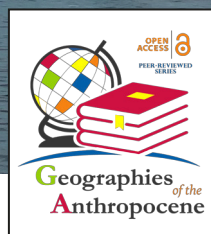


# NARRATIVES IN THE ANTHROPOCENE ERA

*Charles Travis, Vittorio Valentino (Editors)*

Preface by Kirill O. Thompson

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# Narratives in the Anthropocene era

Charles Travis  
Vittorio Valentino  
*Editors*



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*Charles Travis, Vittorio Valentino (Eds.)*

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humanists, intersecting disciplines of Geosciences, Geography, Geoethics, Philosophy, Socio-Anthropology, Sociology of Environment and Territory, Psychology, Economics, Environmental Humanities and cognate disciplines.

Geoethics focuses on how scientists (natural and social), arts and humanities scholars working in tandem can become more aware of their ethical responsibilities to guide society on matters related to public safety in the face of natural hazards, sustainable use of resources, climate change and protection of the environment. Furthermore, the integrated and multiple perspectives of the Environmental Humanities, can help to more fully understand the cultures of, and the cultures which frame the Anthropocene. Indeed, the focus of Geoethics and Environmental Humanities research, that is, the analysis of the way humans think and act for the purpose of advising and suggesting appropriate behaviors where human activities interact with the geosphere, is dialectically linked to the complex concept of Anthropocene.

The book series “Geographies of the Anthropocene” publishes online volumes, both collective volumes and monographs, which are set in the perspective of providing reflections, work materials and experimentation in the fields of research and education about the new geographies of the Anthropocene.

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# CONTENTS

Preface	
<i>Kirill O. Thompson</i>	9

Introduction	
<i>Charles Travis, Vittorio Valentino</i>	33

## Section I

### *Resilience: literary and sensory narratives*

1. Italian writers and the Anthropocene	
<i>Chantal Colomb</i>	40
2. Extinction, atavism and inevitability: life after collapse. A study of The Eternal Adam by Jules Verne and of The Death of the Earth by J.-H. Rosny aîné.	
<i>Kevin Even</i>	57
3. We are not alone in the world	
<i>Noé Gross</i>	72
4. Animals' Optical Democracy in the fiction of Cormac McCarthy	
<i>Geneviève Lobo</i>	91
5. Idyll and threat: man-nature relationship in the history of music, art and literature	
<i>Federico Volpe</i>	107
6. Countering Anthropos with Trans-Corporeal Assemblages in Rita Indiana's Tentacle	
<i>Sarah Sierra</i>	122
7. On the environmental issue: when poets listen to Mother-Land	
<i>Sébastien Aimé Nyafouna</i>	140

## Section II

### *Transformative Action and Global Ecological Sustainability*

8. Becoming aware of the living air: from scientific and indigenous narratives to care ethics  
*Clément Barniaudy* 164
9. An Evaluation of a Shambaa Community's Tradition of Adaptation to Local and Global Forces to Maintain Socio-economic and Ecological Sustainability, and Plague Resilience in Lushoto, Tanzania  
*Raymond Ruhaak, Philemon Mtoi* 182
10. Fire and Form: First Nation Eco-Georgic Practices in "Borri is Fire Waru is Fire" by Lionel Fogarty  
*Trevor Donovan* 216
11. All my earthothers: Levinasian tools for deep ecology  
*Erika Natalia Molina Garcia* 232
12. Bio-deconstructing Bioremediation: Tailings Ponds, Oil-eating Bacteria, and Microbial Agency  
*Aaron Bradshaw* 251
13. Healing the Earth, transforming the mind: how the COVID-19 pandemic generates new insights through the Econarrative writing workshop  
*Angela Biancofiore* 266

### **Section III**

#### ***Crisis and pandemic: dynamics of writing and thinking***

14. COVID-19 as a wake-up call. Potential for more sustainable attitudes and behaviors in Poland  
*Justyna Orlowska, Alicja Piekarz* 285
15. Young People's Geographies in the Times of Covid-19: System Threat as a Chance for System Change?  
*Lydia Heilen, Andreas Eberth, Christiane Meyer* 302



16. Mapping the Anthropocene: The Harrisons' and The Deep Wealth of this Nation, Scotland	
<i>Inge Panneels</i>	321
17. Prolegomena to containment tourism. Happy and smart self-deconfinement sheet or "links to free oneself"	
<i>Charlie Galibert</i>	343
<b><i>The Authors</i></b>	356

