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Anthropocene Noir

DEBORAH BIRD ROSE

Abstract: Bob Dylan said it perfectly: 'it's not dark yet, but it's getting there'. I will explore some aspects of darkness emanating from the concept of the Anthropocene and from the facts of the biosphere changes now in process. The larger questions concern action in a time when all action seems contaminated. What commitments might guide us, in an era of increasingly inscrutable and unacceptable choices? How may we keep faith with life in this era of loss and degradation? Part of the question concerns the positioning of humans in the context of the Anthropocene. The wider context is the question of situated action in a world that is changing rapidly, and reconciliation in a time when everything is open to radical uncertainty.

Keywords: Anthropocene, Indigenous knowledge, reconciliation, noir literature, time, care of country.

> '…there's no sense of time. There's no respect for it: you've got yesterday, today and tomorrow all in the same room, and there's very little that you can't imagine not happening' (Bob Dylan, cited in Cott 1978).[1]

1. Introduction

Several decades of critical thought have brought our attention to focus on context: situated knowledges, situated words, situated lives. We are attentive to considering the emplaced, embodied, specific qualities of identity, exchange and knowledge. The significance of context breaks into claims of universality, and attention to situatedness has opened rich conversations across differences and in defence of different differences. The concept of the Anthropocene opens another vista: experiencing dynamic (and mostly damaging) change. What the 'world' in the largest sense experiences, we too will experience one way or another, sooner or later. But the concept of the Anthropocene is so big that the 'we' who experience it are correspondingly vast and diverse. The 'we' of the Anthropocene includes nonhuman animals as well as human-beings; and includes plants, soils, atmosphere and oceans, and involves dynamic relationships and processes within an extremely dynamic biosphere. And while it is manifestly true that we are not all situated identically, no situatedness is granted immunity. Not just entangled in webs and networks of process, we are all tangled up in dynamics, edges, patches and zones of colliding uncertainties. Time and agency are troubled, relationality is troubled, situatedness is troubled. We are tangled up in trouble.

[1] Dylan is discussing his song 'Tangled Up in Blue'

2. Situated in the Anthropocene

Paul James invited me to speak about possibilities for reconciliation with Indigenous people, here and elsewhere. As I started to think seriously about this question, my response was 'fat chance'. Speaking directly from our situation here in Australia, I can summarise this assessment most succinctly through the words of Justice Peter Grey. He was the Aboriginal Land Commissioner for two terms, and he worked on many Native Title cases. In his retirement speech recently, he said that one of the things he most regretted was that Australian legislatures and some members of the judiciary had 'squandered' the great opportunities that had been opened up with the Mabo decision. I can't say it more vigorously, or with an authority greater than that of a federal court judge. Over the past few decades the vision of reconciliation has been reduced to gestures that are nearly empty; many opportunities for halting the degradation of country have been thrown out, and we seem to have entered an era of maximization of environmental pillage on the one hand, and on the other hand of increasing bureaucratic control, along with vastly expanding containment and incarceration, of Aboriginal people. Increasingly, as we have seen across numerous contexts, in many ways Aboriginal people have become an industry focussed on the biopolitics of discipline, punishment, and salvation.

In my book *Reports from a Wild Country* the framing context was settler society colonialism (Rose 2004). There and elsewhere I was arguing for a practice of dialogue that I call 'situated availability'. The idea was that in social encounters, specifically encounters aiming toward decolonization, no one arrives empty-handed. We bring with us our histories, our cultures, and our commitments. The situatedness that concerned me was the divide between Indigenous people and settler-descended people. For dialogue to fulfil its promise of transformation, we acknowledge our past, and we turn toward others with a willingness to be changed.[2]

In this era we are coming to know as the Anthropocene, we are forced to understand our situatedness differently. It is not that the colonising divide has disappeared; in many ways, as I have briefly mentioned, it seems to be hardening. But at the same time, it is being overtaken by processes that are unmaking the world that any of us ever knew. Bill McKibben wrote recently (2010) that the world we were born into no longer exists. It is going, and we have passed the point where it might have been possible to reverse the changes. This profound comment is widely applicable, not only to all humans, but to most plants and animals as well. In the Anthropocene, we need to be widely inclusive of all who are participants in this era of rapid change, and to be open to the massive changes that are coming our way. Reconciliation is not solely an inter-human project, and relations between Indigenous people and Settler-descended people are cross-cut by the dynamics of wider earth systems.

