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On storiation and what is washed ashore: The Anthropocene as big kahuna

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Abstract

This commentary begins by outlining current debates on the notion of the Anthropocene from a critical perspective. Subsequently, it will discuss how Pugh and Chandler (2021) directly address such a problematic and how their work contributes to pluralising contemporary academic debates on the Anthropocene. Their previous academic engagements are no stranger to questions of epistemic discrimination in the broad fields of geography, geopolitics, island studies, and social research, and, more concretely, mainstreamed anthropological thinking. This commentary will therefore focus on their call for storiation and its relevance for contemporary debates seeking more ethical, localised, fluid, and coherent approaches to environmental degradation, environmental history, island identity, geopolitics of climate change, and indigeneity. From all the shapes storiation can take, this commentary focuses on indigenous storiation as embodiment.

Keywords

Anthropocene, environmental crisis, epistemic discrimination, indigenous knowledge, island thinking, storiation

In her historiography of intertidal relations across Southeast Asian seas, Gaynor (2016) reminds us that one should only write about maritime worlds from within the littoral. There, where land meets the sea, is where a myriad of encounters has long defined and negotiated the storiation of being, journeying, and belonging. The Anthropocene constitutes a series of encounters, violently shaking and appropriating concepts, narratives, and practices of place-making across the world in favour of discourses that situate environmental degradation (i.e., climate change, natural disasters, pandemics, inequality) as a ‘hyperobject’ (Morton, 2010: 130): untouchable, appealing to the public as it allows us to stay zoomed out, to abstract through the sense of

vastness that these objects produce, conveniently obscuring edges and frictions, as the coloniality and violence of the relations which define the hyperobject are naturalised, de-centred (Huff, 2021), and normalised. Thus, the Anthropocene becomes a macro-story overshadowing and neglecting the pluriverses of human existence, a neo-Malthusian story of catastrophic accumulation (McBrien, 2016). Our crises are not with nature but with big

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(depoliticised) stories about nature and ‘the human’ and abstracted causality.

Pugh and Chandler’s (2021) ‘Anthropocene Islands’ is representative of scholarly currents opening up dialectic spaces, or rather ‘tidalectic spaces’ (Brathwaite, 1999), ready for the inclusion of onto-epistemic diversity. Their work contributes to re-centring islands as places of pluriverse politics (Escobar, 2020) and as defined by ever-changing assemblages of relations (Pugh, 2016, 2018). An island approach to the notion of ‘the Anthropocene’ reflects an emerging engagement with critical theory that has permeated the field of island studies for the past two decades (Baldacchino, 2004, 2005; Grydehøj, 2017, 2018; Nimführ and Meloni, 2021). Here, ‘island thinking’ is not a conceptual framework where all islands fit in one way or another, but a reflective methodology, critical tradition, and a positionality exercise intended to situate worlds in relational perspective. Islands represent diverse bodies of knowledge, with stories crafted in the encounters of the littoral, and beyond, functioning as skeletons spanning across the seas. Island connectivity and fluidity, in all its manifestations, will always lead the interested subject towards self-decolonising exercises: challenging inherited hegemonies of regionalism, place, and essentialist approaches to environmental identity and politics.

Rather than situating the ontology-epistemology binary as constitutive of ‘non-modern societies and thought’, I would argue that mainstreamed notions of the Anthropocene (i.e., those resting on technocratic absolutism) have managed to convince the public that they serve a rational enterprise well beyond the doings of ontology and right into the epistemological supremacy of positivist and biocentric approaches. Conversely, the academe in the social sciences has recently capitalised on a series of ‘realisations’ that ‘nature’, ‘culture’, ‘the human’, and ‘non-human presences’ all possess agency (Todd, 2016). The so-called ‘ontological turn’, grounded in knowledge and philosophies extracted from a variety of indigenous contexts across the world, continues to situate such advancement as a product of the Global North’s academic theory and its reflections. In contrast to this, Pugh and Chandler’s (2021) onto-epistemological realisations do

not rely on cherry-picking thoughts to craft a convincing new paradigm but engage with contemporary indigenous scholars who approach the Anthropocene from a variety of perspectives: such as ecofeminism, decolonial theory, and art as activism. As Pugh and Chandler (2021) discuss, ‘knowing is not a product of passive reflection but of being itself’. Thus, island-oriented approaches, as inspired by island indigenous knowledge, feminisms, and decolonial theory, offer a multitude of examples where so-called modernist constructions of time and space as linear can be challenged.

