

How does the Anthropocene feel? (Or, Deep Time Meditation)

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PREFACE: Imagine you are in the Abercrombie Business School Lecture Theatre, University of Sydney, Australia, on Gadigal Land. You are in a lecture of approximately 50 undergraduate students enrolled in a unit on “Gender and Environment.” This week we are trying to understand deep time, and the Anthropocene. We are reading the work of Kathryn Yusoff (*A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*) and of Heather Davis and Zoe Todd (“Decolonizing the Anthropocene”). Obviously, this means that we are going to be interrogating some of the white supremacist, colonial and masculinist foundations of the idea of the “Anthropocene.” However, to get there, we first have to get our heads around the notion of very deep time. We might begin, then, with a question: How does the Anthropocene *feel*?

In preparation, I ask students to take a position where they will be comfortable for about 20 minutes, in a seated or lying position. They may stay at their desks, or they can find a space against the wall, or the lying down at the front or the back. I give students a chance to make themselves comfortable. Ensure that people of all bodily abilities have a way to be comfortable, and that everyone will be able to follow you with their eyes closed. (You might make a script available in advance to hearing impaired students.)

After a pause of silence as the room nestles in, I recite the following, slowly and deliberately.

Breathe. Breathe in all the air around you. Take it into your mouth or your nose; the world now moving through your respiratory system. You are breathing in molecules of other bodies – plants, animals, rock, soil, rain; the breathy hopes and airborne dreams of all those with whom you share this planet. You are breathing the world *in* - making you, sustaining you, for better or for worse. Breathe in.

And breathe out. Breathe the world *out*.

As you breathe out, little molecules of you join the world; they move on to find some other body, and settle there, for a while.

Breathe the world *in* as the world becomes you, and breathe yourself *out* as you become the world.

Breathe in, and breathe out.

And notice, that although you are breathing in, and breathing out, you are not floating away.

Even though you are made of air, the air of the world, you are still grounded. Your body is on the ground and the ground supports your body.

Notice the ground below you. You are supported by the ground.

Breathe in, breathe out. You are supported by the ground.

The ground that supports you is a carpet or a chair—and the carpet or the chair that supports you is made of nylon, polyester, other fibres and synthetic materials. The carpet or the chair that supports you is made also by the labours of machines and hands that made those carpets and chairs and brought them here. Breathe in, and breathe out. And the carpet and chairs are supported by concrete and steel, rebar and conglomerate. All of this is the ground that supports you. This ground is young. It is two, almost three years old. It is five, and ten, and fifty years old.

Breathe in, and feel yourself supported by this new ground. Breathe out.

Below this ground is another ground.

Can you feel yourself also supported by this other ground?

This other ground might be called soil. This ground is dirt, oxygen, humous and other decaying matter. There is nitrogen, although not as much as in other soils. Old leaves, and plants, insects and worms. Although it is not as rich as other soils, this ground is still vibrant, and lively. This ground is older than the ground of this concrete and glass exoskeleton of the earth that also houses you, that supports you. This slightly older ground is decades old, maybe centuries, maybe even millennia. These soils archive the traces of farming and burning practices that made this place Country for Gadigal people. This silica-laden, sandstone soil ground is at least 60 000 years ago. This is survival ground. These are tough soils, that demand perseverance and care. These are the soils that grew the people of the Eora nation. These soils hold the traces of old vegetation, or animals that once lived here, of meetings between peoples, and in more recent times, of the afterlives of those meetings, in the form of blood and bone. These are the soils that much later grew this city, and you as a part of it, as you sit here now, on this ground. You are supported by this ground. This is Holocene ground.

Breathe in, and breathe out; feel the Holocene ground supporting you.

And those tough and tenacious sandstone soils that support this building, and support your body on this ground, are supported by other ground, that goes deeper still. Breathe in, breathe out. Can we sink our breath even deeper, even deeper into the even deeper, even older ground that supports this ground?

We will have to swim through the flooded plains of Sydney's basin in the late Pleistocene era, 12 000 years ago. We rewind to the tertiary period, when the movements of the earth and her waters slowed down enough to deposit gravels, clays, silts and sand in the deep grooves below us. 160 million years ago. Breathing deeper. Moving deeper. We are now 200 million years deep into the ground, that ground that supports you here. You are supported by Holocene ground, and by Pleistocene ground too.

Below your feet, below the Holocene soils and Pleistocene sands, you are supported by rock – the sandstone itself. This sandstone was carved from the earth by a magnificent and massive ancient river, coursing across the continent of Gondwana and depositing minerals from the centre of that continent to become the ground that supports you now. The sandstone that supports you is 250 million years old. If we bring our breath deeper – into the ground, through the tenacious soils, into the rock itself, we are sinking into the many thousands of millennia that support us. This is the ground that supports you. You are supported by these hundreds of millions of years of river-made ground, of moving ground, of vibrant and vibrating ground. Ground of upheavals, and survivals. This is the ground that supports you. This is the ground that holds us all.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in all the air of millions and millions of years, the air of all the time that has ever been. Breathe it *in*.

And now, breathe it *out*. Breathe out the air that is the air of all the time that has ever been, but which is now augmented and changed by few moments of you. Breathe out the air that is you, now added to all the time that has ever been, that will slowly sediment into the earth, and become the ground that supports everything that will come after.

Breathe in, and breathe out.

(PAUSE)

When you are ready, slowly open your eyes. Slowly find your way back to your seat.

When the meditation is complete, I do not usually ask for immediate feedback or comments. Students should be given a few minutes to sit with their thoughts. You might invite them to write down a few thoughts, or to share them with the person beside them.

A proper debrief is better done after some time – for example in the next class, or in an accompanying tutorial. You might ask: Did the exercise change your understanding of deep time, the Anthropocene, or geology? How might we understand these terms as also located within our bodies, or in relation to our bodies? Is it helpful or necessary to bring these abstract concepts into the sphere of experience? How else might we do so?

Obviously, your meditation script requires some knowledge of the various 'grounds' upon which the meditation is taking place. Adjust as necessary.