## Introduction

Charles Travis<sup>1</sup>, Vittorio Valentino<sup>2</sup>

The past years of the pandemic have forced individuals to collectively seclude and sequester themselves, forcing *homo-sapiens* of the twenty-first century to experience unprecedented periods of solipsism, intimacy and introspection. While we humans were locked away in our own domestic “enclosures”, other living non-human beings were reclaiming their place in various environments of the biosphere. From the sky to the seas, from rural landscapes to the most inaccessible urban space, such species were able to experience the absence of humans, regaining, an autonomy of movement, respiration and existence, for which many *homo-sapiens* locked on the “other side of the barricade” cruelly lacked. Indeed, “barricade” seems to be the appropriate term to define the dichotomous co-existences between the families of species scattered on the surface of our planet. This alternation of “presences” has illustrated how, human beings have moved the boundaries of our existence beyond their limits. By invading the spaces of every other living being, we are leaning, ever more dangerously, in our anthropocentric domination to tipping the planetary scales towards increased levels of global warming and a Sixth Extinction. The pages of this volume, composed during the global COVID-19 pandemic assume a timely relevance. The chapters contribute to a deep reflection on the consequences of *homo-sapiens*’ tyranny over other species, and constitute scientific and scriptural journeys, that our deeply rooted in the present.

The contributors to this first part of this volume focus on literary narratives which, in the face of the climate crisis, can instill for readers, a sensory empathy, followed more deeply, by a spirit of resilience. Both are necessary to change the directions of our anthropocentric world-path.

This can be seen demonstrated, in Sébastien Aimé Nyafouna’s chapter who, quoting poetess Rita Mestokosho on the traces of human activities, situates them as “so pervasive and profound that they rival the great forces of Nature.” The poems of Mestokosho, writer and activist of the Innu people in Quebec, are windows into the stories of an entire territory: by celebrating their

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beauty, her writing becomes a powerful tool of liberation and identity re-conquest, which extends to the defense of all dominated peoples, from all latitudes.

In a similar manner, Chantal Colomb's chapter outlines how certain contemporary Italian writers have been engaged for a long time in like-minded dynamics of preservation related to the non-human species. According to Colomb, literary fiction resounds like a cry of alarm in the face of the desire to possess nature and its living beings. In the Anthropocene era different texts and literary genres can, however, participate actively, as Dale Jamieson affirms, to the creation "of an Anthropocene ethic" that lasts and is sustained over time.

Still, as Kevin Even's chapter reminds us, in harmony with a broad ecocritical vision, some texts of the nineteenth century, from Jules Verne to J.-H. Rosny Aîné, have represented humanity facing the danger of environmental collapse with the dawn of the twentieth century. Their works provide an awareness directly linked to the industrial revolution. Rediscovered during the current climate crisis, their texts contain a profound warning against the dangers of hyper-industrialization and capitalism. They depict a future in which old fears flourish and take shape, telling stories of the decline of Western society and of the earth itself, against which each generation must fight, in order to leave a better world for the next.

Noé Gross' chapter starts precisely from the fear of emptiness linked to the pandemic and the role of the living, and discusses how, researchers have begun, in recent years, to see narratives in a new light, which are now considered drawn from materials from which the world itself is constituted. With this dynamic, the incursion of non-human living beings into literature has profoundly transformed the very notion of narratives, creating inter-species dialogues becoming more typical in the Anthropocene era, in which humans are constantly negotiating with other species, often endangered ones, to preserve their very presence on Earth.

In order to explore the dialogue between science and literature, Geneviève Lobo's chapter looks at the writings of the American author Cormac McCarthy. Famous for his interest in biology and ethology, animals have always occupied a central place in McCarthy's fiction, so central that it challenges the traditional anthropocentric thinking. Lobo, through the concept of "Optical democracy" is linked to McCarthy's questions concerning the notions of "humanity" and "animality" in contemporary American literature, in her search of an aesthetic response to ethology and to its progress.

Federico Volpe's chapter also embarks on a journey into the relationship between man and nature, adopting a historical and literary point of view, to understand how the latter has been conceived and experienced in the context of literature, figurative arts and music over the centuries. From the past comes a reflection on the present, on the scientific and technological innovations that have led in recent years to an extraordinary and unexpected developments. This has allowed humans to believe in their total control over the earth and its other living beings. However expectations of this omnipotence have been disillusioned by the catastrophe of the Covid-19 pandemic. Volpe hopes, however, for a return to the complicity between "Humans" and "Nature" in which the pandemic is only one more event in the millennial history that characterizes this relationship.