A quintessential concept for Pugh and Chandler is storiatio as an analytical continuum rather than a discrete lens. Hence, storiatio’s applicability can also be understood as a collaborative process which communicates place, identity, knowledge, and history as entangled embodied experiences. In the context of this commentary, storiatio is contextualised in the journeys, encounters, and intimacies of the everyday. Storiatio is not forgiving of modernist divisions of space and time, far from the intimacy of the everyday and into the abstraction of hyperobjects. Thus, the resistance of storiatio rewrites the Anthropocene as a process with a past, far from over, far from absent in that it not only exists in everyday power imbalances, but in the systems and values perpetuating inequality. By looking at the world through the storiatio of islands, from and with islands, we learn to critically read the Anthropocene. Storiatio is a radical view of ecology: it navigates the Anthropocene through the afterlives of objects, events, histories, and the tensions they enable. History is, thus, composed by traces and intra-actions and effects, rather than inter-relations (Pugh and Chandler, 2021). Islands shift, flow, and change through daily encounters. Island thinking forms places existing in the daily entanglements of islanders, far from isolated and/or contained in topographies. Through storiatio, the (island) body becomes an archive: its voices, its resistance, and the power of its orality call for accountability in the Anthropocene. As Kuhelika Ghosh (2020) discusses with regards to Jetñil-Kijiner’s Marshallese performance poetry as ecological activism, approaching place as an embodied archive, rather than a paper-based one, ensures the continuation of island

indigenous knowledge and thinking regardless of environmental degradation and the politics of text-centric archival records. Island indigenous knowledges of the Anthropocene are not temporary, ephemeral, or at the brink of disappearance. The tidalectic spaces of storiatio, thus, wash-away written archives and modernist regimes of the Anthropocene away from saltwater archives (Enomoto and MacKenzie, 2018), as they flow and transform from within; in the body archives of collective memory, songs, dance, and words. Island bodies, thus, become living archives where the imperial aspects of oceanic environmental history are also stored.

Storiatio pathways grounded on island indigenous knowledge lead us away from hyperobjects, abstraction, and indifference, through more reflective understandings of today's environmental crises and more representative analysis of daily encounters between ontologies, rationalities, imaginaries, and identities. The mastery of sustainable engagements with different environments is in the stories and storiatio of the Anthropocene beyond macro-discourses of 'the human' and 'the natural'. Islands, as containing and contained by the complex encounters of the littoral, contribute to re-conceptualising the natural, the oceanic, and the human through the connectivity of voyaging (Hau'ofa, 1994). Island mobility and circulation across spaces composes an intimate process that constitutes the singularities of the everyday; the island exists across spaces in the place-making of daily encounters. Thus, the diverse storiatio of island mobilities, circulation, and exchanges enable us to step-out of the carefully crafted discourses of domination defining much of what is known as mainstreamed Anthropocene thinking. The consequences of such global processes of environmental epistemic dispossession and domination (Leff, 2019) have often been dressed as a necessary 'collateral damage', assumedly leading towards a unifying narrative of environmental degradation, towards a human mastery of environmental crisis. Simpson (2020) maintains that despite the polarised debates, and the problematic narratives of domination and moral universalism without a past of the Anthropocene, it can also function as an analytical category problematising and destabilising such colonial logics. Pugh and

Chandler critically engage with the past and a present that is not going away (Ghosh, 2016; Satia, 2020).

Just like the notion of kahuna in native Hawaii (meaning mastery and expertise) saw its way through commodification and cultural appropriation into 'big kahuna' (anyone in power), diverse forms of local indigenous knowledge of the environment and of our relations to it have been subjugated to the dominance of the Anthropocene as colonial discourse, promoting modern imaginaries of moral universalism and technocratic absolutism. Yet, new approaches to and readings of the Anthropocene grounded in critical and decolonial island theory, as Pugh and Chandler discuss, can help us actively engage with processes of socio-environmental change as historically contextualised. Island relational thinking and fluidity situate change as constitutive of place as embodied and the (island) body as storiatio archive, places that transcend and resist the conventions and imaginaries of modernism, disaster capitalism, and neoliberal globalisation. In other words, storiatio dissects and reads the Anthropocene from within, and leaves no one indifferent.

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