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Feminist Protest and the Anthropocene

(Keynote Lecture Presented at the 'Gender and the Anthropocene' Conference, Stellenbosch, September 2018)

Fiona Probyn-Rapsey [1]*

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Preamble: *Thanks to Deirdre, Amanda and Azille for inviting me to this conference – Gender and the Anthropocene. This is my first time in South Africa, a country that has always loomed large in my political imagination. Like a lot of Australians, when I was young, I spent a lot of time thinking about race relations in South Africa, rather than looking at race relations in my own country! (I was obsessed by campaigns to secure Nelson Mandela's release.) While my PhD focused on South African and Australian literature, I have not really spent much time writing or thinking about South Africa since then, so I am very much looking forward to being better informed by listening, learning and participating at this conference.*

Most of my research over the last few years has been focused on projects that are beyond what Sandra Swart describes as the 'holy trinity of gender, race and class' – and focused more on gender, race and species, so in this talk I'll be invoking that research and the fields of both Animal Studies and ecofeminist thinking, both of which are highly relevant to questions about how to live in the Anthropocene. Jan Zalasiewicz, member of the Anthropocene Working Group, describes the Anthropocene thus:

> Our research suggests changes to the Earth have resulted in strata that are distinctive and rich in geological detail through including such things as artificial radionuclides, plastics, fly ash, metals such as aluminium, pesticides and concrete. (University of Leicester, 2017)

Measured by elements and objects in geological strata, the Anthropocene names the destructive nature of human impact on the planet. As a name or a label, the Anthropocene also measures other impacts of the epistemological kind. Noel Castree (2014: 230) observes that the term's usefulness lies in its being 'a politically savvy way of presenting to non-scientists the sheer magnitude of global biophysical change'. It was a way for scientists to get traction and attention for the effects of human induced planetary change. As a way of 'sharpening the focus' (Castree, 2014: 230) on human responsibility for planetary damage, one would have to conclude that it's been a success, with its proliferation across the sciences, humanities, media and popular culture. When my teenage daughter heard the term she described it as 'cool' because it seems to point the finger back at 'us' as future dinosaurs and meteorites all rolled into one.

When Castree calls Crutzen and Stoermer 'politically savvy' for coining the term, he is implying that they knew precisely what the term would do – it was designed to provoke, shock us into action. But the problem with shock is that it is not a reliable platform for political projects. The reaction and disorientation that comes with shock has to be followed up with some sort of reassurance, hope and a plan for action. We know this as feminist and critical race teachers. I'm thinking of times when I've introduced students to the idea that racism and sexism are structures: not just events, not just 'bad speech' but a habitus too. It's not uncommon for students to encounter this idea with something like shock – making them feel paralysed by complicity and overcome with a feeling of being stuck – until they connect to an archive of feminist and anti-racist work that reassures us that life can be re-imagined, re-organised. This is vaguely analogous with what the proponents of the 'Anthropocene' have done; shocked with the realisation that climate change and extinction is now our habitus, not a weather event or an accident to be overcome. The difference is, though, that their offer of reassurance and hope for the future is not very reassuring.

[1] *School of Humanities and Social Inquiry, in the Faculty of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities at the University of Wollongong,* AUSTRALIA
***Corresponding Author:** fionapr@uow.edu.au

Their source of hope for surviving the Anthropocene lies not with a lifeline of feminist and anti-racist work against exploitations of various kinds, but with an image of a western male pioneer who, after apparently heeding Gandhi's message on greed, takes the lead on behalf of all humans yet again:

> First, we must learn to grow in different ways than with our current hyper-consumption. What we now call economic 'growth' amounts too often to a Great Recession for the web of life we depend on. Gandhi pointed out that 'the Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's needs, but not every man's greed.' To accommodate the current Western lifestyle for 9 billion people, we'd need several more planets. With countries worldwide striving to attain the 'American Way of Life,' citizens of the West should redefine it — and pioneer a modest, renewable, mindful, and less material lifestyle. That includes, first and foremost, cutting the consumption of industrially produced meat and changing from private vehicles to public transport. (Crutzen and Schwagerl, 2011)

There is much in this to applaud; the shift in emphasis from growth as consumption to growth as mindfulness, a call to cut industrialised animal agriculture and private car use. It is politically savvy in the sense that it points the finger at the west, but it follows up with a handshake, not by displacing privilege but reinstalling it:

