

2021

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### Recommended Citation

Eltringham, Daniel (2021) "The Last Cigarette," *Criticism*: Vol. 63 : Iss. 3 , Article 7.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol63/iss3/7>

# THE LAST CIGARETTE

Daniel Eltringham

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*Anthropocene Poetics: Deep Time, Sacrifice Zones, and Extinction*  
by David Farrier. Minneapolis:  
Minnesota University Press, 2019.  
Pp. 184. \$92 cloth, \$23 paper.

As a temporal category “the Anthropocene” makes a fundamental claim about periodicity: the geological age of the *anthropos* is upon us, or “we” have ushered it in, and it is categorically distinct from what came before (geologically, the Holocene). Subjectively, this idea induces the nauseous vertigo of living as subjects in two radically incommensurate times at once: what Anne-Lise François calls “the simultaneity of speed and slow time. . . . To listen to the geologists, the Anthropocene would be humanity’s last cigarette, a name for the fast consumption of deep time.”<sup>1</sup>

Such a disjunctive “poetics of thick time,” to name one of the central modes David Farrier identifies in *Anthropocene Poetics*, is corralled in a particularly persistent way, he argues, by “lyric’s capacity to pull multiple temporalities and scales within a single frame” (9). One of the many virtues of this book is the way in which Farrier’s sustained focus on the viscous “now” of lyric address enables his close-reading practice to trespass the bounds of the words on the page, in order to access deep times that he reveals to be snagged in the trellises of stanzaic structure. Throughout, these textures of violence or tenderness are shown to add up to a “form of knowledge in the traffic between entities,” a politics of matter and relation to the more-than-human world (19).

Farrier's *Anthropocene Poetics* engages, therefore, "questions of scale, interconnection, and response, but framed more explicitly in terms of deep time" (8). Its three chapters address what he sees as the "three main rubrics for understanding environmental crisis within the humanities—the Anthropocene and the "material turn" in environmental philosophy, the "Plantationocene" and the role of global capitalism in environmental crisis, and the emergence of multispecies ethics and extinction studies" (8). Each chapter groups two or three poets—Elizabeth Bishop and Seamus Heaney, Peter Larkin and Evelyn Reilly, and Mark Doty, Sean Borrowdale, and Christian Bök—in alignments that are given theoretical impetus by framing discussion of an artwork. These unusually worked-through vignettes set up the poetics that each chapter goes on to analyze by placing them in the context of contemporary art's materialist concern with matter, agency and kin-making encounters.

In the fast-and-slow time of academic criticism and publishing, the modish nature of the term "Anthropocene" poses a further periodic difficulty. If, as Farrier quotes Timothy Clark's wry observation, the Anthropocene functions in critical discourse as an "intellectual shortcut," then another stratigraphic layer is added to the book's central focus on the poetics of deep,

weirdly persistent time in a thoroughly instrumentalized, throw-away present (4). That is the time of criticism, in which each contribution is measured in reference to its near-contemporaries, yet is set, too, within both the long expanse of the geological record and the imminence of rapid climatic disturbance to come. The debates around the way the term Anthropocene reinstates human agency as well as responsibility—reprising the cosmological hubris of the *Earthrise* image which Farrier discusses (32)—are surely far from over. As with other interventions, Farrier's temperature-taking of the shifting sands of Anthropocene studies, to mix geophysical metaphors, must be only a provisional reading.

Probably the most significant recent entrant into the field is another volume in the same Minnesota Posthumanities series, Karen Yusoff's *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, which draws out the implications of critiques of the term by Haraway, Moore, and Malm, but in the direction of critical race studies. Yusoff's central argument is that the grammar of geology underwrites the extractive economies of historical and ongoing colonialism that seek to exploit mineral and biopolitical wealth alike. "The Anthropocene," far from redressing this violent historical elision between race and resource, "proclaims the language of species-life [. . .] through a

universalist geologic commons” while it “neatly erases histories of racism that were incubated through the regulatory structure of geologic relations.”<sup>2</sup> Along similar lines, Nicholas Mirzoeff brings the buried assumptions of the “geological color line” into the contemporary politics of race by proposing that the period be renamed “the white supremacy scene.” He asks, “What does it mean to say #BlackLivesMatter in the context of the Anthropocene?”<sup>3</sup>

While these challenges are perhaps too recent to have made an impression on *Anthropocene Poetics*, they cut obliquely across Farrier’s concentration, in his second chapter, on the “poetics of sacrifice zones” in Peter Larkin’s work on forestry plantations. As Farrier notes, the apparently mundane timber enclosure or “Indonesian palm oil estate” are contemporary iterations of the extended colonial experiment with the plantation form (56). Instead, a major influence on Farrier’s thinking of the “plantationocene” is Anna Tsing’s anthropological work on multi-species resilience in the ruins left behind by commercial forestry, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*. Farrier develops Tsing’s key concept of “scalability,” which is central to his second chapter, the most ambitious in terms of the difficulty of the poetic material addressed, as well as the most richly rewarding.

