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Introduction
Mediating the Anthropocene

Bhargavi Narayanan and Sarah Lerner

Alan Weisman begins *The World Without Us* with an interesting thought experiment. He invites readers to imagine a world without human beings, a world where the "relentless pressure" we exert on "the rest of nature" is suddenly no more. "What would such a world look like?" he asks. How long after this erasure would it take for our climate to return to what it "originally" was? This fantasy of return to the original climate condition through a single moment of erasure is coupled with an invitation to imagine the world as a conscious biological entity that, at the time of human extinction, misses "our" (human) presence. "Since we are imagining," Weisman continues, "why not also dream of a way for nature to prosper that doesn't depend on our demise?"[1] The challenge in this experiment is the paradox of imagining a future—our future *without us*—and then reimagining it all over again, this time *with us*. The difficulty lies not only in thinking about the disconnect between "our" historical past and "our" future, but also the need to reimagine what it means to be "us" and what it means to live. This issue of *Media Fields*, titled "Mediating the Anthropocene," engages with the question of how life, human and nonhuman alike, might endure or even thrive in a climate of slow violence. Engaging with both our historical pasts and our possible futures, this issue unsettles, rewrites, and imagines ways of being and living with the earth.

The concepts "mediation" and "Anthropocene" are critical lenses that distort, expand, and reframe biopolitical understandings of life in the contemporary moment. Mediation in this context is defined as a relationality, as that which brings two beings into relationships of power.[2] "Mediating the Anthropocene" not only gives rise to theories, methods, and practices that explore how the Anthropocene is represented in popular media but also engages ongoing biopolitical exchanges,

circulations, and frictions across multiple ecologies of scale. Attuned to the possibilities and the limitations of using Anthropocene as a paradigm, the articles in this issue trouble, negotiate, and expand epistemic understandings of media geographies and temporalities.

Alenda Chang's and Janet Walker's contributions engage the problem of environmental justice in the Trump era. Chang engages with the speculative and imaginary world-making of video games and their platforms. As mediations that make tangible the politics of environmental justice, gaming and play become powerful agentive acts that can question, destroy, interrupt, and invent; they can even rebuild a world where sustainable futures come to life. Through an ethnographic engagement with the Indigenous-led resistance against the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock, Walker shows how independent media, mapping practices, and Mother Earth coevolved as factors that enlivened the resistance. Her intimate account of the world-making practices at Standing Rock is a powerful and timely exemplar of how media studies scholars can enable empathetic analysis of organic movements. Chang's and Walker's contrasting methods, texts, and frameworks illustrate the range of ways that media studies might help us think about and move towards ecological sustainability.

To engage the Anthropocene as a frame of reference is to bring conflicting histories (and futures) in dialogue—natural history, human history, and media histories. Graig Uhlin, Jon Crylen, and Shane Denson engage the uneasy experientialities engendered by these conflicting temporalities. Uhlin explores the contrast between these three modes of history and consequently the unsettling experience of being in the Anthropocene through two distinct weather diaries: the recovered logbooks from USS *Jeannette*'s polar expedition and George Kuchar's videographic accounts of summers in Oklahoma in the 1980s. Crylen and Denson, in contrast, focus on visions of the future given ongoing catastrophe and imminent extinction. For Crylen, images from movies about ocean life become predictors of the ocean's future. What ocean life will endure? Meanwhile, Denson argues that the feeling of extinction that haunts this predictive vision is already embedded in the new media technology of the present. Taken together, these three articles show how the experiential, aesthetic, and material registers of media and environment, across a variety of temporalities and geographies, make legible the mutual entanglements of the human and the nonhuman.