> To master this huge shift, we must change the way we perceive ourselves and our role in the world. Students in school are still taught that we are living in the Holocene, an era that began roughly 12,000 years ago at the end of the last Ice Age. But teaching students that we are living in the Anthropocene, the Age of Men, could be of great help. Rather than representing yet another sign of human hubris, this name change would stress the enormity of humanity's responsibility as stewards of the Earth. It would highlight the immense power of our intellect and our creativity, and the opportunities they offer for shaping the future. (Crutzen and Schwagerl, 2011)

I don't get the sense from reading this that the 'west' loses its social license to take the lead given its leading role in producing the problem. It is an example of the slippage between bigness and greatness that Stacey Alaimo has identified in Anthropocene discussions: 'the hand-wringing confessions of human culpability appear coated with a veneer of species pride' (2017: 90). When the scientists refer to the Anthropocene as the 'Age of Men' there is no irony. They are not calling for a workshop on toxic and or white hegemonic masculinity – the type of masculinity that is responsible for more of the world's meat consumption, travel, real estate, deforestation than any other type of masculinity. They do not mean 'Age of Men' in the way that Val Plumwood referred to the 'Empire of Men' (1997) to describe the ways in which masculinised forms of 'reason' install a hyperseparation between multiple binaries, precipitating the current planetary crisis. By 'Age of Men' they seem to mean something like patriarchal comfort food, untroubled by centuries of feminist and anti-racist activism and scholarship.

Because the Anthropocene is shocking—and here I am referring back to the way it names humans as geological agents on a planetary scale—it has produced revelations of loss and disorientation in humanities and social science thinkers too, as in these three examples:

> As the crisis gathered momentum in the last few years, I realized that all my readings in theories of globalization, Marxist analysis of capital, subaltern studies, and postcolonial criticism over the last twenty-five years, while enormously useful in studying globalization, had not really prepared me for making sense of this planetary conjunction within which humanity finds itself today. (Dipesh Chakrabarty, 2009: 199)

> (...) ourselves lacking a reference point. When we think big we discover a hole in our psychological universe. There is no way of measuring anything anymore, since there is nowhere 'outside' this universe from which to take an impartial measurement. (Timothy Morton, 2010: 31)

> (...) we do not have a developed analysis of the political innovations that have to be made if our aspirations to limit global warming are to become real. It is a strange and indefensible absence. (Anthony Giddens, 2009: 4)

All three exhibit a shock of comprehension, or lack of comprehension and ill-preparedness to imagine the bigness (Morton), and the gaps and absences of knowledge (Chakrabarty and Giddens) that come with the Anthropocene. What is interesting about this revelation is that it reminds me, again, going back to the classroom where I was talking about introducing students to structures of racism and sexism, that there are some reactions that take up more space than others. There will be the shock of students who realise that their lives have been shaped by unearned privilege; there will also be the shock of students who have observed this unearned privilege possessed by others all their lives – and they are not at all shocked by its being a structure. Similarly, when it comes

to the Anthropocene we can see that some are more shocked than others, with greater access to transmit that shock as a collective state. Claire Colebrook makes this point pithily:

> My goodness, who would have thought that centuries of slavery, violence, kleptocracy, plundering and liberation of some humans at the expense of others – who would have thought that was a destructive indictment of 'the human'? Who could possibly have imagined that our species was destructive of its milieu without the definitive evidence of the geological record? (2017: 18)

At the risk of sounding unsympathetic to the newly shocked, I think the examples from Morton, Chakrabarty and Giddens show that we need to be wary of the 'politically savvy' use of shock. Shock can, as Chris Cuomo has argued, produce a kind of fatalism – *'it's all over now'* (2017a, original emphasis). Secondly, it overlooks the fact that this might not be shocking at all to everyone and thirdly, shock can prematurely reinstall power structures based on familiarity and comfort. These three elements can appear simultaneously and are connected.

The first reaction to the Anthropocene (that of fatalism) is something that Chris Cuomo sees in the concept itself. Cuomo argues that in declaring the Holocene dead, we are also mobilising an ethical switch; we no longer focus on campaigning for social change, fighting for forests, for animal rights and welfare, for responsibilities towards the Earth, because the Anthropocene has declared this window of opportunity now closed and we just have to get on with sustainability; sustaining what we have, rather than changing what we're doing (Cuomo, 2017a; 2017b).

