of the need for scalar literacy in both literature and literary criticism. Clark argues that the most successful literary representations of the Anthropocene are those that can engage or dramatize tensions of scale without falling into simplifications, and in the concluding part of the chapter he shows how genre literature and poetry have managed to do this in diverse ways.

One of the most concrete examples of the necessity of scale awareness in the current situation is found in the notion of deep time. The concept, which was originally proposed by John McPhee, has also taken center stage in many writings about literature and the Anthropocene, but in Chapter 5 Noah Heringman, author of the book *Deep Time: A Literary History*, shows how the notion of the geological past has a long and transnational history that can be traced from the cosmologies of Hinduism, over the geological scientists of the Enlightenment, and up to the Anthropocene. The chapter goes into depth with Hugh Miller's *The Old Red Sandstone* (1841) and George Perkins Marsh's *Man and Nature* (1864), both of which extensively anticipate current discussions, and after visiting a satirical essay by Mark Twain on the subject, the chapter concludes with a review of how the Anthropocene concept and the literature on it have renegotiated the relationship between human and planetary time.

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After these introductory chapters on some of the fundamental aspects of the Anthropocene's relationship to literature follow six chapters that focus on how the concept has given rise to a number of critical interventions, which in turn have contributed to its further development.

Some of the most forceful objections to the concept of the Anthropocene relate to its asymmetrical and universalistic nature, pointing out that while the main causes of the Anthropocene are usually to be located in the West or the Global North, it is often the Global South that is hit hardest by the consequences. The relationship between the Global South and the Global North is at the heart of Senayon Olaoluwa's Chapter 6, which argues that the history of the Anthropocene in the Global South does not begin with the Enlightenment, but with the human extermination that took place at the beginning of the colonial period. This argument also helps to soften the binary distinction between the Global North and the Global South, Olaoluwa argues, since the genocides in the Americas are thoroughly entangled with colonial violence in Africa.

In continuation hereof, Stacey Balkan (Chapter 7) depicts how the Anthropocene condition is deeply rooted in what she calls the *Ur*-entanglement of Anglo-European Modernity, namely, the relation between empire and extractivism. The prosperity of western countries is in many ways the result of global capitalist expansion, colonial occupation, and intensive resource extraction, and the depiction of these processes has constituted one of the most significant developments of the Anthropocene concept in the social and human sciences, giving rise to alternative concepts such as the Plantationocene, the Colonial Anthropocene, or the Racial Capitalocene. Based on readings of two main cases, Patrick Chamoiseau's *Slave Old Man* and Helena María Viramontes' *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Balkan shows how the works, through a lithic narrative framework that operates with other, extended temporalities, constitute damaging critiques of western capitalism's extraction of sugar and fossil fuels, respectively, and the human costs thereof.

Henry Ivry (Chapter 8) also places himself within this problem area, arguing that literary criticism, in its eagerness to expose the colonial and imperial histories of the Anthropocene, has often resorted to Black, Indigenous, or queer ecologies. Despite good intentions, however, this expansion can also be described as a kind of gentrification, Ivry argues, in which Black and Brown writers are inscribed in the Anthropocene canon in ways that blur the specificity of their works in favor of a universal point. The chapter engages with a number of examples of recent literary criticism of the Anthropocene and spiritedly shows how they tend to privilege

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particular genres and often, despite the good intentions, fail to relate adequately to the anti-Black violence at the root of the Anthropocene.

Another group that feels the consequences of the Anthropocene are nonhuman species, which make up the majority of the planet's biomass. Critics such as Donna Haraway and Timothy Morton have advocated that we in the Anthropocene need to think about our entanglements with species in completely different ways, a realization that also underlies the burgeoning field of animal studies, which Keita Hatooka's Chapter 9 places itself in dialogue with. After reviewing some of the fundamental theorists in the field, Hatooka – author of the recent *Thomas Pynchon's Animal Fables* – embarks on an analysis of a number of works of fiction that offer us new ways of thinking about our relationship with other species in various ways. Examples include works by Sherman Alexie and Thomas Pynchon, as well as Yoko Tawada's *The Emissary*.

