



Unsettling the Anthropocene

Experiments in dwelling
on unstable ground

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Unsettling the Anthropocene: Experiments in dwelling on unstable ground

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree
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by

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Statement of authorship

I, Justin Westgate, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the School of Geography and Sustainable Communities, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading 'J Westgate', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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Abstract

The Anthropocene names a proposed new geological epoch defined by significant human planetary influence. Emerging from earth and physical sciences the idea has far-ranging ramifications. Beyond its material implications, the Anthropocene provokes profound philosophical questions about the status of humans, unsettling a presumed exceptionalism, and suggesting that humans have never been separate from the ‘natural’ world.

Research on the Anthropocene has explored material, political, and social consequences, but much of this work neglects visceral and affective dimensions. In this thesis I argue that reason alone is insufficient and that the Anthropocene compels attention to troubling conditions and contradictions of lived experience. Powerful unsettling registers such as uncanniness, anxiety, and loss wrest the self from prosaic complacency and reveal the existential emergency of Anthropocene dwelling. The resulting disruption and disorientation of emergency effectively makes us homeless, exposing us to difference and strangeness. Such experience functions as a vital transcendental exposure to the world, offering generative insights which allow us to productively reorient and remap. Taking the Anthropocene as an existential call to ‘live dangerously’ thus becomes a compelling invitation for planetary dwelling, impelling humans to grapple with conditions of coexistential inter-being and an awareness of shared embroilment and vulnerability with strange others.

Following this argument I apply an autoethnographic approach investigating multiple sites of emergency. Autoethnography draws on the researcher’s reflective experience of the world and, for this project, is key to interrogating visceral Anthropocene dimensions. My journey unfolds through four field chapters: following the path of a river, across a flood plain, into the ocean, and up into the air. A traumatic encounter with a river is a dissociative entry point. Events that threaten our very being can profoundly unsettle our sense of the world, and I use the experience to reexamine attachments to place and familiar ground. I next survey post-earthquake conditions in the city of Christchurch, contemplating what it means to live on deeply unsettled ground. The task of reorienting and remapping place after disruptive events opens up novel possibilities for dwelling, but jars against persistent attachments to stability. Contemplating loss, I look to oceans and the imperilled Great Barrier Reef. Both enduring and highly precarious,

the constitution of this complex biotic structure is infused with paradox, yet the fluid qualities of oceans and corals suggest useful insights for dwelling in turbulence. Concerned with a different kind of unsettledness, a final case ascends into the air, interrogating creative interventions into dwelling. Intentionally disruptive to familiar attachments with firm ground, such artistic work harnesses social, political, and energetic potentials of atmosphere, seeking antidotes to Anthropocene unsettling and unease.

I conclude that Anthropocene dwelling requires suspending secure Holocene attachments and, rather, inhabiting unsettledness and paradox. From this argument stem a series of contributions to broader Anthropocene and environmental humanities literature. First, contradictions arise for the theorisation of human-nature relations, conceptions of 'progress', and for socio-political response more broadly. This suggests the need for humans to learn to dwell within states of unease, and to use those conditions generatively to stimulate novel outcomes outside of modern conventions. Second, attending to affective registers opens portals into potential human responses to the Anthropocene. Existential ideas remain highly relevant to disturbing conditions of ecological emergency; not only confronting us with profound sense-making but revealing shared vulnerabilities and a coexistence of being within non-human others. Third, intransigent Anthropocene responses may be coloured by denialism, intolerance, and cynicism, suggesting the need for increased misanthropological analysis. Ultimately, we must approach the Anthropocene with clear, tempered examination that avoids overt optimism or fatalism. The Anthropocene is uncharted territory for humans and the planet, and navigating pathways through its unsettled dimensions demands attentiveness to the full range of human faculties.

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Declaration of published work

Papers:

Westgate, J. Beyond hot air: Anthropocene art and speculative practice, *Global Discourse*, special issue: Staying with Speculation: Natures, Futures, Politics (forthcoming).

Westgate, J. 2020. Anthropocene dwelling: lessons from post-disaster Christchurch, *New Zealand Geographer* 76(1): 26–38.

Westgate, J. 2017. Crossing rivers, revisiting trauma, and contemplating the Geo: Thinking into the Anthropocenic, *GeoHumanities* 3: 233–245.

Presentations:

Reflection: Cultural practices in the Anthropocene (invited discussant). Anthropocene Transitions Project, UTS, Sydney, September 2016.

'Imaginative practices and post-natural futures'. Department of Design, Goldsmiths University of London, London, September 2015.

