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Epic Fail: The Failure of the Anthropostory in Douglas Coupland's Post-Millennial Prose

Abstract: The aim of the paper is to discuss the conceptualization of humanity's planetary agency offered by a Canadian author, Douglas Coupland, in his three post-millennial novels: *Generation A*, *Player One: What Is to Become of Us?*, and *Worst.Person.Ever*. Exposing the egotism of what for years he has been calling humanity's "Narrative Drive," Coupland comments on the fallacies of the Anthropocene. Advocating the power of stories to act as models for approaching climate change in its hyperobjectivity, the three novels hint that unless people learn to story-tell-with other terran forces and agents, the anthropostory, which positions humans as the only active agents in a sequential narrative of conquest and destitution, is bound to come to an abrupt end.

Keywords: the Anthropocene, Douglas Coupland, posthumanism, extreme present, "Narrative Drive," storyliving, making-with

The Story vs. The Stories

In the introductory pages of *The Age of Earthquakes* (2015), Douglas Coupland, Hans-Ulrich Obrist, and Shumon Basar paint the magnitude of humanity's influence on the planet. Printed on individual pages, in black and white and with font size changing parallel to intended emphasis, short evocative statements concerning the chain reaction leading to current environmental changes read like a machine-gun volley. The message conveyed is simple: the unfolding of informational capitalism has triggered processes which directly contribute to global ecological imbalance, manifesting, among others, in the recent intensification and increased frequency of earthquakes. "The bulk of human activity is the creation and moving of information," Coupland et al. write,

> Twenty years ago the Internet used zero per cent of human energy consumption. Today, the digital economy uses 10 per cent of the world's electricity. It's the same amount that was used to light the entire planet in 1985. Transporting data now uses 50 per cent more energy than aviation. This amount will grow and grow and grow and grow. The carbon that fuels our electronic life is melting the ice caps. The shifting weight of billions of tons of melting ice is relieving vast gravitational pressure from the Earth's crust. The remains of the Ice Age vanish in a few decades. The Japanese earthquake of 2011 was no coincidence. (6-17)

The consequences of the global restructuring of capitalism are momentous; far from altering only the way people function in and relate to the world, informational capitalism has shaken the world's very materiality. "We haven't just changed the structure of our brains these past few years," Coupland et al. conclude, "We've changed the structure of our Planet" (18-19). The eponymous "Age of Earthquakes" is supposed to mark a new epoch in planetary history, one characterized by the unprecedented extent and

weight of human ecological footprint. The epoch the authors describe is now often referred to as the Anthropocene.

The term "Anthropocene" was introduced to the world at the beginning of 2000 by Paul J. Crutzen, a Dutch atmospheric chemist and the 1995 Nobel Laureate in Chemistry. The term was subsequently developed, first a couple of months later by both Crutzen and an American biologist Eugene F. Stoermer in *IGBP's Global Change* Newsletter 41, and then in 2002, in "The Geology of Mankind," an article Crutzen published in *Nature*. According to the two scientists, the Anthropocene denoted a new geological epoch in which the unprecedented scale of human influence on the environment had turned people into a geomorphic force. On May 21, 2019, 29 out of 34 members of the Anthropocene Working Group, set up in 2009 by the International Commission on Stratigraphy and tasked with investigating the Anthropocene as a chronostratigraphic unit, voted in favor of the designation of the Anthropocene as a new geological epoch. The Group voted as well to locate the scientific start date of the Anthropocene in the mid-20th century, thus officially challenging Crutzen and Stoermer's initial suggestion of the Industrial Revolution as the start of the epoch, and instead connecting the beginning of the Anthropocene to the onset of the atomic age and the so-called "Great Acceleration." According to *Nature Magazine*, by 2021 the AWG will have submitted an official proposal for the introduction of a new epoch to the International Commission on Stratigraphy, responsible for supervising the geologic time scale (Subramanian).