Despite the alternative ways of making kin outlined in Hatooka's chapter, extinction is a very real risk for many animal species in the Anthropocene. Extinction is a common phenomenon which Claire Colebrook describes as the most natural thing in the world, but in the Anthropocene, it has nevertheless reached such a scale that scientists have begun to talk about a Sixth Mass Extinction. In Chapter 10 Colebrook focuses on literature's complex relationship to extinction: On the one hand, she describes literature as a form of counter-extinction, an archive that allows us to preserve things (dodos, for example, are alive and well in literature). And on the other hand, she shows how literature itself is imbricated in extinction; both by relying on perishable physical artifacts; and by contributing to the further colportation of the colonial and capitalist worldview, which bears a large part of the responsibility for the Anthropocene, a point she exposes in analyses of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and J. M. Coetzee's postcolonial rewriting *Foe*.

Christian Moraru rounds off this section with a discussion of how the Anthropocene places completely new demands on the writing of literary history. In Chapter 11 he argues that the usual methods of writing world literature are not sufficient at a time when the planet and our relationship with it are undergoing radical changes. He therefore suggests that literary studies must develop new ways of reading and writing that are based on what he calls planetary archives, larger constellations of source material that move beyond what we have traditionally understood as the subject matter of literary studies and include such nontextual features as mountains, bodies of water, infrastructure, and natural resources.

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Moraru's suggestion for updated reading strategies is finally followed by a section that puts various themes and key concepts into play in a series of concrete readings, which on the one hand exemplify how the concepts can be productively applied, and on the other hand present analyses of often fresh literary examples, thus providing an up-to-date status of the Anthropocene in literature. In Chapter 12 Søren Frank focuses on the sea, which plays an increasingly significant role in the Anthropocene. The ocean occupies two-thirds of the planet, but as has often been pointed out, we know less about it than about outer space. In order to remedy this knowledge gap, the green humanities have increasingly been joined by the blue humanities, and the chapter provides examples of the interests of this field through concrete readings. Drawing briefly on J. G. Ballard's classic *The Drowned World*, Frank, author of *A Poetic History of the Oceans*, cross-reads two recent novels in which the ocean plays a leading role, respectively Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* (a contemporary classic in Anthropocene literature) and Danish Peder Frederik Jensen's recent historical novel *Ran's Will*, each of which thematizes the risk of man-made flooding and different ways of living with the sea.

In Chapter 13 Rune Graulund looks at the topological counterpart of the sea, the dry and arid desert, which is also a recurring figure in the Anthropocene. The two tropes, sea and desert, are not mutually incompatible, and in concert they show how conditions are increasingly changing for the inhabitants of different places in the Earth system. Graulund reviews a number of examples of different desert imaginaries in fiction, both literary fiction and fiction in other media, including film, television, comics, and computer games. A key point in the chapter is that the desert is not just desert (hence the indefinite form Desert in the title of his chapter). Graulund traces three types of deserts, the Apocalyptic Desert, the Toxic Desert, and the Biospheric Desert, and argues that each type of desert is also rooted in a certain conception of humankind. The analytical examples include recent works such as *Oppenheimer* and *The Water Knife*, but also older works such as the science fiction novels *A Canticle for Leibowitz* and *Dune*.

In addition to the ocean and desert, another important topological entity in the Anthropocene is the planet itself. In her seminal *Death of a Discipline* from 2003, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak proposed the planetary as an alternative to globalization, which was a dominant concept at the time. In Chapter 14 Nicole M. Merola reviews different dimensions of the concept, planet, planetary, and planetarity, each of which foregrounds

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different ethical and affective notions of our relationship to Earth. To capture both the continuity and the differences between these dimensions, Merola suggests the neologism planet(ar[it]y), which she subsequently uses as an entry point for a close reading of Samantha Harvey's recent Booker Prize-winning novel *Orbital*, which depicts six astronauts who in low orbit speed around the planet sixteen times in a day. In her analysis of this unusual depiction of sped-up orbital time – the opposite of deep time – Merola shows how the novel can both represent and bring about aesthetic-affective-emotional labor in relation to the planet we all live on.

