



# Anthropocene Humanities: A Perspective on Actionable Outcomes

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## Abstract

*Anthropocene Humanities is an interdisciplinary field that examines the profound implications of the Anthropocene epoch, a term coined to describe the current geological age characterized by significant human impact on the Earth's geology and ecosystems. This concept, popularized by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen in the early 2000s, suggests that human activities have become a dominant force influencing climate and environmental changes, challenging traditional narratives within the humanities and prompting scholars to reassess the interplay between humanity and the nonhuman worlds.*

**Keywords:** climate change, traditional intervention, human impact, ethical intervention

The notion of the Anthropocene not only raises critical questions about human agency and responsibility but also highlights the urgent need for ethical frameworks that address the ecological crises we face today. The study of Anthropocene humanities encompasses various themes, including the critique of established socio-political systems, the role of art and literature in reflecting environmental issues, and the need for inclusive narratives that consider the perspectives of marginalized communities. Scholars such as Dipesh Chakrabarty and Carolyn Merchant emphasize the need to reframe historical narratives and ethical considerations, as traditional frameworks often overlook the complexities of human-environment interactions and the sociohistorical roots of environmental degradation. Furthermore, the field advocates for a “partnership ethic,” promoting sustainable practices and interdependence between

human and nonhuman entities as crucial steps toward addressing climate change and fostering ecological justice.

Controversies surrounding the Anthropocene are rooted in its anthropocentric framing, which some critics argue risks oversimplifying the intricate dynamics of ecological and socio-political realities. Neo-Marxist scholars caution against depoliticizing the narrative, advocating for a more engaged approach that prioritizes direct action and challenges systemic injustices associated with capitalism and colonialism.

Additionally, the discourse increasingly acknowledges Indigenous knowledge systems, which have long addressed the impacts of colonialism on the environment, suggesting that integrating diverse perspectives is essential for a holistic understanding of ecological futures. In summary,



Anthropocene humanities not only illuminate the critical intersections between human experiences, environmental change, and ethical responsibilities but also challenge scholars and activists alike to envision new pathways for sustainability and social equity in an age marked by human influence. Through this lens, the humanities emerge as vital contributors to the ongoing dialogue about our place within Earth's geological history and the moral imperatives that arise from it.

The Anthropocene is a term that denotes a significant geological epoch during which human activity has become a dominant influence on climate and the environment. Its origins can be traced back to discussions led by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen in the early 2000s, where he suggested that the Earth had entered a new geological age characterized by human impact on a planetary scale. While originally conceived as a new epoch following the Holocene, its official recognition has faced challenges, leading to debates about its precise starting point and implications for historical narratives. The concept of the Anthropocene has gained significant prominence in contemporary thought.

In recent scholarship, the Anthropocene has been framed not just as a geological concept but as a complex socio-political phenomenon intertwined with the history of capitalism and colonial expansion. This perspective aligns with the notion of the "Capitalocene," which posits that the roots of the Anthropocene extend back to the fifteenth century with the rise of European colonialism and the consequent establishment of global capitalism. Such interpretations highlight how economic structures and industrial developments have shaped ecological transformations, emphasizing the contingent nature of history that intertwines human agency with broader systemic forces.

The historical narrative of the Anthropocene is enriched by interdisciplinary approaches that span various fields, including history, literature, and environmental ethics. Scholars like Dipesh Chakrabarty argue that the climate crisis necessitates a re-evaluation of historical periods, urging a reconsideration of how we understand the interplay between human beings and the environment. Furthermore, literature plays a vital role in critiquing

and reimagining dominant narratives of progress and development, which have often overlooked the consequences of ecological degradation. Through these lenses, the Anthropocene is not merely a backdrop for scientific inquiry but a dynamic context that challenges traditional humanities scholarship, prompting a reconsideration of our place within Earth's geological history and the moral responsibilities that accompany it. The ongoing discourse surrounding the Anthropocene serves as a call for a more nuanced understanding of history, one that acknowledges the complexities of human-environment interactions while also addressing the ethical implications of our current trajectory.

