

# **Anthropocene Unseen: A Lexicon**

Edited by Cymene Howe  
& Anand Pandian



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Goleta, CA

WE GOT HIT BY  
AN ASTEROID -  
WHAT'S YOUR  
EXCUSE,  
FREEWAYS?  
GatewaySucks.org

TSAWWASSEN INN

Campbell  
doesn't care  
puts power  
over  
People

WHERE were YOU  
Mr. CAMPBELL  
SOUTH DELTA needs

GATEWAY  
TO  
EXTINCTION

# Extinction

*Noah Theriault and Audra Mitchell*

In a recent essay entitled “The Uninhabitable Earth,” David Wallace-Wells (2017) makes a morbid prediction: “The mass extinction we are now living through has only just begun; so much more dying is coming.” The essay, which quickly went viral, regales readers with graphic imagery of starvation and perpetual war in a coming climate apocalypse. But it leaves us to wonder precisely *who* is doing this dying, now and in the future? For whom and by whom — humans and other beings included — is earth being made “uninhabitable”?

Part of a growing journalistic and pop-culture genre that some have called “apocalypse porn,” Wallace-Wells’s essay vividly reflects the necropolitics that haunt narratives about life, death, and extinction in the Anthropocene. As scholar-activists committed to promoting environmental and ecological justice, we acknowledge the gravity of extinction, but we are concerned about what narratives of mass extinction obscure. By eliding the violent structures that disproportionately burden certain assemblages of beings with acute acts of dislocation and cumulative forms of “slow violence” (Nixon 2011), these narratives naturalize a colonial order in which some earthlings are actively targeted for extermination, some are categorized as valuable “biodiversity,” and many others are summarily consigned to an unmarked planetary grave.

As cultural theorist Claire Colebrook (2014) has shown, the desire of Western people to contemplate the total and irreversible destruction of the planet has become a central theme of popular culture. Exposure to these images produces complex forms of affect: the thrill of fear, the sublime sense of living in important (perhaps even end) times, and the fantasy of being among a small group that survives the destruction of its species — all experienced from the safe position of the voyeur. This fantasy is evident in the jarringly optimistic, almost salvational conclusion to Wallace-Wells’s essay: “Now we’ve found a way to engineer our own doomsday,” he declares, “and surely we will find a way to engineer our way out of it.” Here, mass extinction is inevitable, but not necessarily for *us*. Who *we* are is left unspecified, although it almost certainly refers to the “modern,” Western humans interpellated by the article. Similarly unquestioned are the specific social, political, and economic formations — primarily, Western colonial and capitalist ones — that drive global patterns of extinction. Like many of the most influential Anthropocene narratives, this framing naturalizes immense inequalities in responsibility for harm and in the distribution of suffering, among and across diverse life forms (Malm and Hornberg 2014; Ogden et al. 2015; Todd 2015).

A clear example of this can be found in prevailing market-driven practices involving the conservation of life forms deemed useful to humanity (see Adams 2010). Recent efforts to assess the financial value of biodiversity aim to incentivize states and other actors to conserve more efficiently. In these schemes, the relations that have enabled life forms to coexist over millennia are recast as stocks of capital to be leveraged or as commodities to be bought and sold, ostensibly for their own protection (Büscher 2014; Castree and Henderson 2014). Sometimes these relations are literally figured as financial instruments — biodiversity ecosystems as “banks” or “insurance policies” (UNMA 2003; de Groot et al. 2012; Roe et al. 2013) — while biodiversity derivatives generate capital by betting against the extinction of life forms (Sullivan 2013). These approaches monetize biodiver-

sity, along with the labor and relationships that sustain it, in order to “offset” ecological degradation in the global North (Pawlicek and Sullivan 2011). Not only does this strategy conscript more forms and dimensions of life into systems of global capital (Kelly 2011; Moore 2016), but it also prescribes “fixes” intended to sustain capitalist systems (Harvey 2003). These fixes make the global calculus of elimination profitable for global elites, while relegating marginalized groups of humans and other-than-human beings to sacrifice zones and/or conservation enclosures.