One of the things that is most clearly visible to the astronauts in *Orbital* – especially at night – is *infrastructure*. As Reuben Martens explains in Chapter 15, it is estimated that anthropogenic mass, that is, human-made objects, now exceeds all global living biomass, and a large part of it is infrastructure (roads, bridges, pipelines, etc.). It is a staggering piece of information, and in line with this, much recent literary criticism about the Anthropocene has been interested in infrastructure as both the cause of the Anthropocene (as it enables the transport of, for example, machinery and necessitates fossil fuels), and as – especially for the Global South – a possible way out of the consequences of the Anthropocene. However, Martens partly does away with such a binary division into dystopian and utopian infrastructure, and through readings of David Huebert's *Oil People* and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* he argues that the Global North's utopian notions of exporting for instance green energy to the Global South are not as simple as they sound.

There seems to exist a special relationship between speculative fiction and the Anthropocene. Not bound by the constraints of reality, speculative literature has a flexible set of tools at its disposal that allow it to range over large temporalities and can provide nonhuman species with a stronger agency than we are used to, thus presenting alternative scenarios to the standing order. In Chapter 16 Rebecca Ballard even argues that the dual histories of speculative fiction and of the Anthropocene not only *can* but *should* be read together, just as there is no science fiction that is *not* in and of the Anthropocene. The chapter accordingly provides an engaging overview of this dual history, from the earliest science fiction novels and their depictions of the relationship between technology and nature, over the growing ecological consciousness in much of postwar speculative fiction, and up to more recent speculative genres such as cli-fi, zombie literature (e.g., *Zone One*), and counter-hegemonic or utopian literature.

Although there is clearly a close relationship between speculative fiction and the Anthropocene, it is far from the whole story, and in Chapter 17

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"The Understory" (named with subtle reference to Richard Powers' *The Overstory*), Ben De Bruyn argues that realistic literature can also present us with narrative strategies that allow us to negotiate life in the socio-environmental struggles he with Bonneuil and Fressoz calls the Polemocene. Specifically, De Bruyn takes his point of departure in Rachel Kushner's recent novel *Creation Lake*, a work that is not so much about the scalar mismatch between human narrative and planetary upheaval as about the political mismatch between biophysical catastrophe and activist disillusionment. Through its fundamentally realistic portrait of the sometimes unsympathetic and manipulative protagonist, the novel exposes a number of dilemmas that in many ways bring the crises of the Anthropocene closer to home, and whose particularity emphasizes that people and stories cannot be reduced to typical cases and generalizable lessons.

Whereas literature and literary criticism quickly embraced the Anthropocene and already have a long history of dealing with environmental issues, media studies seem to have been a little slower on the uptake. This argument is made in Jørgen Bruhn's Chapter 18, which points out the complete absence of environmental issues in, for example, Mitchell and Hansen's influential 2010 anthology *Critical Terms for Media Studies*. However, this has changed significantly in the intervening years, and in his chapter, Bruhn presents three positions in what he calls Anthropocene media theory: intermedial ecocriticism, ecomedia studies, and environing media. Research in recent years has shown how much literary criticism and media studies can gain by entering into dialogue with each other at a time when literature itself is increasingly becoming intermedial (a trend that Bruhn himself has written about in *The Intermediality of Narrative Literature*), and in his analysis of Danish Amalie Smith's experimental, media-conscious, and eco-conscious work *Thread Ripper*, he demonstrates how the three positions outlined above can be brought to bear in a rich, media-conscious reading of literature.

As stated earlier in the Introduction, the Anthropocene is often linked to various kinds of apocalyptic notions. The idea that it is too late, that we have already reached an irreversible tipping point and have entered a more or less protracted planetary endgame, seems to characterize many works on the Anthropocene, often resulting in apathy, resignation, or powerlessness. The apocalyptic or dystopian, however, is only one side of the Anthropocene coin, and in Chapter 19 Andrew Milner, drawing on a large body of examples from literature and other media, examines how the utopian runs like an undercurrent through much fiction about the Anthropocene, and how the notion of other and better ways of living is not just escapism, but – in the

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words of Kim Stanley Robinson – should be considered nothing less than "a necessary survival strategy" in the Anthropocene.