[2] This theory and practice of dialogue was directly inspired by the work of philosopher Emil Fackenheim (1994 [1982])

3. Dark Spectacles

Anthropocene—the Age of Man—this era in which human action has become a planetary force. We know the climate change issue well because it has the greatest profile, but it is just one big part of a much wider set of entwined events that include the great mass extinction event now in process, the acidification of the oceans, the accumulation of plastic waste, the loss of soils and fertility, the loss of rainforests, and of course the rampant consumption that fuels the work of tearing up and wrecking planet Earth.[3]

Recently I was asked if I was concerned about the fact that the term Anthropocene is itself anthropocentric. The point was that the term seems to put agency squarely on the human, as if we were all powerful. It must be said that there is a response to the Anthropocene that is astonishingly self-laudatory. Consider, for example, the neo-environmentalism that sees in the Anthropocene the apotheosis (in the sense of becoming god-like) of humanity (Dibley 2012, Kingsnorth 2013). Stewart Brand's book of warning asserts: 'We are as gods and HAVE to get good at it' (Brand 2009). And have we not heard this story before: technology will fix it, trust the experts, modify your behaviour a bit, then sit back and fasten your seatbelts and wait for the happy ending. This, too, is one of the dominant narratives of modernity—the use of human reason through scientific progress with the aim of 'consolidating the empire of man' over the world of 'mere things' (Plumwood 2009, p. 120).

Actually, I think that the term Anthropocene opens our attention to a much darker vision of people and planet. Rather than giving agency to the human, it seems rather that the earth is speaking language so powerful and expressive that human pretensions to mastery and control are shattered (think Frankenstorm, or Katrina, or 'Angry Summer' for example). Indeed, the geographer Nigel Clark reminds us that much that happens on this dynamic and volatile planet that is not caused by us, either directly or indirectly—tsunamis, for example (Clark 2011). Philosophically, this is extremely interesting. For decades now, environmental philosophers, activists and many others have developed strong critical analysis of the mindset that has been at work in setting the Anthropocene crisis in motion, particularly the narrative which has offered visions of progress and held forth the hope that technology would engineer the world and deliver the happy ending promised by modernity. The Anthropocene is now doing what decades of insightful critique never quite succeeded in doing: it is forcing the truth upon us. The Anthropocene is something of a mirror, and the image it is giving of human agency is grotesque—an agency that outstrips its capacity to manage itself, which wrecks, pillages, loots, and destroys, that has very little idea what it is doing, and that carries with it, in contradiction to all reason, an expectation of immunity.

Almost all of my research these days involves extinctions, and I am acutely aware of living in a time of imminent and extremely unhappy endings. I have been noticing a growing use of the term 'dark' or 'noir' in contexts that go well beyond the film origin. 'It's not dark yet, but it's getting there', to quote Bob Dylan. Ever the master of the arts of multiple dimensions, Dylan sings 'Well my sense of humanity / Is going down the drain'.[4] His words open a murky vista of

[3] But let us remember the cruel twist of modernity: much of this wreckage has been and is now being done in the name of human progress—that is, to secure (an allegedly) happier, more liberated, and healthier humanity.
[4] Song 'Not Dark Yet' on the Album 'Time out of Mind', Columbia Records, 1997.

shadows sliding across the world, and the approach of a moment when they coalesce, as a different, darker, world envelops us.

From one perspective, this has been the story of the twentieth century. Heidegger spoke of a *darkened of the world* by which he meant that we have all come to see, and understand, the world around us simply as a *resource* (discussed in Rowlands 2002, p. 196). This is true, but it only goes so far. Because it is clear that we also have seen the world around us as full of impediments to our access to resources, and so we have embarked on something of a death cult: everything that can be consumed will be consumed, everything that gets in the way of consumption, will be killed.