As Diletta De Cristofaro and Daniel Cordle write in the editorial of the *C21* issue devoted to the literature of the Anthropocene, "although the term, has its origins in the earth sciences, the Anthropocene is something with which contemporary culture is actively engaged" (5). The reasons for the engagement seem twofold. Not only is the Anthropocene an ecological "mega-concept" which provides a common framework for thinking about the interconnectedness of "the environmental crises of the sixth mass extinction, climate change and the ongoing processes of terraforming and increasing toxification of our world" (Davis 63), but, positioning people at the center of events, it both indulges human sense of exceptionalism and invites the rewriting of the global narrative *away* from anthropocentric delusions and *towards* a more multifocal understanding of life on Earth. Thus, while the geological community is pondering the introduction of the term into geological timelines, cultural producers are intent on creating more inclusive nomenclature, which would not only invalidate anthropocentric stories but also reestablish people in the world and invite alternative ways of thinking about and beyond the present.

Whereas the proposed nomenclature varies, all the suggestions[1] originate in the belief in all-encompassing connectedness and the horizontal-collaborative rather than vertical-domineering relationship between humans and everything else, especially

1 See e.g.: Haraway, Donna. "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin." *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 6, pp. 159-165.; Haraway, Donna. *Staying with Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke UP, 2016.; Tsing, Anna. *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton UP, 2011.; Albrecht, Glenn A.. "Exiting the Anthropocene and Entering the Symbiocene." *Minding Nature*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2016, pp. 12-16.; Parikka, Jussi. *The Anthrobscene*. U of Minnesota P, 2014.; Stiegler, Bernard. *The Neganthropocene*. Translated by Daniel Ross, Open Humanities Press, 2018.

nature. "This brave new epoch is not the time when we took charge of things," Marcia Bjornerud writes, arguing against the established understanding of the Anthropocene,

> it is just the point at which our insouciant and ravenous ways start[ed] changing Earth's Holocene habits. It is also not the 'end of nature' but, instead, the end of the illusion that we are outside nature. Dazzled by our own creations, we have forgotten that we are wholly embedded in a much older, more powerful world whose constancy we take for granted. (158)

Instead of being taken to mark the onset of unquestionable human dominion, the Anthropocene is supposed to be understood as the time of human awakening to the reality of both people's influence on and interdependence with the world. It is this reality that new nomenclature is keen to reflect. The recognition of the embeddedness of the anthopostory in other, especially Earth stories underlies, among others, Donna Haraway "Chthulucene," Glenn Albrecht's "Symbiocene," or Jussi Parrika's "Anthrobscene." While—similar in meaning—all the terms in question point to current directions in ecological thinking, it is Donna Haraway's chthulucenic imagery—its centrifugal impulse even more pronounced than that of posthumanist discourse it sprung both from and next to—that seems to offer the most compelling framework for thinking away from the human and towards collectivity of experience.

Unlike transhumanism, which, to quote from R.I. Rutsky "continue[s] to rely on, and in fact reinforce, a humanist conception of the subject, defined by its instrumental mastery over the object world" (190)—posthumanism is post-anthropocentric, post-dualist, and non-hierarchical. As such, Francesca Ferrando argues in "Existenz" (2013), it is well-suited to discussions of the Anthropocene. "As the anthropocene marks the extent of the impact of human activities on a planetary level," Ferrando writes,

> the posthuman focuses on de-centering the human from the primary focus of the discourse. In tune with antihumanism, posthumanism stresses the urgency for humans to become aware of pertaining to an ecosystem which, when damaged, negatively affects the human condition as well. In such a framework, the human is not approached as an autonomous agent, but is located within an extensive system of relations. (32)

While, in a conversation with Cary Wolfe, Haraway admits she is "implicated in posthumanities" ("Companions" 262),[2] she is quick to assert that while she appreciates and is influenced by posthumanist theory, she is no longer comfortable with the term, and, rather than with posthumanism, has come to identify her work with "compost," a term coined by her partner Rusten Hogness—"It's not post-human," Haraway says, "but *com-post*" ("ACC" 259). Denotative of the collective, for Haraway, compost hinges upon an etymological redefinition of the "human" as derived from "humus." Taken "into the direction of *humus*," Haraway explains, the human is taken "into the soil, into the multispecies, biotic and abiotic working of the Earth, the earthly ones, those who are in and of the Earth, and for the Earth. Humus is what is made in soils and in compost, for those who would nurture the Earth" (*Staying* 2). "'Homo,'"