Sierra's chapter explores Rita Indiana's 2015 novel *La Mucama de Omicunlé (Tentacle)* that details events leading to an ecological disaster in the year 2024. The protagonist known as Anthropos symbolizes a world that locates homo sapiens at the apex of a species hierarchy on the planet. In Sierra's exegesis, Anthropos does not represent all of humanity, but rather defines an ontological position systematized by a rigid binary that posits human exceptionalism against passively receptive global environments.

After discussing the relevance of literature to redefining our knowledge and our position in the current global environmental crisis, the second part of this collection feature contributions interested in transformative practices. Whether educational, cognitive, or linked to sustainable development, the following chapters speak to our estrangement from Nature and the overall degradation of our environment.

It is precisely the dualistic perception of the "Human-Nature" binary that is investigated in Clément Barniaudy's chapter. The author adopts a pedagogical vision, which takes into consideration transformative practices that renews the awareness of our bodily senses, in order to connect with the "more-than-human-world". In this sense, it adopts an exploratory originality, from the perspective of an "aerial matrix," around which the relationship between the human and the non-human are interwoven. Air, a fluid and eolian reality, in addition to leading to different forms of connections with the biosphere, is the gateway to a world of sensual relations, in which human cultural constructs, such as language or technology, are rooted. Prospecting, through this experience, a metamorphosis of our way of inhabiting the world, by adopting new forms of thought and perception of Earth is considered.

In the same vein, Angela Biancofiore's chapter combining pedagogy and sensitive perception sees in the global experience of the Covid-19 pandemic

a learning opportunity to conceive of human presence as interdependent with other living beings. According to the author, the illusory control of reality has taught us not only uncertainty, but that our anthropocentric vision is no longer adapted to our world. An awakening of the mind seems necessary to better understand this new complexity. Biancofiore's chapter focuses on ecological, social and emotional learning dynamics, based on a transformative educational concept and on global and profound ethics of *care*.

Influenced by Virgil's *Georgics*, Donovan's chapter explores the idea of an "Eco-Georgic" literature based on the use of fire as a tool in the agricultural practices of Australian First Nations. Donovan's perspective confronts our preconceived expectations of what constitute a Georgic Landscape. In this regard, the chapter demonstrates that phenomenological experiences of the Georgic and their literary representations are conversely related. The chapter illustrates that the use of fire as an agricultural tool conforms not only to an Eco-Georgic definition, but its poetic contributes to a novel ecocritical approach to literature.

Erika Natalia Molina Garcia's chapter parses the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, by reviewing ecological perspectives in his philosophy, - in francophone and anglophone spheres -, to analyze specific notions that can inform non-anthropocentric or deep ecology discourses. Garcia uncovers distinctions between the ethics of responsibility and vulnerability and arrives at explanations for the positing of a Levinasian methodological humanism. This allows her to create a schematic model of sensibility situating a binary of enjoyment/vulnerability to support deep ecology unrestricted from traditional ideas of free will, rights or value.

Bradshaw's chapter sketches a case study of the Albertan oil-sands, to ask how human and nonhuman agency might be related in responding to ongoing environmental destruction in western Canada. He analyzes the discourses and practices of metabolizing microbial strains to detoxify waste products generated by the oil-sands industry, stored in tailings ponds and which must be detoxified before the sites can be remediated to sustain the ecologies of boreal forests and wetlands. Bradshaw asks if the goal of 'controlling' such processes, arisen spontaneously from the "creative metabolism" of bacteria, undermines the outlook which drives the research into such bio-remediation processes.

Pannel's chapter is a case study on the art exhibit *The Deep Wealth of this Nation, Scotland* (2018) by eco-art pioneers known as "the Harrisons," who deploy mapping to explore how a future Scotland could thrive and create surplus of ecological resources, founded on deep scientific and ecological knowledge. The exhibit provides an example of a new Cultural Ecosystem

Services (CES) model where mapping and hacking methods engage collaborative, interdisciplinary, art practices to home in on local environs to highlight their interconnectedness with global ecosystems to provide an ‘ecological eye’ on the Anthropocene. The chapter proposes that CES models are underused and undervalued tools for policy-makers, and need to be reconsidered in context of a new “ontopolitics” for the Anthropocene.