And this is true, too, but only goes so far. Jean Baudrillard writes that global capitalism has become 'a vehicle and alibi for an other, much more ferocious form of *moral predation'* (1994, p. 66). This ferocious moral predation 'extracts the spiritual raw material that is the misery of peoples' (p. 67). It has constructed the third and fourth worlds as a catastrophe-bearing stratum, and we western or privileged peoples 'are the consumers of the ever delightful spectacle of poverty and catastrophe, and of the moving spectacle of our own efforts to alleviate it…' (p. 67). Baudrillard's hideous vision pretty well sums up what 'reconciliation' has become under regimes of coercion, control, incarceration, and on-going racism. In saying that, I do not intend to denigrate the sincerity of many committed people. It is not motives that are in question, but rather the wider cultural contexts of power and spectacle which grasp, shape, and direct them.

Our position at this time is something akin to the dark tourism that takes people to sites of death, disaster, and suffering. There are some complex and, indeed, beautiful reasons for dark tourism, including pilgrimage, memory, the desire to witness, and a refusal to turn one's back on past and present suffering. At the same time, one inevitably experiences a disconcerting shadow. The close proximity of pilgrimage and voyeurism are a kind of shorthand for the many sides of this complex phenomenon—guilt, respect, love, fear, and the face-to-face encounter with unanswerable questions (why am I alive, why are they dead or suffering?). This soulscape of responses that dash all over the place leaves us all tangled up in uncertainties, commitments, questions, and more questions.

The Anthropocene parallel is this: we are spectators in the unmaking of the world we have known; we are spectators in the mass deaths of other creatures and in the misery of numerous and diverse forms of life including humans; we may indeed become spectators of our own demise. We know we are doing this, and we are unable to take effective political or social action in areas that we know would be helpful. Along with the anthropocentrism, and the ethnocentrism, there is also a weird egalitarian aspect to this. Baudrillard contends,

> 'Man is without prejudice: he is using himself as a guinea-pig, just as he is using the rest of the world, animate and inanimate. He is cheerfully gambling with the destiny of his own species as he is with that of all the others…He cannot be accused of being a superior egoism. He is sacrificing himself, as a species, to an unknown experimental fate…' (1994, p. 83)

Perhaps this is the ultimate 'cannibal tour': we watch as our species consumes everything, including ourselves.

4. Troubles with Time and Agency

Modernity's big story is progress. It works with a concept of time that is unilinear, monological, teleological, and extremely elastic. The unilinear aspect is a one-directional, future-facing direction of history. It is monological in the sense of claiming to be true for all people on earth, sooner or later. It will scoop them all up in a vision that ingeniously combines engineering and freedom, and will deliver *its* vision of the good life to all (eventually). It is teleological in that it is aimed toward a known outcome—always more progress, always more of the good life. It is a secularized version of Messianic time. And it is elastic in that the end point is always just at the edge of the horizon—the the Messiah never comes, so to speak. A hermeneutic of suspicion would rightly engage with the political and social instrumentalism of this time concept—all kinds of violence and misery can be, and are, justified as necessary steps toward the promised future. And indeed, violence and misery can be claimed as acts of well-intentioned assistance. The Aboriginal artist Marshall Bell explained this convoluted intermeshing of time, politics, violence and benevolence in talking about the Intervention. I quote:

> 'Mal Brough and John Howard…they come riding in, in their tanks and their machine guns and their army to Uluru, making out they're gold-plated, well meaning, going to do the best for everybody, sort of thing. And basically what it is is Howard and Brough and, much of the continuation of this intervention, it's just being to piss on our country, to piss on us, to devalue us, to degrade us, to make us feel like we're not part of this country, but belong in the yesterday, and in need of these good guys to get us through.' (Personal Communication)

It may not yet be fully obvious, but Modernity's time concepts are another casualty of the Anthropocene. Several recent articles attempt to come to grips with just what it is about the idea of the Anthropocene that is so impossible for modernity. I am drawing on three excellent articles, all of which see the Anthropocene as the end of an era in the west in which the Enlightenment story of Man could be credible. I will discuss them briefly in order of decreasing optimism.