2 See also: Haraway, Donna. "Staying with the Manifesto: An Interview with Donna Haraway." Interview with Sarah Franklin. *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2017, pp. 49-63.

she adds, "needs to re-root in *humus*, not bliss out into an apocalyptic *anthropos*" (Haraway, "ACC" 260). While the blissing out into the anthropostory is a tendency of trans- rather than posthumanism, Haraway's terminological turn is aimed at stressing the need for both the ultimate dethronement of the human as "a self-making and planet-destroying CEO" (*Staying* 32) and the recognition of the (re)generative power of being with and plenty rather than beyond and one. As with humus significance shifts away from the *anthropos*, so should the Anthropocene, with all the destructiveness and depletion it signifies, make way for new realities of being. Directed at replenishment, these realities of being should rest, according to Haraway, upon people's "intense commitment and collaborative work and play with other terrans," and it is "the real and possible timespaces" ("ACPC" 160) of such commitment that Haraway chooses to name Chthulucene. The term thus comes to denote "the dynamic ongoing sym-chthonic forces and powers of which people are a part, within which ongoingness is at stake" ("ACPC" 160). As Haraway explains in *Staying with Trouble* (2016), the difference between Anthropocene or Capitalocene—as the former is sometimes called—and Chthulucene is one of narrative and response. Whereas anthropostory positions humans as the only active agents in a sequential narrative of conquest, chthulucenic stories, multiple and multithreaded, emphasize the coexistence and the "being at stake to each other" of different equally important forms of life. What is more, while in their human-centric arrogance "[b]oth the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene lend themselves too readily to cynicism, defeatism, and self-certain and self-fulfilling predictions, like the 'game over, too late'" (Haraway *Staying* 56), Chthulucene is the narrative of hope derived from engagement: the practices it advocates are directed at "making oddkin," or "kinning," i.e. interconnecting in "unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles" (Haraway. *Staying* 4) and promoting "relationality that goes beyond [the] Anthropos" (Klumbytė 227).

Epic Fail[3]

While *The Age of Earthquakes* describes the current epoch in terms of the seismicity of changes it is facing, one of the book's co-authors, Douglas Coupland, directly references the Anthropocene as the reality of now: once the informational dust settles, "extreme present"— as Coupland refers to the post-millennial reality of time-space compression—proves to be all about people struggling to reconcile their sense of exceptionalism with the dawning realization of their cosmic insignificance. A Canadian writer and visual artist, Coupland, to quote from John Moore "has kept his finger on the prostate of pop culture ever since his 1991 debut *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*" (Moore 9). (In)Famous for his incisiveness in identifying the directions in which both culture and the world are headed as well as for his partiality to absurd, trivia and hyperbolization and his pop-artsy aesthetics of consumerist

3 The phrase comes from "Slogans for the 21st Century," one of the installations from Coupland's exhibition "everywhere is anywhere is anything is everything", opened in 2014 at the Vancouver Art Gallery. Online exhibit available at https://artsandculture.google.com/partner/vancouver-art-gallery.

abundance, in recent decades, Coupland has proven himself to be one of the most talented—and definitely underestimated—writers of the millennial *Zeitgeist*.

In his most recent post-millennial fiction, Coupland engages in constructing ideas about the posthuman and problematizing the realities of the Anthropocene, and offers a conceptualization of people's planetary agency hinged upon de-romanticizing the narrative of human exceptionality. "[E]xtrapolat[ing] scientific as well as sociological and political entanglements of climate change," he not only joins the ranks of writers intent on mediating "the transactions between natural sciences and humanities"[4] but also advocates the power of "stories as models" (Frelik 128) (the use of the plural intentional) for approaching climate in its hyperobjectivity.[5] Drawing on his life-long interest in investigating people's sense of place in the world, in *Generation A* (2010), *Player One: What Is to Become of Us?* (2011), and *Worst.Person.Ever.* (2013), Coupland exposes the egotism of what for years he has been calling humanity's "Narrative Drive," hinting that, in order to move beyond the Anthropocene, rather than indulge and perpetuate the anthropostory of conquest and destitution, people should embrace "Gaïa stories" or "geostories" (Haraway *Staying* 40-41), as Gifford Latour and Donna Haraway respectively call the narratives involving the chthonic ones, and learn to "story-tell-with" other terran entities.