## **Major Themes in Anthropocene Humanities**

### **Overview of the Anthropocene in the Humanities**

The Anthropocene, a term used to describe the current geological epoch marked by significant human impact on Earth's geology and ecosystems, has profound implications for literature and the humanities. This interdisciplinary field explores how human experiences and narratives can shape our understanding of environmental changes and challenges. The works within this domain argue that the Anthropocene necessitates a re-evaluation of ethical frameworks, emphasizing the intricate relationships between humanity and the nonhuman world.

### **Ethical Frameworks and Approaches**

Various ethical frameworks have been scrutinized in the context of the Anthropocene, including egocentric (liberal), homocentric (anthropocentric), ecocentric (ecological), and multicultural perspectives. These frameworks inform different analytical approaches, each characterized by unique conceptual vocabularies and ethico-political agendas. The Anthropocene raises crucial questions for the environmental humanities, challenging established norms and encouraging a broader discourse on interdependence between human and nonhuman entities.

### **Art and Literature as Reflection and Action**

Art and literature serve as pivotal media for exploring the Anthropocene. They not only depict environmental issues but also engage audiences in



contemplating the complexities of human-nature interactions. For instance, the works of artists and writers are seen as transformative, capable of altering perceptions of progress and prompting collective action towards sustainability.

Notable literary figures, such as Wordsworth and Dickens, as well as American transcendentalists, have been highlighted for their contributions to understanding the human dimensions of ecological crises.

### **The Role of Cultural Narratives**

Cultural narratives surrounding the Anthropocene often reflect on the historical and ongoing impacts of industrialization and colonialism. These narratives can reveal the socio-political dynamics that contribute to environmental degradation and inequality. Noteworthy is the examination of African American and Native American activism, which underscores the intersection of environmental justice and social equity. Scholars advocate for incorporating diverse perspectives, particularly indigenous knowledge systems, into the discourse on environmental ethics to enrich the conversation surrounding the Anthropocene.

### **Moving Towards Sustainability**

A recurring theme in the Anthropocene humanities is the transition from an era dominated by human control to one characterized by sustainable practices and partnerships between humans and nature. The advocacy for a “partnership ethic,” which posits that both human and nonhuman communities can thrive through mutual interdependence, represents a critical perspective on how to navigate the challenges posed by the Anthropocene. This shift calls for an ethical reimagining that prioritizes ecological balance and justice, promoting a collective commitment to addressing climate change and its ramifications.

### **Influential Authors and Scholars**

The study of the Anthropocene through the lens of the humanities has attracted a diverse array of scholars and authors, each contributing unique perspectives that deepen the understanding of this epoch characterized by significant human impact on the Earth.

### **Poul Holm**

Poul Holm is a notable figure in the discourse surrounding the Great Acceleration, a concept that highlights the rapid changes in the environment and society during the late 20th century. His work emphasizes the need for interdisciplinary collaboration among historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists to refine measurements and interpretations of human-induced environmental changes. Holm argues that while the Great Acceleration is a global phenomenon, its effects manifest differently across various contexts, necessitating a nuanced historical analysis that considers regional and local factors.

### **Carolyn Merchant**

Carolyn Merchant is an influential ecofeminist philosopher and historian of science known for her critical examination of the relationship between science and nature. Her seminal work, *The Death of Nature*, posits that the Scientific Revolution marked a pivotal shift in how humanity perceives the natural world, leading to its objectification and exploitation. Merchant’s insights into environmental history and ethics are vital for understanding the ecological crises of the Anthropocene, advocating for a new ethic of sustainability as a means to address current environmental challenges.

### **Eva Horn and Hannes Bergthaller**

Eva Horn and Hannes Bergthaller have explored the implications of the Anthropocene for humanities scholarship, questioning traditional notions of agency, justice, and scale. Their collaborative work provides key insights into how the Anthropocene framework challenges established scholarly practices, encouraging a re-evaluation of the role of the humanities in engaging with pressing environmental issues. They highlight the importance of addressing questions of limits and energy in the context of human and ecological interactions.