At the end of this presentation of the book's chapters, it should be mentioned that this anthology invariably connects to other volumes in the series Cambridge Critical Concepts. As I have argued at the beginning of this Introduction, the Anthropocene connects a wide range of disciplines and questions, and previous themes of the series, such as The Global South, Animals, Climate, Nature, Technology, and Commodities are therefore all inextricably woven into the Anthropocene. Readers who wish to learn even more about these topics are referred to these volumes. At the same time, it should be emphasized that it does something to the concepts when they are read in conjunction with the Anthropocene and with each other, which is also an explicit point in many of the chapters in the book. The Anthropocene is (despite the SQS panel's vote) a ubiquitous scientific fact and a transdisciplinary figure of thought which in recent decades has influenced and has been influenced by literature and literary criticism in profound ways, and together the chapters in this book provide a rich and complex impression of how it has occurred and where it has led us.

Notes

1 Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, "The 'Anthropocene,'" *Global Change News Letter* 41 (May 2000), pp. 17–18.
2 Ibid., p. 17.
3 These golden spikes were both proposed by Lewis and Maslin in an article in *Nature*: Simon L. Lewis and Mark. A Maslin, "Defining the Anthropocene," *Nature* 519 (March 12, 2015), pp. 171–80. For an eye-opening visualization of the impact of the Great Acceleration, see W. Steffen, R. A. Sanderson, and P. D. Tyson et al., *Global Change and the Earth System* (IGBP, 2004), p. 15.
4 Christopher E. Doughty, Adam Wolf, and Christopher E. Field, "Biophysical Feedbacks between the Pleistocene Megafauna Extinction and Climate: The First Human-Induced Global Warming?" *Geophysical Research Letters* 37 (August 7, 2010), L15703.
5 For a fuller account of the decision, see Raymond Zhong, "Are We in the 'Anthropocene,' the Human Age? Nope, Scientists Say," *New York Times*, March 5, 2024.
6 Cited in Raymond Zhong, "Geologists Make It Official: We're Not in an 'Anthropocene' Epoch," *New York Times*, March 20, 2024. See also the comment by Jan Zalasiewicz, Julia Adeney Thomas, and Colin N. Waters et al., "What Should the Anthropocene Mean?," *Nature* 632.8027 (August 29, 2024), pp. 980–83, DOI:10.1038/d41586-024-02712-y. The authors stress that in spite of the official rejection of the proposal, "an

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understanding of the Anthropocene as the result of mid-twentieth-century planetary transformation remains broadly useful across disciplines" (p. 982).

7 Nigel Clark and Bronislaw Szerszynski, *Planetary Social Thought: The Anthropocene Challenge to the Social Sciences* (Polity, 2020), jacket copy.

8 Timothy Clark, "Scale," in Tom Cohen (ed.), *Telemorphosis: Theory in the Era of Climate Change*, Vol. 1 (Open Humanities, 2012), p. 154.

9 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak suggested the notion of planetarity, an ethical relation to Earth that recognizes that we only have the planet on loan, in *Death of a Discipline* (Columbia University Press, 2003).

10 See for instance Pieter Vermeulen, *Literature and the Anthropocene* (Routledge, 2020); Tobias Menely and Jesse Oak Taylor (eds.), *Anthropocene Reading: Literary History in Geologic Times* (Penn State University Press, 2017); John Parham (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Anthropocene* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

11 For a more elaborate discussion of this valorization of newness within the literary and artistic fields, see the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Niklas Luhmann.

12 Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 306.

13 Lawrence Buell, *The Dream of the Great American Novel* (Belknap, 2014).

14 See also the volume *Animals, Animality, and Literature* in the series Cambridge Critical Concepts.

15 Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (Third Norton Critical Edition, W. W. Norton, 2018), p. 338. For another reading of *Moby-Dick* as a precursor to fiction on the Anthropocene, see Caren Irr's Chapter 3 in this volume.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid., p. 339.

18 Jules Verne, *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* (Simon & Schuster, 2024, E-book), ch. XXXVI, n.p.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid., ch. XLI, n.p.