The second point, that shocked reactions to the Anthropocene overlook the fact that others have known all along, is a long and complex one and I think we will probably be able to spend much more time on this at the conference. Women have long been at the forefront of the environmental movement and Indigenous people have consistently framed decolonisation in terms of ecology, land and identity. Women and Indigenous peoples are least likely to be shocked by the Anthropocene but also least likely to be cited *because* of the Anthropocene.

Indigenous responses to climate change are never simply about isolated technological fixes, but rather they include decolonising epistemologies, and epistemologies of decolonisation. Bruce Pascoe's *Dark Emus* (2014) is a good example of Indigenous arguments for ecological decolonisation. He makes the point that pastoralism (in particular sheep and cattle) formed a major plank of colonial dispossession and the fiction of *terra nullius*, or 'empty land'. Pastoralism filled the 'empty' and by so doing destroyed Indigenous cultivation practices that sustained communities. In 1992, the High Court overturned the doctrine of *terra nullius* and declared that pastoral leases did not extinguish native title. Not surprisingly, pastoralism remains one of the clearest expressions of settler colonial occupation, saturated as it is with sentimentality, national identity and all, conducted through the everyday violence of animal agriculture (Boyde, 2013). The sorts of Indigenous epistemologies of sustainability that Bruce Pascoe is calling for thus does not only work against 'poor farming practices' with the wrong hard-footed animals, it works against a settler colonial worldview.

In the Canadian context, Billy Ray Belcourt argues that settler colonialism needs speciesism (particularly expressed through animal agriculture) to justify its occupation. He writes: 'it is my contention that speciesism intersects with the logic of genocide to secure a capitalist project of animal agriculture that requires the disappearance of Indigenous bodies from the land' (2015: 5). In other words, Indigenous scholars such as Pascoe and Belcourt tell a more complicated story about the geological agency expressed by humans – that it is not all humans, nor all practices that are equally responsible for the crisis. Bruce Pascoe does not express any shock or surprise either at the degradation that he is describing; it is an intimate part of colonisation. Pascoe states that, if anything, the 'older' practices of managing country are going to be necessary for the future. While on the subject of western scholars 'discovering' the value of Indigenous knowledges of country, Kim Tallbear makes the point that when western scholars 'discover' alternatives to instrumentalist relationships with nonhumans, they need to be aware that 'Indigenous people have never forgotten that nonhumans are agential beings engaged in social relations that profoundly shape human lives' (2014: 234). Again, this is a good reminder to calibrate the 'shock' of the Anthropocene against the knowledge of Others. If we get too caught up in the shock then we miss the opportunity to listen. Many have already had an inkling of the bad news, had lived with the bad news, experienced the bad news and are now sitting back watching, with maybe a wry smile, at why, in this supposed 'Age of Men', the men seem so disoriented and lost.

Val Plumwood also foresaw that the 'empire of men' would drive an ecological catastrophe. Her archive is ecofeminist and environmental philosophy. She argues that the west's hyperseparation (from nature) was bound up with our overinvestment in binary thinking (nature/culture, man/woman, etc). This hyperseparation fuelled an investment in detachment: detachment from acknowledging our interdependence with ecologies and nonhuman animals. This meant we had no sense of ecological vulnerability and without that we would hurtle headlong into ecological crisis (1997: 2002). Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva (1993) make a similar point, but they are even more explicit about disputing any claim of innocence when it comes to knowing what was/is going on.

So, given these different standpoints — shock on the one hand and recognition on the other — we might benefit from speculating what has produced this state of affairs where a renowned sociologist, historian and literary scholar claim that there are vacuums of knowledge, while other archives are full of predictions, plans and ideas. One way to understand this is to consider whether the Anthropocene is an epistemological accelerator of blind spots – whatever blind spot you went into the Anthropocene with is scaled up alongside the planet. In response to Anthony Giddens's claim of an absence of political analysis of the crisis, Sherrilyn MacGregor makes the important point that far from their being 'no politics of climate change' as Giddens suggests, 'many of us who have been working on environmental political issues for a lot longer than he has would beg to differ with his assessment' (2009a: 144; see also MacGregor, 2009b).