In "Future Legend," an appendix to *Player One*, Coupland defines "Narrative Drive" as "[t]he belief that a life without a story is a life not worth living" (232-233). Ironically, "Future Legend" states, while very common, in what Coupland calls extreme present,[6] narrative drive is usually "accompanied by the fact that most people cannot ascribe a story to their lives" (*Player One* 233). Due to time-space compression, people come to experience their lives not in terms of narrative progress but rather as a string of more of less loosely connected events. Yet, while inhabiting the digital age, most people are still mentally anchored in the 20th century and experience a lingering nostalgia for storyliving (the perception of stories as value- and meaning-bestowing dates back, Coupland argues, to sequential thinking and romanticized individualism

4 While Coupland has never openly identified himself with science fiction, if one follows Frelik's—definitely convincing—line of argumentation concerning the artificial distinction frequently drawn between speculative fiction and SF, Coupland's post-millennial novels—especially in their dramatizations of the scale of environmental changes and human planetary agency—include him among writers of not only Antropofiction or cli-fi but also SF. (For a terminological discussion of climate fiction see: Leikam, Susanne, Leyda, Julia. "Cli-Fi and American Studies: An Introduction." *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, vol. 62, no. 1, 2017, pp. 109-114.)

5 See: Morton, T., *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, Minneapolis; London 2013.

6 In both his writing and visual art, Coupland uses the term "extreme present" (or "superfuture") to describe the way people have come to experience time in the 21st century. According to Coupland, extreme present is characterized by the radical shrinking of the span of now and the consequent advent of a new temporal order characterized by the supersession of continuity with concurrence and instantaneity (Coupland's ideas concerning the specificity of the post-millennial temporal order coincide with Manuel Castells' concept of "timeless time"). See: Coupland, Douglas. "Before We Begin…." *Bit Rot: stories+essays*, William Heinemann, 2016, pp.1-3.; Coupland, Douglas. "Escaping the superfuture." *The Financial Times*, 10 Mar. 2016, ft.com/content/1dbc8ec4-e583-11e5-a09b-1f8b0d268c39. Accessed 7 Sept. 2019.; Coupland, Douglas. "Futurosity." *Bit Rot: stories+essays*, William Heinemann, 2016, pp. 72-74.

fostered by the 20th century and inculcated in people "by the logic of the book and fiction as a medium" (*Kitten Clone* c02))[7]. The unrealized craving to be the heroes living out their own stories coupled with the still nurtured belief in humanity's status as the crown of creation pushes people to heroize their very species and conceive of the Anthropocene as their center stage, simultaneously belittling the perspective of others.

The Anthropocene is a story. While supposedly a story of guilt and repentance—owning the transformative/destructive nature of people's influence on the environment—the Anthropocene is simultaneously a story of human exceptionalism. As such, it bears testimony to not only human partiality to narrative thinking, but above all human superiority complex. It is "a tragic story with only one real actor," Donna J. Haraway argues in *Staying with Trouble*,

> one real world-maker, the hero, … the Man-making… cutting, sharp, combative tale of action that defers the suffering of glutinous, earth-rotted passivity beyond bearing. All others in the prick tale are props, ground, plot space, or prey. They don't matter; their job is to be in the way, to be overcome, to be the road, the conduit, but not the traveler, not the begetter. (39)

The Anthropocene, to quote from Macfarlane, represents humanity's "crowning act of self-mythologisation (we are the super-species, we the Prometheans, we have ended nature)" (Macfarlane). Placing people as those responsible for change inflicted upon the world, it confirms human (man's) originative abilities, be they creative or destructive, simultaneously relegating all other life forms to passivity and submission. All three of Coupland's novels under analysis tell the story of the Anthropocene. All three as well expose people as the story's antihero: despite the obviousness of their wrongdoings, people remain adamant in not only looking away but also making it all about themselves.