The final part of this volume brings together contributions that focus on plagues and pandemics in order to illustrate the dynamics of writing, reflection and practices, that test the resilience of the human condition in the face of self-inflicted environmental threats.

Justyna Orłowska and Alicja Piekarz’s chapter details the results of a survey undertaken in the Silesian region of Poland during the first Covid-19 pandemic lockdown in April and May of 2020. The survey focused on the potential of redefining people’s everyday rituals for fighting climate change, by concentrating on high-carbon footprint behaviors, such as daily transport, travel, consumption, and food waste. Survey findings speculate that policies mitigating carbon footprint behaviors could be introduced, and revealed that the health crisis and the lockdown inspired a sort of national reckoning on “what was really important” and, to some extent, a reconnection with nature.

Likewise, Heilen’s chapter features a survey of millennial youth whose results illustrates that young people of this generation view the Covid-19 pandemic crisis as an example of how rapid, and consistent action by political actors can be mobilized against mass dangers and hazards to society. Survey findings demand that restrictions benefitting the climate be maintained to mitigate the global warming crisis. The chapter suggests that it is helpful to broadcast widely examples of successful communal efforts to overcome massive threats and uncertainties to motivate young people and instill them with a sense of collective efficacy.

Galibert’s chapter observes that human imagination is the fuel that nourishes our reflections on the world and takes all forms from concepts of science, to notions of common sense, to works of art. The Covid-19 pandemic has created a catalog of complex stories, and is part of a possible new axis of reading of the imaginary universe. The catalog of confinement includes tales, fables, legends, mythologies, medical, health, scientific, political, conspiratorial, and literary fictions. His chapter provides a selection of such readings and advises that we parse their storylines in conjunction the concept of the *Narrativium*, which comes from author Terry Pratchett’s Discworld to talk about the “science of our own”. Galibert asserts that framing the idea of “story” in such a manner constitutes the basis of our human relationships with

the world in all its form -cognitive, affective, oral, gestural, written, behavioral, reflective, active, creative, and most importantly -the imaginary.

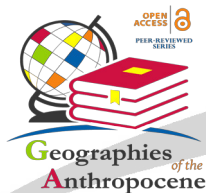
Ruhaak and Mtoi's chapter assesses the resilience of a Shambaa agricultural community based in the highland Lushoto District of northeastern Tanzania during the plague epidemic years between 1980 and 2004. Utilizing a local community narratives, the chapter analyzes the factors of Shambaa cultural knowledge and subsistence practice that contributed to greater community resilience to the plague compared to nearby two distinct large-scale cash-crop agricultural communities.

Over the three parts of this volume, the reader will find, striking parallels between chapters as the threads of ideas proposed by the collections' authors are woven together by ethical, and sensory and perspectives which address the degradation of our world. Indeed, the images and the themes evoked in the chapters create echoes between the act of writing and its endless quest for human transformation. In attempting to change the foundations of our anthropocentric existence, the inter-disciplinary nature of each author's contribution take on a fuller meaning, as they bear witness to a collective call for the necessary and historical commitment to define a new human condition for our species, *homo-sapiens*.

"The Anthropocene has still the rank of a scientific hypothesis. Yet, it has already sedimented in our imagination with its stories of climate change and mass extinctions, global pandemics and energy crisis, technofossils and oceanic plastic, social justice and new minerals that are changing the face (and the bowels) of the planet. Investigating this imagination from multiple angles, *Narratives in the Anthropocene Era*, brilliantly edited by Charles Travis and Vittorio Valentino, is an indispensable tool for situating these stories into the conceptual horizon of the environmental humanities".  
(Serenella Iovino, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)

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*Vittorio Valentino*, born in Naples in Italy, lived in France for several years, from the late 90's, where he graduated with a thesis in Italian literature studying the theme of travel in Erri De Luca's writing. In 2013, he obtained a PhD in Romance languages working on the link between "engaged" French and Italian literature and migration in the Mediterranean between 1950 and 2013. His research fields include migrant literature, postcolonialism, feminine writing, ecocriticism and Care. He has published several papers focusing on authors like De Luca, Lakhous, Scego, Abate, Santangelo, Camilleri and Iovino. Vittorio Valentino has been teaching as an Assistant professor at the University of La Manouba - Tunis, in Tunisia, since 2015.



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