

# ESSAYS



## Introduction

---

### Anthropocene Feminisms: Rethinking the Unthinkable

CLAIRE COLEBROOK AND JAMI WEINSTEIN

IN HER RECENT LECTURE ON the Anthropocene (to which she adds the Capitalocene and the Chthulucene), Donna Haraway expresses some alarm that after two major insights into what counts as *thinkable*, it was “anthropos” that became the term for the post-Holocene (Haraway 2014). Haraway declares, with emphasis, that it is “literally unthinkable” to work with the individual unit of “man” if one is to do good intellectual work. For Haraway, the two knowledge events that ought to have precluded the use of the figure of the “anthropos” are: first, the acceptance that any seeming individual is the outcome of a series of complex relations and must be studied as such (so there would be no epoch with anything, let alone “man,” as its first cause), and, second, intellectual inquiry has acknowledged a general becoming-with, such that in order to be anything at all, “one” must be in a dynamic relation. Haraway’s work is exemplary of post-liberal feminist resistance to the figure of man—as subject, agent, and center of knowing. Terms like “Woman” or “the feminine” do not extend the field occupied by man; they instead create a different intensity. So when Haraway questions the “anthropos” of the Anthropocene she neither asks that women, too, be included in those who have scarred the planet, nor does she claim that “Woman” would occupy some innocent outside. Instead, she proposes that one think of the “anthropos” as untimely, as out of sync with an intellectual milieu that theorizes the death of the subject and the eclipse of the human, and has even begun to renounce the notion of life in itself. It is odd that in the face of this destruction of any possibility of thinking by

way of individualism, the epic gesture of the present deploys the figure of the “anthropos,” as it should be *unthinkable* today to return to the figure of man.

When Haraway invokes what is *literally unthinkable*, and then gestures to the Anthropocene, she suggests that perhaps the figure of the Anthropocene is a form of *unthinking*, and that it is precisely when complexities, timescales, predictions, manageability, and any form of sustainability ought to disturb and trouble our logics that we *cease to think* and ask for a single cause for an entire epoch. If this is so, and the “anthropos” of the Anthropocene is a reaction formation, then we might see the skirmishes and turf wars that surround the golden spike<sup>1</sup> as diversions. If we spend our time disputing just when it was that man started to change the planet, then we allow a contested point in time to pass itself off as thinking, all the while allowing the intensive multiplicity of what has come to be known as the Anthropocene to remain unthought. By asking when the Anthropocene began, we revive a modified version of the time of man; once again, man is placed as *the* agent of history, albeit unwittingly, and he can look back upon and assess the past of his own making. Haraway is not alone in suggesting that such conceptions of a single line of time, and a conception of first cause, are highly gendered and racialized. The figure of “man” who creates his own history and recognizes himself as having come into being through a time that is readable is bound up with hegemonic conceptions of modernity, and has long been the target of feminist, poststructuralist, and postcolonial critique (e.g., Foucault 1970; Amin 1989; Grosz 2004). If it is *literally unthinkable* to do good work from the premises of a methodological individualism, then asking who or what caused the Anthropocene, or when it began, would amount to a form of un-thinking or not-thinking. At the same time, perhaps the Anthropocene is *literally unthinkable* in a sense that marks a more positive and profound absurdity. Let us accept, following Haraway, that all “good work” both acknowledges the impossibility of accounting for the complexity of life by way of bounded, individual singularity, and dispenses with the exceptional man of reason as its foundation. If we do, what the Anthropocene demands is, at present, *literally unthinkable*. Perhaps the long-accepted premise of the interrelatedness, symbiosis, and mutually creative becoming of all things—the way we think and do good work now—*needs* to be disrupted by the unthinkability of the Anthropocene. *This* “anthropos” would not be the man who is master of earth, thought, and his own becoming, nor would he be man as one more event in a world of interrelated, mutually creative, and dynamic becomings. Instead, in a world of autopoiesis, symbiosis, extended minds, and dynamic systems, something that called itself “man” took itself to be the master of the universe and, in so doing (and while thinking otherwise, or while thinking that he was the master of thinking, naming, and doing) initiated an unthinkable collapse. If this were the case, the collapse would then be generated not so much by a naive Cartesianism—where man