### **Christy Tidwell and Carter Soles**

Christy Tidwell and Carter Soles have edited ‘*Fear and Nature: Ecohorror Studies in the Anthropocene*,’ which introduces critical discussions around petrofiction and its implications within ecological



contexts. Their work expands the geographical and theoretical scope of oil fiction, particularly emphasizing perspectives from the Global South. This collection serves as a significant contribution to the field, offering new critical methodologies and insights into how literature reflects and engages with ecological anxieties.

### **Lucinda Cole and Robert Markley**

Lucinda Cole and Robert Markley are the editors of the *AnthropoScene* series, which aims to bridge the gap between literature, science, and the arts. This series includes a range of scholarly studies that explore the intersections among natural sciences and the humanities, emphasizing the importance of innovative juxtapositions to advance interdisciplinary dialogue. Their editorial work has been instrumental in shaping contemporary discussions around the Anthropocene and its cultural representations.

These scholars, among others, play a crucial role in advancing the understanding of the Anthropocene within the humanities, fostering interdisciplinary approaches that address the complex interplay of human activity and environmental change.

### **Methodological Approaches**

The methodological approaches within the field of Anthropocene humanities are characterized by diverse methods, analytical frameworks, conceptual vocabularies, and ethico-political agendas. Scholars in this field recognize the destabilization of traditional dichotomies between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ as well as ‘human’ and ‘non-human’, particularly in light of pervasive ecological crises exacerbated by human activity, such as climate change and pollution.

### **Interdisciplinary Engagement**

Many anthropologists have begun to transcend disciplinary boundaries, drawing from methods and frameworks of other disciplines, including biology, environmental science, and art. This cross-disciplinary engagement aims to address the complex socioecological challenges posed by the Anthropocene, highlighting the importance of collaboration among varied fields of study.

For instance, the “Rubber Boots Methods for the Anthropocene” initiative exemplifies this trend by employing empirical studies that blend the arts,

human sciences, and natural sciences to explore socioecological chaos through immersive fieldwork in diverse environments around the globe.

### **Critique and Political Action**

A significant aspect of the methodologies adopted by scholars is a critical perspective on the prevailing socio-economic systems that perpetuate environmental degradation. Neo-Marxist critiques emphasize the dangers of depoliticizing the Anthropocene narrative, warning against an overly simplistic view that allows capitalism to persist without fundamental changes. Scholars such as Hornborg argue for a more politically engaged anthropology that not only critiques existing inequalities but also fosters direct political action to challenge these issues.

### **Environmental History and Ethical Frameworks**

Environmental history also plays a vital role in methodological approaches, as it provides insights into the past relationships between humans and nature, informing future policy formation. This historical perspective is complemented by the need to develop new ethical frameworks that promote sustainable partnerships with the natural world, recognizing the intertwined destinies of humanity and the environment. Such approaches underscore the necessity of understanding past interactions to inform more ethical and responsible human behavior in the context of global change.

### **The Role of Humanities in Global Change**

The humanities have been positioned as crucial players in addressing the complexities of the Anthropocene, offering insights into human perception, motivation, and agency.

The Humanities for the Environment initiative seeks to bridge disciplinary gaps and foster dialogue between academics and societal stakeholders, aiming to ensure that perspectives from the humanities inform climate change discourse and policy decisions.

This approach highlights the potential for humanities disciplines to facilitate a deeper understanding of the human dimensions of environmental issues and to promote pro-environmental behaviors at various levels of society.



## Overview of Case Studies

In the study of Anthropocene humanities, several case studies exemplify how literature and art contribute to the discourse surrounding environmental change and social justice. This section examines specific authors and their works, highlighting the potential for art to effect small-scale social change while also acknowledging its limitations.