21 Ibid., ch. XXXVI, n.p.

22 Lewis and Maslin, "Defining the Anthropocene," p. 178.

23 Verne, *Twenty Thousand Leagues*, ch. XXXV, n.p.

24 Ibid., ch. XLIII, n.p.

25 Cormac McCarthy, *Whales and Men* (unpublished screenplay, the Wittliff Collections, ca. 1980), p. 25. Similar bleak thoughts on the destructive nature of humankind appear in Thomas Pynchon's novel *Gravity's Rainbow*, where the narrator says of humans that: "*It is our mission to promote death*." Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (Viking, 1973), p. 720.

26 See for instance Andreas Malm, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* (Verso, 2021).

27 Dipesh Chakrabarty distinguishes between *homo* (rational, enlightened humankind) and *Anthropos* (humankind as a selfish, blindly acting *species* which through technological prostheses wields an enormous force).

28 Donna Haraway, "Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene," *e-flux* 75 (2016), pp. 1–17.

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29 Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Harvard University Press, 2011); Anne Stewart, *Angry Planet: Decolonial Fiction and the American Third World* (University of Minnesota Press, 2022); Tore Rye Andersen, *Planetary Pynchon: History, Modernity, and the Anthropocene* (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

30 In their comment in *Nature*, Zalasiewicz et al. argue that much of the criticism of the concept of the Anthropocene can be traced to the fact that the humanities and social sciences have different interests and agendas than the natural sciences, which do not tend to consider the Anthropocene at the individual level. According to the authors, the two approaches can easily co-exist and do not necessarily contradict each other. Zalasiewicz et al., "What Should the Anthropocene Mean?" (p. 983).

31 See, for instance, Naomi S. Baron and Anne Mangen, "Doing the Reading: The Decline of Long Long-Form Reading in Higher Education," *Poetics Today* 42.2 (2021), pp. 253–79; and Rose Horowitch, "The Elite College Students Who Can't Read Books," *The Atlantic* (October 1, 2024).

32 Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change," *New Literary History* 43.1 (2012), pp. 1–18, p. 1.

33 Here it should be noted that Ghosh's critique of the limited register of the novel seems to derive from a rather limited understanding of the genre, namely, the domestic, realistic novel, which is also central to Ian Watt's classical study of the novel. However, such a (primarily British) understanding of what a novel is leaves very little room for speculative fiction (see Rebecca Ballard's Chapter 16 in the present volume), hybrid experiments, or monstrous novels such as *Moby-Dick* and *Gravity's Rainbow* – an expansive and experimental tradition that we can also find in the United Kingdom (for instance in Anthony Burgess' *Earthly Powers*, David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, Lawrence Norfolk's *Lemprière's Dictionary* and *The Pope's Rhinoceros*, and Alan Moore's *Jerusalem*, to mention a handful). For a similar argument, see Pieter Vermeulen's Chapter 1 in this volume.

34 Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, p. 365.

35 The Trump administration has antagonized research into climate change in various ways, for instance, by withdrawing funding or removing books about the topic from official libraries.

36 An even larger question than the one about literature's agency is whether humanity in itself can affect the Anthropocene condition. This huge question shall not take up much space in this Introduction, but briefly, Lewis and Maslin argue that humanity's destructive behavior can be "withdrawn and modified," while for instance Pieter Vermeulen has argued that such a "sustained emphasis on human autonomy forgets that environmental debasement has spun out of control." Lewis and Maslin, "Defining the Anthropocene," p. 178; Vermeulen, *Literature and the Anthropocene*, p. 15. In a similar way, Derek Woods has argued that the true subject of the Anthropocene in spite of its name is not humans, but the sum of so-called terraforming assemblages, composed of humans, nonhuman species

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(especially domestic animals), and technology. While Woods is no doubt right in stating that technology and livestock leave just as lasting traces on the planet as both *homo* and *Anthropos*, one may legitimately ask whether these entities would have existed if humans had not assembled and tamed them in the first place. Derek Woods, "Scale Critique for the Anthropocene," *Minnesota Review* 83 (2014), pp. 133–42.

37 Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (Knopf, 2006), p. 205.

38 Ben Lerner, 10:04 (Faber & Faber, 2014), p. 19.

39 The genre is often considered to be more or less synonymous with literature about the Anthropocene, as can be seen in Adam Trexler's book *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* (University of Virginia Press, 2015), but in reality cli-fi should be seen as a subset of Anthropocene literature, which encompasses much more than anthropogenic climate change.

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