In *Generation A*, the world is in a state of deep environmental crisis. While the novel does not dwell either on the processes responsible for the crisis or the details of ongoing changes, it is interspersed with information pointing to the scale of ecological degradation. The picture that emerges is of an overheated world suffering through droughts and indistinguishable fires; there are no more seasons; wildlife is quickly disappearing, leaving the world ever quieter; the vanishing of the bees has led to a global pollination crisis and food shortages; people's health is in ruins, their respiratory systems ravaged by long use of antibiotics and chemicals. The novel hints that the world might be destroyed well beyond redemption—"Is this a world a holy man might deem worthy of saving?," one of the book's characters, Harj, asks himself doubtfully, "What if there was a new Messiah—would he coldly look at atmospheric CO_2 levels and call it quits before he began? Would he go find some newer, fresher planet to save instead?" (Coupland, *Generation A* 59). Harj's doubts, however, quickly drown in a sea of indifference. The offhandedness with which most information concerning

7 See also: Coupland, D., *Polaroids from the Dead*, New York 1997.; Coupland, D., *Kitten Clone: Inside Alcatel-Lucent*, Toronto 2014.; Coupland, D., *Nine Readers*, in: *Bit Rot: stories+essays,* London 2016. pp. 23-26.; Coupland, D., *Why I can only ever be one Doug at any given time,* "Financial Times" 2017.; Basar Sh., Coupland D., Obrist H.U., *The Age of Earthquakes: A Guide to the Extreme Present*, UK; USA; Canada 2015.

the degradation of the environment is given points to it having already become old news. As made clear in another character's, Zack's, account of the global response to planetary disappearance of the bees, while at first disturbing or even horrifying, in the reality of the novel, environmental changes have been already processed and accepted as the new normal, their familiarization sped up by the need to silence the guilt over human complicity in or even sole responsibility for what happened. "I remember being upset about it," Zack recalls, thinking about the bees, "—most kids were. A tornado is awful, but a tornado isn't about you—you just happened to be there when it struck. But bees? There wasn't anyone on earth who didn't have that sick, guilty feeling in the gut because we knew it was our fault, not Mother Nature's" (Coupland, *Generation A* 33). Instead of spurring the world on to environmental action, shame at the recognition of the destructiveness of human environmental footprint results only in denial, or "blanking out" of consecutive ecological disasters—the angrier Mother Nature gets, the more people try to ignore her anger into irrelevance:

> When I was growing up, Mother Nature was this reasonably hot woman who looked a lot like the actress Glenn Close wearing a pale blue nightie. When you weren't looking, she was dancing around the fields and the barns and the yard, patting the squirrels and French-kissing butterflies. After the bees left and the plants started failing, it was like she'd returned from a Mossad boot camp with a shaved head, steel-trap abs and commando boots, and man, was she pissed. After the bees left, the most you could ask of her was that she not go totally apeshit on your ass. My dad and I used to drive into Des Moines to hook up with his pseudoephedrine dealer, and whenever we saw dead animals on the road, he'd say, 'Blank 'em out, Zack, blank 'em out.' After I'd seen enough roadkill, it became pretty easy to blank'em all out. And that's what the world did with the bees: we blanked 'em out. *And now Big Mama's out for revenge*. (Coupland, *Generation A* 33)

Nature's transformation into a bloodthirsty killer, as Zack chooses to poeticize the environmental crisis the world is experiencing in *Generation A*, is the direct effect of people's persistent refusal to acknowledge either the gravity of the changes or their own role in their unfolding. The refusal, in turn, hinges on human arrogance. Nurturing their grandiose delusions, even in the midst of a mass extinction, people still believe they know better. Convinced that not only are they the ones who control the narrative but also every narrative is, or at least should be, about them, they fail to realize that what they are blanking out is, in fact, a fire at home.