The analysis of visual art includes a diverse range of projects by both established and emerging artists. Notably, the works of Edward Burtynsky and Chris Jordan are highlighted for their engagement with environmental themes, demonstrating how visual art can provoke public reflection on the Anthropocene. These case studies not only illustrate the intersection of artistic practice and environmental issues but also emphasize the role of collaborative engagement between artists and communities in addressing pressing ecological concerns.

## Artistic Contributions to Environmental Awareness

Artists have increasingly taken on the role of advocates for environmental awareness, utilizing their mediums to inspire action and promote understanding of ecological crises. For example, the workshops organized by the European Observatory aimed to foster dialogue between humanities scholars and corporate executives, exploring how insights from the humanities can resonate within the corporate sector to drive sustainable practices. This reflects a growing trend to connect the humanities with practical outcomes in public policy and community engagement.

## Theoretical Implications

The case studies also reveal a broader theoretical framework known as “Anthropocene Humanities,” which encompasses innovative methodologies aimed at examining human relationships with the environment through literary and artistic lenses. These approaches encourage scholars to move beyond traditional academic models, fostering collaborations that involve multiple stakeholders, including policymakers and the public. As such, the Anthropocene humanities not only enrich academic discourse but also facilitate transformative actions in society.

## Critiques and Challenges

The concept of the Anthropocene has sparked significant debate across various disciplines, particularly within the humanities. Critics argue that the Anthropocene, while highlighting human impact on the planet, often risks oversimplifying complex ecological and socio-political realities. Such critiques emphasize the importance of contextualizing human actions within broader historical and systemic frameworks.

## Neo-Marxist Perspectives

Neo-Marxist scholars express concerns about the potential for the Anthropocene narrative to depoliticize urgent ecological crises. For instance, Hornborg (2017) criticizes certain speculative and creative approaches that prioritize aesthetic experiences over practical political engagement, arguing that these approaches distract from addressing inequalities and encouraging direct action against systemic injustices.

This critique underscores a broader ethico-political stance that seeks to transform anthropological critique into a form of activism, drawing on insights from political economy and political ecology.

## Anthropocentrism and Its Implications

The Anthropocene’s very nomenclature suggests a human-centered perspective that may obscure the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman life. Scholars argue that this anthropocentric framing can lead to a deterministic view of human domination as an inevitable condition, neglecting the historically contingent nature of these developments. Crist (2016) argues that this tendency results in a “consequentialist bias” that favours scientific evidence of biophysical changes over a deeper exploration of systemic causes and historical processes. Such a perspective raises critical questions about responsibility and the potential for transformative change in human behavior and societal structures.

## The Role of Indigenous Knowledge

The discourse surrounding the Anthropocene is further complicated by the recognition of Indigenous perspectives. For example, Powys Whyte (2017) contends that Indigenous peoples have long been aware of the impacts of colonialism on environmental





change, which complicates the mainstream narrative that positions the Anthropocene as a new or unique epoch. This highlights the need to integrate diverse voices and experiences into discussions of environmental responsibility and ecological futures.

### **The Challenge of Multidisciplinary**

The interdisciplinary nature of Anthropocene studies presents both opportunities and challenges. As noted by some scholars, the rapid evolution of debates across scientific and humanistic domains can make it difficult to establish a coherent framework for understanding the Anthropocene.

This complexity calls for innovative research approaches that are inclusive of various cultural contexts and historical backgrounds, recognizing that interpretations of the Anthropocene can vary significantly based on geographical and socio-economic factors.

### **Aesthetic and Ethical Dimensions**

The aesthetic dimensions of the Anthropocene also warrant critical attention. Some scholars, including Merchant (2022), categorize prevailing ethical frameworks concerning environmental issues into ecocentric, egocentric, and homocentric perspectives, each presenting distinct implications for how humanity interacts with nature.

This ethical landscape is essential for developing more hopeful and democratic environmentalism that acknowledges human entanglement within unstable planetary systems.

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