Relatedly, Dylan Howell takes up the 1946 Trinity Test photos and debates whether the digital enhancements and simulations that visualized the accelerated timelines of the plutonium bomb might exemplify a viable scopic regime for environmental media. The apocalyptic time-space of the test photos excludes the scattered high-energy matter that became the radioactive component Trinitite. These particulates prolong the temporality of the event and transform the lithosphere. The challenge in representing such an event, Howell argues, is in finding ways to accommodate ongoing, constantly mutating space-time relations where there is a noticeable disjuncture in cause and effect. While Howell's contribution revolves around

aesthetic strategy, Kyle Stine deals with the problem of clean, energy-efficient methods of production, distribution, and exhibition. He traces the carbon footprint of environmental documentaries, revealing a tragic irony. The allied industries that produce and circulate films increase the energy consumption beyond what can be compensated by carbon offsets. Deconstructing industrial "best practices," Stine shows the insidious relationship between environmental crisis and its cinematic representation.

Christina Belcher's essay is also centrally preoccupied with processes of human extinction. Through an analysis of the podcast *S-Town* and its subject, John B. McLemore, she offers a queer reading of our relationship with the slow, ongoing process of our extinction. McLemore's melancholic reflections on climate crises and his general mood of despair should be read as a radical form of negativity, she asserts. McLemore's physical deterioration caused by possible mercury poisoning and his grief over the state of the world, both of which culminated in his sudden suicide, are a microcosm of our fate in the Anthropocene: slow corrosion over many years due to elemental poisoning, followed by quick death.

The essays discussed above grapple with the problem of arriving at responsible, sustainable mediations of the Anthropocene. They are attuned to the disjuncture in linear causality between categories of history and futurity, human and nonhuman, space and time. As coevolving, co-constituting assemblages, such categories fold into and are intricately entwined with each other. These rigorous media studies-centered approaches to theorizing material and aesthetic dimensions of sensuous, experiential processes of world- and media-making complement Heather Davis's, Andrea Polli's, and Elaine Gan's artistic strategies for living in the Anthropocene. Polli's manifesto, also featured in her forthcoming book, *Hack the Grid*, uses the term *hack* in a constructive sense that promotes knowledge-building. She finds routes to environmental activism in learning about community energy issues and developing practical skills like soldering and circuit construction. Interested in the world-producing effects of plastic, Davis's research disrupts purity politics and asks "what we can do within a compromised and contaminated world." For Davis, the ubiquity and materiality of plastic offer insight into "feedback systems among ideas, materials, and culture." In our interview feature, Davis discusses her work on plastic and its relationship to the human body, petrocapitalism, slow violence, and "queer futurity."

Fundamental to the work of both Heather Davis and Elaine Gan is the idea that contamination, destruction, and ruin are the dominant features of the world we live in. Gan's artistic practice explores the spatial and temporal effects of sustained violence. For her, it is crucial that as humanists who are invested in the present and the future of the planet, we pay attention to the particularities of each encounter with the Anthropocene. The mediated geologies and spatio-temporalities of progressively deteriorating environmental conditions foreground the heterogeneity of the Anthropocene, of the diversity of life it features.

At a time when global environmental crises unequally affect those in the Global South, we strongly believe that this idea of plural anthropocenes, dynamic and contingent, is fundamental to an expanded understanding of what constitutes life. Such an understanding should be attuned to the many becomings and emergences that are mediated in the present but bleed into, and are imagined with, pasts and futures. "Mediating the Anthropocene" is invested in a framework that emphasizes such a radical co-becoming. Resonating with Donna Haraway's process of making kin, the becoming-alongside media that is central to our framework is a tentacular process that stretches and re-composites the human and the more-than-human alike.[3] Through ethnographic engagement, speculation, and experimentation with these becomings, we can approach what Timothy Morton refers to as a radical self-knowledge of our place in the biosphere and the speculative futurities of living in a world where catastrophe, ruin, and destruction are inevitable.[4]

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Notes

1 Alan Weisman, *The World Without Us* (New York: Picador, 2008): 5–6.
2 Richard Grusin, "Radical Mediation," *Critical Inquiry* 42, no. 1 (2015): 125–26.
3 Donna Haraway, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin," *Environmental Humanities* 6 (2015): 159–65.
4 Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016): 5–7.

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