'AnthroPolicy: Speculative policy for the Anthropocene'. Royal Geographical Society/Institute of British Geographers Annual International Conference, Exeter, August 2015.

'Speculative futures and serious possibility'. Royal Geographical Society/Institute of British Geographers Annual International Conference, London, August 2014.

'Adapting to what? Experimenting with speculative futures'. Unnatural Futures Conference, University of Tasmania, Hobart, June 2014.

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Preface

This research began with a sense of unease. An unease stemming from the awareness that ecological issues remain a significant yet intractable global problem. Pollution, deforestation and habitat loss, biodiversity loss, and climate change remain unaddressed, and future forecasts paint grim scenarios. Although not schooled in earth, environmental, or biological sciences, environmental themes have informed my personal and work lives over the last two decades. But, having been involved with numerous projects aimed at mobilising forms of social and political change, the fact that the same environmental problems persist, while additional others emerged, led to an amplified sense of uncertainty. My appreciation of the many issues – as well the potential solutions – was far from comprehensive. This left me with feelings of doubt and unease, which were further amplified by anxiety with being anxious.

Such concerns were a significant influence on the direction of this thesis. In a practical sense the project became a way of ‘taking stock’; using the opportunity presented by a major research undertaking to investigate current thinking around the human-environment nexus, and to better understand the complexities governing this. I viewed the project as a means to both challenge and reorientate my own thinking about what matters, and investigate potential pathways for action.

Such a pragmatic acknowledgement might appear a suitably rational response to my unsettled entry point – and was certainly intended as such. But, in highlighting this pragmatic impulse, I use it as a signal for the way in which the thesis has grappled with underlying dispositions of rationality and practicality against those of affect and feeling. In this way the thesis arc has been one beginning with practical concerns, but which veered towards reconciling dissonances between effective and affective potentials.

My approach is further influenced by multiple disciplinary, as well as political affiliations. Beyond geographic interest in human/nature entanglement I have interests in creative practice and social agency which, although not overt constituents of the research, significantly influence it. I use this preface as a way of disclosing allegiances informing my positionality as a researcher (Rose 1997; Savin-Baden and Major 2013); acknowledging that one brings with them

a particular background of beliefs, values, and outlook to a project which, even if not employed directly, will have an influence on it.

My ethical-political orientation sits within the ‘green’ and ‘liberal’ camps but, over time, has fluctuated between shades of green: between a deep-green politics (see Næss 1973), which takes a holistic and systems approach to understanding relationships between humans and non-human nature; and, bright-green environmentalism (Steffen 2004) which proposes innovative, technologically orientated solutions to social and environmental issues. Such allegiances are not directly compatible, and my thinking has oscillated, influenced by ancillary factors, such as the professional and intellectual circumstances I find myself in.

My professional affiliation sits within the creative industries, and is infused with an optimistic disposition both in its thinking and with its outputs (see for example McDonough and Braun-gart 2013; Kolko 2013). My own approach to design practice sits within the constructivist camp. A challenge to the influence of positivist-led ‘design science’ (Herbert 1969) that emerged in the mid-twentieth century, the constructivist approach looks directly to artistic and intuitive processes, and the sensibilities that designers bring to situations (see Schön 1983; Cross 2006). This makes the researcher/practitioner an integral constituent of the research, restoring faith in human sensibilities rather than seeing these as impeding production of knowledge about the world. Through a ‘reflexive practice’, the designer undertakes conscious reflection about their part in the research.

There are two significant implications from this approach to creative practice. First, it approaches the world as inherently complex and messy – more so than we might assume. Any response to conditions of the world must attend to contextual circumstances in formulating a suitable outcome. Second, what follows is that there is not necessarily a correct or singular solution – numerous different and appropriate responses exist for any situation. The work of understanding and generating a response to a problem, therefore, requires close attentiveness to context that is filtered and significantly influenced by the particular qualities of the researcher/practitioner.

My creative allegiances are visible throughout this thesis: in my approach to investigation, as well as how I express ideas. It is a methodological alignment dovetailing recent geographic interest in practices of knowledge making in relation to creative and artistic forms (see Hawkins 2013; de Leeuw and Hawkins 2017). However, to be clear, this thesis is not impelled by the concerns of creative geographies. Rather, any affinity comes from my own creative orientation, as well as the associations found between creative practices and interests with experimentation.

The experimental is a broader category than the creative (see Kullman 2013), and emerges as a key theme within this thesis. Both the creative and the experimental are open to novel ways of thinking and doing, which includes being receptive to risk-taking, uncertainty, emergence, and surprise.