Dipesh Chakrabarty's well known article, *The Climate of History*, offered four theses concerning the impacts of climate change on the discipline of western history, a discipline that has contributed greatly to our sense of time and our sense of meaning and purpose. The main point he makes is that the Anthropocene signals the end of the distinction between human history and natural history. Human history has become natural history, but this is not the only side of the story. Natural history has become human history, and in the process, our stories of freedom, mastery, and the future no longer obtain. In fact, historical understanding itself no longer functions, because we simply cannot understand the enormity of what is coming, and nor can we reduce it to any of our familiar narratives (Chakrabarty 2008).

In 2012, Timothy Morton published a fascinating essay called *The Oedipal Logic of Ecological Awareness*. He, too, acknowledges problems with our concepts of time, saying: 'We can be sure that many official documents state that humanity has now arrived at a crossroads. Yet what if we have always already been there and are only beginning to notice it now?' (Morton 2012, p. 15) His metaphor is the Möbius strip, where you end up just where you started. Morton locates the origins of current problems in the establishment of settled agriculture, and he argues that 'We agricultural people have reaped what we have sown'. Morton writes of miasma; he is interested in darkness that is not localized, but rather seeps everywhere and affects everything. In addition, he briefly addresses the complications of agency, writing that like Oedipus, we are forced to confront the fact that we are the culprits we have been looking for.

My final example is an essay by Nick Mansfield with the arresting title *'There is a Spectre Haunting…': Ghosts, Their Bodies, Some Philosophers, a Novel and the Cultural Politics of Climate Change* (2008). This is by far the most dire of the three essays I have discussed, both in its diagnosis and in its prognosis. In working with Derrida's hauntology, Mansfield is pressing us toward the understanding that what we are facing arises out of our past, and comes at us from the future. Neither familiar nor totally unfamiliar—it is wrecking our sense of history, freedom and so on, as others have said. Mansfield goes deeper. The Anthropocene wrecks the logic of both modern and postmodern sensibilities; it is not that their logic and meaning are coming undone, but more that they 'are about to hit a wall, and that wall…cannot be made friendly, [it] is climate change...' 'It is an 'Absolute Other who abolishes and does not make new' (paragraph 9). This material reality comes with violence, because it is the past refound in the future: 'the material violence of the past emerges, reincarnate, re-fleshed, in our future, and in a politics for which our last centuries of politics cannot prepare or even forewarn us' (paragraph 14). Mansfield concludes that while hauntology offers a politics of the event-to-come, that event is already with us, displaced onto others, perhaps, but here in the present. In that sense, time is all tangled up.

> 'The politics of climate change will be experienced differentially, as determined by race, religion, wealth, nationality and locality. It is being experienced now. The abandoned city. The drowned nation. The unwanted guest. The feared race. The oppressive democracy. The ruthless freedom. The vile law. The risks of justice. The unmanaged change. The unpredicted revolution. The unimaginable end' (paragraph 29).

5. Le Noir

My opening question was: how are we situated in this time of uncertainty? What is our situation as individuals who must act? The complexities lead me to noir literature; it offers us protagonists whose perspectives uniquely articulate our condition in this dark (Anthropocene) era.[5] Lee Horsley's wonderful study of noir literature takes the genre beyond the dark thrillers that gave us protagonists like Raymond Chandler's Marlowe—a solitary figure who walks the

[5] Morton makes a similar point, briefly, in the context of being the culprit for whom one has been looking, referencing Bladerunner.

mean streets without becoming irremediably tarnished (2001, p. 1). Horsley's wider definition looks to literature that is less clearly delineated between the mean and the clean. He defines noir literature as consisting in 'stories that evoke a mankind always…tragically eager for self-destruction' (p. 2). When we widen that definition out into our Anthropocene context, we recognize that our western eagerness to remake everything in the name of progress and emancipation is bringing us ever closer to ruin, and in fact is already ruining much of life on earth. So this tragic rush toward self-destruction is very much a story of our time.