Responses to the Anthropocene do not necessarily change shape because they are re-imagined as 'big': indeed the bigness may get in the way of examining what archives, tools and thinking are already available. Giddens, Morton and Chakrabarty may have a big archive, but they do not necessarily always have a useful one; an archive that highlights the contributions of Others to the 'crisis' in which they put themselves and their intellectual histories right at the center. As we can see, this supposed 'absence' of knowledge, or disorientation and ill-preparedness does not lead to intellectual humility or lack of certainty. When Chakrabarty (2009: 220) says

> We humans never experience ourselves as a species. We can only intellectually comprehend or infer the existence of the human species but never experience it as such. There could be no phenomenology of us as a species (...)

we should probably take it that he means, *I know this while also knowing that all that I know has not prepared me well for saying such things with certainty*. Because how are we to be convinced that he and the others know what they are talking about if they have not in fact cited anyone with different expertise on the matter?

So, I've already briefly outlined how Indigenous scholars position Indigenous epistemologies as key to the current crises by linking colonisation and ecological domination and, in the case of Belcourt, making the case that racism and speciesism are fundamentally both expressions of anthropocentrism. I have also briefly outlined how ecofeminists have also been flagging these issues for decades too. The sort of dynamic that I am describing here reminds me of a book written by Henry Reynolds called *Why Weren't We Told*? (2000), an account of the whitewashing of Australia's violent frontier history. A reviewer responded by wondering whether this book should be more aptly referred to by white readers as 'why didn't we listen?' (Nicoll, 2001). After all, Aboriginal people had been talking and writing about the frontier for a long time. Both Reynolds and Nicoll frame the question of responsibility differently. The title of the book appealed to white complicity as *almost* excusable by virtue of ignorance and that was the problem: after all, ignorance comes close to indifference and both are cultivated, actively, and not necessarily perniciously. Ignorance and indifference, feigned or real, make the scholar an authority of the 'big reveal', the big statement, the big book. But it relegates other subjects to the margins as mere onlookers.

So, a certain scholarly practice of confusing one's own ill-preparedness and smallness for everyone else's is at fault in some of these approaches to the Anthropocene. Chakrabarty's claim that we can never experience being a species is an example. As I said, he is very certain about this, even though warning us that his archive ill prepares him for such a statement. The reason that Chakrabarty does not want to 'go there', to think of humans as a species, is related to two concerns: one is biological determinism (where historical dialectics risk being reduced to merely biological forces), and the second fear is of biologised racism. Species thinking conjures up eugenics, genocide and ethnic cleansing, and the hierarchical arrangements of the family of 'man' that energised and sustained imperial projects. There is also a reluctance within feminist scholarship to engage with 'species thinking' because of its links with racism and biological essentialism. Think of Simone de Beauvoir's work in *The Second Sex* and how the concept of 'species' is shorthand there for the biological entrapment of all women. Trapped in immanence, in mere biological reproduction of the species, women, and in particular she refers to 'nomadic women', were dominated by men. Here Beauvoir simultaneously positions non-white women and animal counterparts as all that should be transcended, all who cannot take risks, and states that they cannot imagine themselves into the future: they *merely* reproduce the species. She expresses a fear of non-whites and animals at the same time. This is why we should 'go there' because, as her work demonstrates, there is something there that needs unpacking – something that otherwise might lie buried in feminist archives because feminism keeps a lid on its blind spots too. Feminism also has a history of denying its own reliance on racism to elevate the status of women, meaning white women. This has been a blind spot keenly observed, and analysed by Indigenous feminists (for more information on the Australian context see Moreton-Robinson, 2000).

Feminism should be well placed to take on many of the challenges that the Anthropocene presents. It can draw attention to the exclusionary logic of the way the Anthropocene is framed scientifically; it can call out mansplaining on a planetary scale; it can highlight poor citation practices, shrunken canons, wilful ignorance of feminist and Indigenous scholarship and it can criticise scholars who confuse their own ignorance of data with the absence of data.

But feminism is going to have to do more than call out sexism and racism: it will also have to engage with the question of species and address Anthropocentrism, not least because the Anthropocene and anthropocentrism are very closely related (Probyn-Rapsey, 2018).

Maneesha Deckha's work on establishing the animal movement as a woman's movement, points to a presumptive anthropocentrism within feminism (2006) and she finds a 'general failure' (2013: 50), amongst theorists of intersectionality to acknowledge species difference. She argues that are no logical impediments to including species as another axis of social difference alongside gender, race and class (2006: 5). She argues that the case 'has already been made by ecofeminists and other Animal Studies scholars who have demonstrated the interconnectedness of sexism, racism, colonialism, etc. with oppression against animals' (2013: 61). Claire Kim's *Dangerous Crossings: Race, species and nature in a multicultural age* (2015) also elaborates on a 'multi-optic' method for Animal Studies, moving us away from focusing on single issues (such as gender only or race only) towards intersectional approaches that highlight how different taxonomies, including species, 'energise' each other.