A sense of human arrogance permeates not only *Generation A* but also *Worst. Person.Ever* and *Player One*. Whereas in *Generation A*, the characters continuously ponder people's ecological myopia and readiness to turn everything to their advantage, in *Worst.Person.Ever.*, Coupland uses the example of the Great Pacific Trash Vortex to expose the absurdity of human hero complex and belief in what Donna Haraway calls "technofixes" (*Staying* 3). More apologetic in tone, *Player One* revisits the notion of the human as species, suggesting that human exceptionality lies in nothing but unparalleled potential for destruction.

People cannot see further than profit. Moreover, they are more than eager to see environmental damage as their gain. "Corn is a fucking nightmare," Zack says in

Generation A referring to corn's transformation from a natural kernel to "a bloated, foot-long, buttery carb dildo" (3). In the novel, reckless genetic modification turns corn into a fructose bomb, thus weaponizing staple food and causing it to contribute to global obesity epidemic. According to Zack, corn's is not an isolated case; with evident "parallels between the dildoization of corn and the crunchification of apples" (142) and the correlation between the two and the pollination crisis never examined, there seems to be every reason to seek collusion in every genetic amplification. Another example of human short-sightedness is given by Julien. During a flight, Julien observes the destruction inflicted upon the North Pole by "the soot lines the Russians had drawn—crazy zigzagging patterns of carbon stripes on the remaining ice packs, soaking up heat, accelerating ice breakup to create new shipping routes"; as the pilot informs him, "[t]he carbon speeds up iceberg calving by a factor of a thousand" (Coupland *Generation A* 142). Focused solely on prospective revenue, even in the midst of an environmental catastrophe, people still refuse to acknowledge that their actions not only ruin the habitats of multiple species but are also bound to further increase global warming. Furthermore, as Julien notices, seeing themselves as the driving force of the world, people—with all the perversity involved—look to the destruction they so expertly inflict for confirmation of their exceptionality. "I hate how the world has turned into one massive hamburger-making machine," Julien contends, thinking about the world's reaction to the pollination crisis,

> how the world is only about people now—everything else on the planet must bow to our will because there's no longer any other option. Fundamentalists rejoiced when the bees died out; to them it was proof that the planet exists entirely for and was entirely about people. How could such thinking not make you want to go out and vomit into the street? (Coupland *Generation A* 17)

"[C]ompact, standardized, and mass-produced, coming at the world as an irrepressible economic and cultural force" the hamburger, to quote from Josh Ozersky, embodies the urban, the industrial, and the capitalistic (20). Serving thus as a perfect icon of the Capitalocene, the hamburger seems to represent the human/capitalist desire to mince and process everything into submission. The belief that not only is the human way the only way but it is also the only way that is somehow cosmically sanctioned provides people with a handy excuse; moreover, as Coupland signals in *Worst.Person.Ever*, it blinds them to reality and deludes them into thinking they can singlehandedly fix the unfixable.

In 2013, while beachcombing on Haida Gwaii, remote islands off the coast of British Columbia, Coupland came across the first wave of tsunami debris that started to wash up on the west coast of North America two years after the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake. A metaphor for the dubiousness of everything millennial—"I'm interested in the toxicity that lies beneath the pretty pink plastic," Coupland admits (qtd. in Ditmars)—plastic has been at the center of Coupland's artistic practices for almost two decades. It was, however, his 2013 beachcombing, Coupland admits while elaborating on the origins of *Vortex*, his 2018 exhibition at the Vancouver Aquarium, that triggered his fascination with people's relationship to plastic and set him off on a mission to familiarize humanity with the reality of the Pacific trash vortex. Still, the idea must

have been budding earlier, as it is in *Worst.Person.Ever*, published in December 2012, that Coupland first mentions the vortex, using it to expose the misguidance of human environmental initiatives.