What emerged in early stages of research was a sense of friction with my allegiance to creative practice. My familiarity with creative practice, combined with my initial practical impulsion, directed my early thinking about undertaking research to be focused on more functional and agential outcomes. After some exploratory investigation, however, the limitations of such an approach became evident, and this prompted me to re-evaluate and contemplate a more nuanced and deeper interrogation. One of the prompts for this reassessment came through the lingering resonance of a small but poignant experience. It was a moment that suggested being more attentive to situations; and so doing before moving towards action. The incident was also a reminder that the themes of uncertainty, emergence, and surprise may operate in ways more subtle than expected.

On the face of it, the event was small in nature, and not particularly dramatic. Indeed, I did not think much of it at the time: only some time later did my thinking come back to the moment, triggered by other events. The incident occurred during a conference I attended in the early stages of my research; an opportunity to be exposed to current climate change-related research. The National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility (NCCARF) Climate Adaptation Conference was organised as a trans-disciplinary event, and while a wide range of research was presented from across different disciplines what struck me was the conservative approach taken by much of the work. I understand now that most climate change research tends to be cautious, needing to be informed by the science, to be rigorous, and be responsive to the highly political environment in which it operates. At the time, though, my personal creative bias was attuned to ideas appealing to imagination rather than reason: unconventional ideas diverging from normative thinking.

A brief moment in one presentation stood out against the more conservative atmosphere of the event. The session proceeded much like others, with the researcher framing the topic, and then presenting research and findings. This dealt with environmental campaigning activity and the influence this can have on policy change. The presenter was an older man – somewhere in his late sixties, grey-haired, and with a beard – who looked to have a long-running commitment to environmental issues and with campaigning. At the end of the presentation, as he delivered his concluding points, the presenter did something unexpected. To emphasise the conclusion he

looked at the audience and raised a symbolically clenched fist. Emotionally he urged the audience to “keep the rage alive”. The audience was quiet for a moment, waiting to make sure the presentation was concluded, and then politely applauded.

This small moment struck me at the time, not so much a powerful moment, but rather an inconsistent and perhaps awkward one. The impassioned call seemed out of place, and somewhat misdirected given the constitution of the conference audience: if there was any rage felt it was well masked. I noted the event but didn’t dwell on it at the time – my attention was focused more on discerning intellectually stimulating ideas, and less on affective evocations. It was only later that I returned to considering this moment, coming to a juncture in my research after encountering the provocation of the Anthropocene. I was grappling with subsequent literatures, and having difficulty apprehending the concept and its implications in more tangible terms. Much work on the Anthropocene, at the time, came through debates within earth sciences; other work took a highly intellectual approach. The idea of an Anthropocene, though, appeared to have significant consequences for not just *thinking* about conditions of the world, but also having *affective* repercussions, as we – humans – are increasingly confronted by turbulent and disruptive circumstances.

Such grappling, and my emerging sense of the Anthropocene, directed me back to consider events at the conference. The presentation incident acted as a moment of affective incongruity: a call to emotion in a situation attuned to more intellectual registers. The moment poignantly foregrounded those strong emotional currents – such as rage – that have the capacity to move us into action. The potential within affective currents problematises assumptions about applied reason as a primary force in facilitating effective responses to complex and concerning real-world phenomena. This is not to say that rational methods are ineffective, but rather, calls attention to the fact that there are other human dynamics at play – and, at times, it is easy to overlook the significance of these. Such thinking is a reminder to consider the multi-faceted nature of things, and a prompt to remain attentive to those subtler signals rendered by events. It also redirected my thinking about the thesis towards considering wider implications of Anthropocene ‘thought’.

Contemplating affective and visceral aspects of the Anthropocene, therefore, was not a direct starting point for this project; rather, it was a trajectory that emerged through being unsettled, and also one that necessitated an openness to remaining unsettled. In this way, the outcome of this thesis is markedly different to that which I had imagined from the outset. Perhaps this is no surprise given my affinity with creative process, and being receptive to risk

taking, uncertainty, and emergence. But, for a project of this scale, the anxieties of producing an outcome with some significance were a challenge even to longstanding epistemological attachments. Such insight acts as a reminder to be more attentive to the fuller range of registers that constitute experience of the world. It can be within those odd moments – the ones that seem unimportant, and which we choose to ignore – within which novel concepts can be found. What I have also been reminded of is the folly of having a singular focus on outcome within research, and to remember that it is a process – not just an end product (see England 1994). It is also an undertaking that, when done effectively, *should* be surprising and have the potential to unsettle us.