Farrier’s persuasive argument here finds complexity within homogeneity. While “arranging nature in the interests of capital requires a mass simplification” of forest relations, the dualistic framing of wild/cultivated undercuts its own effectiveness by mimicking such monocultural simplification on the rhetorical plane (52). Violence is inherent to the standardization of biotarian life grouped under the instrumental logic of resource, but Larkin’s local interest in the plantation form grants perceptual access to the dense entanglements that lie beneath the simplified surfaces of the regularized plantation. What Farrier neatly calls Larkin’s “cop-piced” verse blocks afford far greater multiplicity than the bounded, plotted, and reduced “logic of scalability” would suggest (55). While capital effects symbolic, taxonomic, and discursive reduction and separation, the “unruly entanglements of intergenerational species-environment coproduction” continually trespass these orderly subdivisions (56–57). The inimitable view from the coppices of Larkin’s repeated verse fields is more like a strange sort of realism, which employs radically paratactic formal strategies to enact the minimal yet still generative suggestion of life going on amidst landscapes of extraction. In doing so, they disrupt the seemingly seamless links between the sacrifice zone and the smoothed-over zone of consumption.

The second part of the chapter counters another illusory “dematerialization” at the point of consumption: the “smoothness” of plastic’s “utopia of uniformity.” Farrier’s example here is the New-Materialist aesthetics of Evelyn Reilly’s open-form experimental text *Styrofoam*. In a passage that is at once theoretically sharp and poetically lucid, Farrier outlines the ways in which plastic’s transparent ubiquity renders it “the ultimate scalable material,” which “distils the world into a series of frictionless surfaces and tessellating shapes” (72). But, as with our everyday dream-machines, the tablet and the smartphone, this impression of immaterial weightlessness is shadowed by a deadly, hard-materialist undertow, whether it be in the rare-earth mines of China or the garbage gyres that gather in oceanic currents. In Farrier’s reading of *Styrofoam*, plastics are relational and impure, expressed by Reilly’s “polymerized” poetics in which “chains of association continually form, degrade, and reform” (77). And not only do they give rise to weird new senses of formal entanglement in space but also in deep time. The vast half-lives of plastic waste—made in the first place from stores of buried photosynthesis—“hedge each fleeting moment of consumption” with the implicit charge of a characteristically Anthropocenic single-use selfishness.

A somber final chapter addresses the “double death” (91) of extinction and the “great thinning of biodiversity” (101) through an exploration of the limits of multi-species kin-making with jellyfish, bees, and DNA. Organized around the clinamen, or swerve, it delineates a poetic “turn toward the animal [. . .] even while the animal itself turns away from any fixed shape” (98). Jellyfish and bees are differently shown to be partly the stuff of malleable metaphor in the work of Mark Doty and Sean Borrowdale, their distributed intelligences troubling understandings of self and more defined states of creaturely being. Doty’s jellyfish, especially, is “hyperfigurative,” “the most plastic of all animals”; at a cellular and, implicitly, discursive level, it is all transfer and slippage (97).

Jellyfish blooms are signs of unbalanced, warmer, more acidic oceans, and what is good for them is bad for most other life-forms. Their swarming, globular drift has lately become a cipher for the “sublime appeal of incipient-extinction narratives,” Farrier writes (99). Farrier’s dwelling on the recent environmental specters of “jellygedon” and “beepocalypse”—the proliferation of jellyfish and the loss of bee hives to Colony Collapse Disorder, respectively—hints at the lurid imaginings of the end of the world in contemporary pop culture. The postmodern

popstar Grimes's new album *Miss Anthropocene* plays on the currency of "the Anthropocene" by conflating it with the older, human-hating seam within deep ecology. Grimes announced on Instagram that she was working on this "concept album about the anthropomorphic Goddess of climate Change: A psychedelic, space-dwelling demon/beauty-Queen who relishes the end of the world"; each track presents "a different embodiment of human extinction as depicted through a Pop star Demonology [*sic*]."<sup>4</sup>

Grimes's tongue-in-cheek flirtation with signifiers of a *mis-anthropic* planetary death-drive that "relishes the end of the world" gestures toward the enraptured "now" of consumption—willfully blind to deep pasts and futures—that *Anthropocene Poetics* parallels with the "thick time" of the lyric instant. But Maria Sledmere identifies a subtler "Anthropocene poetics" in the music of Lana del Rey, which evades the pitfall of climate nihilism's "ugly, masturbatory quality of fucking yourself with the rush of elaborate doom." Instead, the "desirous flow" of Lana's "anthropocene softcore"

speaks to the lyric I in its state of orphaned exception, which in turn is the loss felt by us all unequally. If we make of Lana a sort of anthropocenic siren, we must recognise the distinctions within

our longing. For we all lose worlds differently; harm is striated along lines of class, gender, race, ethnicity, geographical distribution—of course.<sup>5</sup>

Only some of us get to take a drag on the last cigarette, and Sledmere here brings out lyric utterance's continuing state of privileged exception, even if "orphaned." *Anthropocene Poetics* pays careful attention to the ways in which these innumerable human and nonhuman worlds are differently lost, by exploring the peculiar untimeliness of lyric address within and beyond the oddly durable cultural materials of poetic language.

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#### NOTES

1. Anne-Lise François, "Ungiving Time: Reading Lyric by the Light of the Anthropocene," in *Anthropocene Reading: Literary History in Geologic Times*, ed. Tobias Menely and Jesse Oak Taylor (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press), 239–258, 244.
2. Karen Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 2.

3. Nicholas Mirzoeff, "It's Not the Anthropocene, It's the White Supremacy Scene; or, The Geological Color Line," in *After Extinction*, ed. Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 123–149, 123.
4. Grimes, private Instagram post, 19 March 2019.
5. Maria Sledmere, "The Greatest Loss: Lana del Rey's Anthropocene Softcore," *m/m* (11 September 2019) [accessed 23 January 2020] <https://musingsbymaria.wordpress.com/2019/09/11/the-greatest-loss-lana-del-reys-anthropocene-softcore/> (site discontinued).