In the novel, the main character becomes involved in an unlicensed attempt to destroy the Pacific trash vortex with an atomic bomb. Regardless (and partly because) of its obvious absurdity, the endeavor serves as a poignant commentary on the naïveté of human perception of the world, human hero complex, as well as people's belief in the climate's fixability by, to quote from Haraway, either the "secular godlike Anthropos" (*Staying* 50) or his tools. Most people, one of the characters, Neal, notices in *Worst. Person.Ever.* while flying over the Pacific, have no idea the garbage patch exists. Coupled with the patch being "[t]he largest manmade object on the planet" (108), people's ignorance testifies to the power of human blanking out. Accompanying Neal, Raymond, the novel's main character, watches the sunset over the vortex. Raymond's regret at his inability to do justice to the beauty of the sunset points to the ambivalence experienced in confrontation with the vortex—"Makes you proud and disgusted about being human, all at the same time" (108)—dangerously leaning towards awe at its poetic magnificence. Still, the novel truly ridicules human failure to see reality for what it is in its descriptions of the aftermath of the bombing. First, reacting to what he takes for Raymond's disapproval, right after the bomb is dropped, Neal exclaims:

> Don't be such a sourpuss, Ray! Think of all that plastic, gone forever—fluffy little dolphins now able to romp through lagoons free of plastic six-pack yokes. Seahorses cantering about, snacking on little bits of seahorse food. It's a Disney movie down there now, like *Finding Nemo*. It's world peace. Our Jenny [the soldier who coordinated the operation] here is a planetary hero. (139)

The same day witnesses a celebration of the bombing. "Everyone on the island is celebrating a new era of hope for mankind," Neal explains to Raymond, whose initial skepticism—"'They think they're actually going to fix the trash vortex with bombs…. These fucking Americans are like *children*" (146)[8]—is quickly silenced, and who then lets himself be sucked into a crowd toasting and chanting "All hail the atomic bomb! To the bomb! The bomb! The bomb!" (143). In no sense educational, all the all too common mediation of nature as the Disney World inhabited by Nemos, Mushus, and Baloos does is contribute to people's depreciating perception of the natural environment as fantastic but imaginary—merely a colorful setting to a story they weave—in no way real or just as alive as they are. Still, Neal's fantasy of the post-blast underwater life as an aqua wonderland seems symbolic less of human ignorance than of the belittling impulse behind the anthropocentric gaze hinged upon humanity's conviction of its unerring omniscience and omnipotence. "[T]he story of Species Man as the agent of the Anthropocene," Haraway writes, "is an almost laughable rerun of the great phallic humanizing and modernizing Adventure, where man, made in the image of a vanished god, takes on superpowers in his secular-sacred ascent, only to end in tragic

8 While Raymond's comment is a stock phrase, it should be noted that with recent intensification of youth climate strikes and Greta Thunberg listed as a potential candidate for 2019 Nobel Peace Prize, using infantilization as a form of depreciation, especially in the context of environmental awareness, seems no longer in any degree warranted but instead purely ridiculous.

detumescence, once again" (*Staying* 47). Each time, the superpowers are granted to man either by the tools of his own making or his delusion of having been chosen and thus having the unfailing support of whatever he worships. While the bomb might have been dropped by a woman, it is the godlike phallic *anthropos* with his "comic faith in technofixes, whether secular or religious" (*Staying* 3) that is the alleged hero in the destruction of the Pacific garbage patch in *Worst.Person.Ever*.. His arrogance is such that it is the very tool he uses that he turns into the universal object of worship. What the self-proclaimed human hero remains oblivious to is the havoc wreaked by his secular-turned-sacred technofix, or, to use a more befitting term, "techno-apocalypse" (*Haraway Staying* 3).

"We all like to see ourselves as a St. Francis of Assisi," Coupland writes in *City of Glass*, referring to people's declared benevolence towards the environment, "but self-flattery is all too human. Let's face it," Coupland concludes, "we're the pests" (172). While *Generation A* and *Worst.Person.Ever.* focus more on sketching the picture of human environmental arrogance, *Player One* is a novel of human self-reproach (however meaningless). In the novel, the characters not only acknowledge the exhaustion of the anthropocentric story but also echo Zack's assertion from *Generation A* about people having it coming: "Man, humans are a nightmare fucking species. We deserve everything we do to ourselves" (3). The sentiments are most openly expressed by two characters, Karen and Luke:

> She [Karen] will remember a game she played as a child, called Pretend You're Dead. She and her friends would run around, and someone would shout 'Stop!' and they'd all drop to the ground. As quickly as possible, they had to shout out how they'd like to reincarnate, without overthinking their decisions. More often than not, they chose horses, cats, dogs, and colourful birds and insects. It will dawn on Karen, as she sits there behind the bar, in hiding from one or more snipers, that never once in all the times she played the game did anybody choose to come back as a human being. *Good decision,* she will think. *We are a wretched species, indeed.* (Coupland, *Player One* 85)

> Luke finally composes himself and says, 'Oh man. We're a disaster of a species, aren't we? People, I mean.'
>
> Rick croaks, 'Are we?'
>
> Luke says, 'We completely *are*. I'm not even going to single out human beings as the Number One disaster on this planet—I'm going to single out our DNA as the criminal. Our DNA is a disaster. Everything we make is the fault of our evil little DNA molecule. *Hi, I'm a little DNA molecule. I build cathedrals and go to the moon—heck, I harnessed atomic energy! Take that, viruses*.' Luke looks around the room. 'And this is what it gets us in the end. Bar mix. Blindness. Toxic snow. A dead energy grid. Phones that don't work. We're a joke.' (Coupland, *Player One* 197-198)

Even if normally in denial, Karen appears to be saying, deep down people are well-aware of their inadequacy and given the chance would be more than willing to jump species ship. The wretchedness of humanity as a species lies, according to Luke, in people's need to establish their superiority not only knowing no restraint but also being uncompromising to the point of effecting (self-)destruction. Still—the novel's

subtitle ("What Is to Become of Us?") serving as an early warning—while abounding in human self-criticism, the novel is devoid of any environmental impulses. With the characters focused on the future of only one species and pondering the potential of re-narrating the same old story, *Player One* aptly demonstrates that self-criticism might be just another expression of human self-absorption.

Making-with

The Anthropocene is a problematic term. As Anja Claus argues in "Art in the Anthropocene," whereas the term does indeed "evoke… scientific facts—concerning anthropogenic influence," it simultaneously reaffirms "ethical values—concerning anthropocentric superiority" (100). By accepting, or rather proclaiming, "the humanization of the Earth as a reality" (Crist 141), the Anthropocene validates human self-centeredness and self-absorption placing people in the driver's seat of the planetary narrative. It is for that reason, Donna Haraway writes, that Anthropocene should be treated "more [as] a boundary event than an epoch;" instead of dwelling upon it and in it, people should "make the Anthropocene as short/thin as possible and… [instead] cultivate with each other in every way imaginable epochs to come that can replenish refuge" ("ACPC" 160).

"Poor humanity, praying and cursing and praying and cursing. What is to become of us as a species?" (206)—central to Coupland's *Player One*, the question voiced by one of the characters echoes transhumanist speculations: people's sole interest lies in fathoming the essence of their humanness and the potential directions of their evolution; their attempts at using technological progress to "fix" the world only disguise, in fact, their instrumental treatment of technology as a way of not only advancing their humanity but also abandoning, more or less literally, the sinking ship that is the Earth. "Nothing," however, "makes itself" (Haraway *Staying* 58). In Coupland's *Generation A*, *Player One*, and *Worst.Person.Ever.*, the stories of human grandiosity denarrate before the characters' very eyes. If they want it or not, Coupland demonstrates, people remain in a symbiotic relationship with everything around them; hard as they might try to delude themselves of their outsider status, any disturbance to the eco-homeostasis between them and other terran agents and forces invariably influences their well-being, bringing home the inaptness of the anthropostory. Once planetary eco-homeostasis is disturbed beyond repair, the Earth will be made unhomely and its inhabitants, human or not, will be reduced to what Haraway call "refugees… without refuge" ("ACPC" 160). As, wiser in sensing the potency of changes, some—as do bees in *Generation A*—are already regrouping, others—people—stupidly rejoice in having the world to themselves. It is time people realize both that in a world out of balance they too are at stake and that it is only by ceasing to see the planet as their center stage and "making-with"—story-telling-with—other planetary agents that they stand a chance of making themselves a home away from home.

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