As a subgenre of apocalypse porn, mass-extinction narratives also tend to obscure the racialized and colonial nature of the phenomena they seek to define. This is reflected in the profound anxiety of white Western authors regarding the apparently imminent end of the world. By locating this apocalypse in a potential future — and fetishizing images of its ravaging by extinction — purveyors of these narratives evince extreme privilege. In contrast, for Potawatomi scholar Kyle Powys Whyte (2017, 207), Indigenous peoples faced — and *survived* — centuries of colonial occupations that have forced them to “inhabit what our ancestors would have likely characterized as a dystopian future” in which plants and animals integral to their ways of life have been obliterated. Meanwhile, by framing all of humanity as the undifferentiated victim of ecological collapse, mass-extinction narratives magnify colonial discourses that treat extinction or extermination as inevitable for Indigenous peoples, peoples of color, and nonhumans such as wolves, dingos, whales, or bison (Mohawk 2010; Bird Rose 2011; Hubbard 2014). These stories of extinction preclude the powerful acts of survivance and resurgence through which more-than-human communities coexist and resurge in the face of world-ending violence.

These examples illustrate the dangers of apocalypse porn, of the shocking, thrilling, and sometimes pleasurable exposure to the threat of mass extinction. Rather than a deviant subgenre, these narratives have become mainstream; in fact, for many Western people, they serve as the first and most basic understanding of what extinction is and whom it affects most. Just as pornography can normalize particular kinds of violence, we

contend that apocalyptic narratives of mass extinction embed and mask their own perverse and self-sustaining violences. To confront the violence of extinction, it is necessary to nurture alternative concepts and practices that better tend to who and what is being destroyed — alternatives that recognize the capacity of life forms and worlds to resist the violences that threaten them and that respect refusals of subjugation and erasure. We are not asking readers to disregard dire warnings about mass extinction, but rather to look closer at what their overexposing rhetoric may conceal and legitimize.

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- Expenditure** Nur Hashem shouts “Go!” Photo by Naveeda Khan.
- Exposure** Bodily Exposure, Mexico City, 2015. Photo by author.
- Extinction** Activists in dinosaur costumes protested a planned freeway expansion project by “haunting” a BC Liberal Party campaign stop in Tsawwassen, British Columbia, 2 May 2009. Photo courtesy of StopThePave.org.
- Fiction** Rachel Whalen. Gated Community, 2019. Acrylic, metal pull tabs, and thread on canvas.
- Fire** A more explosive fuel upends the détente between trees, birds, and burning grasslands. Photo by Daniel Fisher.
- Flatulence** Mountain cows grazing in a meadow in Uttarakhand, India. Photo by Radhika Govindrajan.
- Flock** Melvin and me. Photo by Anne Galloway
- Generation** Finland’s nuclear regulatory authority Säteilyturvakeskus. Photo by Vincent Ialenti, 2013.
- Gluten** Freshly cut wheat, Egypt. Photo by Jessica Barnes.
- Gratitude** Women praying. The same gesture is used to express gratitude for a favour. MK Photography.
- Heat** A pesticide bag, mounted on a branch, marks the corner of a Nicaraguan cane field, July 2017. Photo by Alex Nading.
- Hyposubjects** Virus Particles. Image by Carl Fredrik
- Industrialism** Composite image by Craig Campbell
- Installation** *E-Motions* (2015) by Raḥşan Düren, Haydarpaşa Train Station. Photo by Serpil Oppermann.
- Interstellar** Artist’s visualization of Earth’s magnetosphere, courtesy of Conceptual Image Lab, NASA/GSFC, and “StarshipSPIDER” by Frederik de Wilde.
- Leviathans** Detail from the frontispiece to a manuscript version of Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan*. Attributed to Abraham Bosse, 1651. Digital image from Wikimedia.
- Melt** Listening to the sounds of a melting Arctic, with Aimee Smith, Eva la Cour, and Wendy Jacob.
- Miracles** Mud covers Belalcázar’s school after an avalanche caused by the Huila Volcano, AP. *El País*. November 23, 2008.