Consider the classic noir protagonist: he or she is part criminal, part detective, part victim; everyone is guilty and shared guilt is a common bond (p. 6). This is exactly our condition today. We are all tangled up in political, cultural and economic systems we know to be destructive—of course we are guilty. We participate in actions that damage the earth—yes, in some sense we are criminals. We seek to understand the coercive bonds that entangle us in systems of damage, and so—yes, we are detectives trying to figure out what is going on, really. And we are now suffering, and in future will suffer more deeply, the effects of all this damage—we are victims too. The noir protagonist is not in control of his or her fate, and there is a widespread dispersal of guilt. The dark is not an aberration, but is inseparable from society. And thus the Noir sensibility: under the weight of burdens from the past carried into the future as inescapable fate, there is a sensibility of discontent and anxiety, disillusionment, and loss of confidence in the possibility of effective agency (p. 8).

The term Anthropocene noir indicates the story without a known ending; the looming sense of fatality; the creeping awareness that nothing can be put right. We are stuck between the ghastly detachment of the spectacle and the struggle to salvage some fragments of goodness in a social world that increasingly runs on 'deliberate deceptions' (p. 8).

The Anthropocene implicates us all in this looming darkness. We human-beings are all criminals, all detectives, and all victims. That is the situatedness of the Anthropocene—everyone is contributing to it, everyone is affected by it, everyone is guilty. We don't all suffer the same burden of guilt, and we won't all suffer the same things at the same times; indeed, the suffering of many Aboriginal people now is beyond comprehension. And nor is suffering falling primarily on humans, as Baudrillard reminded us. Human action in the world today is amplifying suffering across a vast diversity of life forms. Whatever modes of encounter we will embrace will have to include nonhumans as well as humans. And still we must hold on to the possibility of decent action.

6. All Tangled Up

The really scary thing about the idea that our past is now racing toward us from the future is the way in which it forces us to abandon the illusion of immunity, and confront seriously the processes we have been triggering. At the same time, this disorienting shift away from standard unilinear, teleological time concepts offers an opportunity to engage quite differently with Aboriginal people. With western mainstream time concepts losing their hold on reality, perhaps the hubris of modernity will falter enough to allow us to open new conversations about time, place and action. I will briefly discuss Aboriginal time concepts as I came to understand them

in many years of learning with the people in the Victoria River District of the Northern Territory.

Westerners like me implicitly understand that a temporal orientation is also a spatial orientation: we face the future, the past is behind us. Aboriginal Australians make temporal-spatial links, too, but theirs work differently. They face the source; those who come after are called the 'behind mob'. Each generation follows along behind their forebears, and their descendants follow along behind them. I imagine this mode of time as waves of generations; we face the source, which is where we all come from ultimately, and we follow our predecessors back to the source, leaving behind us a 'new mob' or 'new generation' to take over. Those behind us walk in our footsteps, as we walk in the steps of our old people. It is easy to experience a dizzying sense of the past jumping ahead, or of time running backward.

Within this Indigenous world of time, space, and generations in motion, the future is complex. On the one hand, it can be assumed to be following behind us in the form of the next generation of people, plants, animals and others. More significantly, though, it is in the ground. The future is waiting to come forth, to be born and to live, and then to return into the source, riding the waves of generations that have kept country and all the creatures alive for so long ('forever').

To imagine the future in the ground requires attention to what is happening all around us: taking care of country, to use the Indigenous term, is all about taking care of the future. In the Anthropocene, terrible questions arise. Who or what can come after us if the source of life is being wrecked? Where will the next generations come from and how will they live, if there is no country to bring them forth and sustain them? In a degrading and dying world, at this very moment creation itself is coming unstuck, disintegrating right back to the beginning. So, that dizzying sense of time running all over the place confronts me vividly as I try to think about this great unmaking—an unmaking of the possibilities for the future that is also an unmaking of all the work and care of the generations that have preceded us. What I have said using the term 'creation' can also be said using the term 'evolution', for in our day extinctions vastly outpace the emergence of new species and evolution itself is coming undone (Quamman 1996, p. 538). But if the footprints we are now making are not productive of future life, we can still be sure that the future is not fore-ordained. There is simply so much we do not know.