I agree with Deckha that are there are no logical impediments, but there are illogical and affective impediments (2006: 6), and this is where looking more closely at the nature and culture of anthropocentrism is helpful. To me this is a crucial tactic for critiquing the Anthropocene and its portents. We need a more robust concept of anthropocentrism. Val Plumwood helps here. She makes a distinction between human-centredness and human self-centredness, the latter being anthropocentrism of the sort that requires political redress. Lori Gruen also makes a crucial distinction between 'inevitable anthropocentrism' and 'arrogant anthropocentrism'. Inevitable anthropocentrism is related to the fact that one is human, with human perspectives that do not cancel out the possibility that we can also learn to appreciate and understand the perspectives of others (2015: 24). Plumwood says that we are 'inevitably rooted in human experience in the world, and humans experience the world differently from other species' (2002: 132). An example of this might be that, without machines, we cannot breathe underwater for very long, see certain things (such as ultraviolet light), and that by comparison with dogs we have a very poor sense of smell, sight and inadequate fur to keep us warm. These bodily and sensory differences root us in a 'human experience' that we cannot avoid and which frames our perceptions. But anthropocentrism is most useful when it is framed as a political problem that can be addressed rather than as something that is, in any simple way, inevitable. By comparing it with racism and sexism, Plumwood calls out anthropocentrism as a 'moral and political failing' (2002: 133; see also Probyn-Rapsey 2018).

The other illogical way that species has been refused by feminism, and by other political movements in the Left more broadly, is because caring for animals has been largely seen as a bit 'crazy', disconnected from more important 'human' political projects and therefore possibly a threat to them. Lori Gruen and I are tackle this issue in a recent book called *Animaladies* (2018), which examines the ways in which the perception of an interest in species other than humans is routinely depicted as 'crazy'. It is clear that if we are going to imagine better ways of sharing the planet with other creatures, then this history of women having *crazy* relationships with animals, particularly as their advocates, is going to be another one of those important resources. But as we have seen, the Anthropocene accelerates blind spots as well as the likelihood of reaching for the intellectual comfort food of canons. In order to resist this narrowing of debate, it is important to take up positions that risk being unintelligible to that narrowing.

But this can trigger a sort of autoimmune reaction: pathologising human-animal relationships blocks empathy towards animals because the characterisation of animal advocacy as mad, 'crazy', and feminised, distracts attention from broader social dis-order regarding human exploitation of animal life. Often advocates are themselves identified as mad, as damaged, much like Sara Ahmed's brilliant Feminist Killjoy (*Living a Feminist Life,* 2017), where the woman *who identifies the problem becomes the problem*.

Animaladies contains a number of really interesting case studies that examine how feminist protests are themselves characterised as animaladies; dysfunctional, mad, and insubstantial. Examples include the important work done by animal sanctuaries to rescue and sustain the lives of agricultural animals in a context where such animals are seen as mere capital, property, or alive only in order to become meat. In my chapter I look at crazy cat ladies, why they are so ubiquitous right now in popular culture and how they are built upon histories of disparaging women and animals, and serve as a distraction for the much bigger problem of industrialised animal hoarding, the ubiquitous but invisibilised factory farm. Nekeisha Alayna Alexis (2018) looks at the ways in which pro-slavery narratives of the Southern US share similar logic to the 'happy meat' organic farmers who 'reluctantly' have to exploit their animals. There is also a chapter by artist and academic Yvette Watt (2018) on the 'Duck Lake Project' that she designed and instigated with a group of animal activists. In protest against the start of duck hunting season, Yvette Watt and a group of untrained dancers mounted a floating pontoon on the edge of a lake designated by the government as a hunting zone, and performed Swan Lake. They attracted media, scared the ducks and countless protected native species in order to save their lives. They attracted political support, raised money and attracted the ire of men in army fatigues armed with their guns. And in doing so, they raised important questions about just who is the 'mad' one in the context of all the violence. Perhaps it's time for all of us dance madly to disarm; perhaps this is what the Anthropocene is asking of us. And with this example I'll conclude, as a way of inviting further

conversation about the importance of long histories embedded in marginalised archives, archives of knowledge about tactics, strategies and responsibilities.

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