I turn now to a story that carries us generously and perhaps effectively into the Anthropocene. One of the great Lawmen of the Victoria River region in the 1980s and 1990s was Old Jimmy Mangnayarri. He spoke about Captain Cook and colonization (as did many people), and one of his questions was why it had all been so hard. Why wasn't mateship offered right from the start? That was what Jimmy Mangnayarri wanted to know: 'Why [Captain Cook] never say: "Oh, come on mate, you and me live together. You and me living together, mates together. You and me can work for country all the same then"' (cited in Rose 2009, p. 194).

I am revisiting his words in the context of the Anthropocene, having become newly sensitized to how Old Jimmy is transforming the dyad of coloniser/Indigenous into a triad that includes his people, Captain Cook's people, and country. And it puts country—the source—at the heart of it all.

Country, as I think is by now well known, is an extremely inclusive term: the soils, water, underground water, plants, animals, landforms, and all the patterns of organization of life, and all the connectivities of mutuality and exchange, the life and death, the metamorphic flow of beginning creation through the life and lives of country. Staying with Aboriginal usage, there is sea country and sky country, along with land country (Rose 1996). But when Old Jimmy says that the whole purpose of living together is to work for country, his words are founded in an Indigenous ecological philosophy within which the purpose of life (all life, not just human life) is to work for country—*where they are* (Muecke 1999, p. 34).

Work means actually putting our life energy in the service of country. This is big. To work for country is to work for creation, continuity, and mutuality. It is to be in the midst of change, and to work with that too. There is a humility here that may not be readily apparent. Taking care of country doesn't mean engineering it. It means doing your part as human-being while others do their part, and country's own life-giving capacities have the chance to flourish.

Together can be understood expansively. I do not think the old man meant that every Indigenous person would have to be working side by side with a non-Indigenous person, and vice-versa. Rather, he spoke of sharing—you can be part of my place, and I can be part of your place. *Together* could recognize that our lives are entangled, and that we can be sharing purposes, while working where we are. And of course, humans ought not to imagine themselves as the only beings working together.

Three 'where' issues stand out amongst the many that could be addressed. The first concerns remote area Aboriginal communities where people are being forced off the land and pushed into town camps because of the withdrawal of Community Development Employment Project (CDEP) funds and service provision. Huge amounts of money ostensibly dedicated to improving Aboriginal quality of life is spent employing white people (Shaw 2013). Our governments (federal, state, local) should be helping Aboriginal people who want to do so to get back home, live well in country, and work for country.

The second 'where' issue is urban. Not only are humans becoming more urban, so too are animals. The reasons are many—their habitat is removed, or the suburb is built in their habitat, or cities provide a range of opportunities that facilitate their lives. Urban planning to include wildlife is an urgent priority. So too is the development of everyday arts of co-existence. Some such arts simply involve mutual avoidance, but others may, indeed, become convivial as shared places produce a sense of place that is inclusive and mutually beneficial (Wolch 2002, Lunney and Burgin 2004).

A third 'where' issue is that of re-imagining urban and suburban places as kinds of 'country'. I don't want to devalue the Aboriginal term, and yet I want to ask, with others, about nature in the city, and to go beyond the idea of natural areas within urban spaces to look more thoughtfully at how a city might be reconfigured imaginatively and spatially if the aim of inhabitation was to inhabit country. I imagine such an imagining as a continuation of the idea of a 'green' city, but without an anthropocentric focus. The imagining would partake of work already being done, such as the work of Ceres in Melbourne, for example, and would further engage with the lives and stories of nonhuman city-folk with the aim of pulling back the human

to make space for others. Such spaces would not be exclusion zones, although there could be times when interaction would need to be restricted, so as not to disturb infants for example, but rather would be sites where new forms of conviviality could arise (Peattie 1998, Mathews 2000, van Dooren and Rose 2012).

None of this work could be thought to rewrite the Anthropocene so as to give it a happy ending. Everything is too wide open for that. But it removes us from that singular position of spectator; it acknowledges the truly tangled up quality of our lives, and suggests some modes of action in a time of on-going trouble. Working together for country allows us to express some of the few truths we still can recognize: that in the midst of all that we cannot choose, we still do make choices, and that bowed down with a sense of loneliness and fatality, we are actually not alone.

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