

Transcription

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Episode 6: Anthropocene Poetics: David Farrier with Adam Dickinson

<https://soundcloud.com/user-760891605/farrier>

**Host intro:** The [Anthropocene](#) describes how humanity has radically intruded into deep time, the vast time scales that shape the Earth system and all life forms that it supports. In [Anthropocene Poetics](#), David Farrier asks how poetry can help us think about and live in the Anthropocene by reframing our intimate relationship with geological time. David is professor of literature and the environment at [The University of Edinburgh](#), and he's joined here in conversation by Adam Dickinson, who is the author of four books of poetry, including [Anatomic](#). Adam is a professor in the English department at Brock University in Ontario. This edited conversation was recorded in July 2020.

**Adam Dickinson:** Hello, my name is Adam Dickinson, and I'm here with David Farrier, who wrote a book called [Anthropocene Poetics](#), and we're going to talk to you a little bit about poetry and the Anthropocene today. David, how would you define the Anthropocene for our listeners? What does this word mean?

**David Farrier:** The Anthropocene describes this unique condition we find ourselves in, in the midst of a whole range of planetary, influential crises. It describes the unprecedented influence that we have over the planet that's been home to humanity for hundreds of thousands of years. The fact that now we not only inhabit the planet, but also have a role in determining how the Earth system works. So, the Anthropocene describes this uncanny, disorienting sense that we are, I guess you would kind of say agents, at a planetary level, that we are having an effect on how the Earth system functions in a way that will leave legacies for the very deep future.

**AD:** And is there agreement on when this Anthropocene begins or can we point to a particular time?

**DF:** There's consensus, there's not total agreement. Initially, when people began to talk about the idea of an Anthropocene and the era of the human, if you like, in geological terms, they began to talk about the middle of the 19th century, the onset of the [Industrial Revolution](#) as a likely starting point, a hinge moment. More latterly, consensus has grown up around the middle of the 20th century, around 1950 or so, when we see a huge spike in all kinds of forms of consumption, fossil fuel use. It's a period sometimes known as the [Great Acceleration](#). We see a huge increase in plastic production from this point onward, nuclear testing starts around this time. So, the consensus tends to

coalesce around 1950 or so on. But there are other arguments that pose other dates. One particularly interesting one suggests that we need to look at the beginning of the colonization of the Americas when we have semi-organized migrations of people and species across continents and across oceans and the devastations that follow there; the genocides, but also the kind of ecological disruption that follows as well.

**AD:** So, I suppose this would be the origin of some alternate terms for the Anthropocene like [Capitalistocene](#) or [Homogocene](#), which is the kind of homogeneity of biospheres, of ecosystems [that have] resulted from as you're mentioning, some of these exchanges facilitated by global trade and travel that developed through the development of capitalism and accelerated more recently. How then does literature fit into this? I can see how geologists would be interested in thinking about the Anthropocene as a kind of taxonomical marker, [the "golden spike."](#) When does it begin? How does poetry, literature help us understand the Anthropocene differently?

**DF:** The Anthropocene could be defined narrowly, simply to do with changes in the function of the Earth system, and that would sit squarely within a small number of disciplines, geology amongst them, earth science and so on, but the Anthropocene is also an imaginative crisis, if you like. It's a fundamental change in how we understand ourselves as individuals and as a species in relation to the planet. It requires us to adjust our imaginary, giving us different frameworks for thinking about how do we relate to the world around us. The Anthropocene is, I think, something that affects every discipline, every atom of life. It touches upon all aspects of how we live and how we think and how we feel. And therefore, it's incumbent upon literary studies as it is on any other discipline to reflect on that, to consider that challenge and the changes that we're seeing. And think about: How do we respond on our own terms to the Anthropocene as this "rupture in my relationship with the planet."

**AD:** In what we call the environmental crisis is a product or a function of many of these changes that have taken place in the Anthropocene. I think it's [\[Lawrence\] Buell](#) who says the environmental crisis is not simply a crisis of technology. It's also a crisis of the imagination, which you point out in your book. And so, you're right. This sort of draws in all kinds of other disciplines. It's not only about science. It's about culture, too. And certainly, changes that have taken place are reflective of a particular kind of cultural approach to the planet, to resources, to life, ultimately.

**DF:** And it's about story as well. I think we really do need to come to terms with the fact that the actions that we're taking now, the decisions that we take have a really long legacy. They'll leave traces. They'll shape conditions on the planet that

will persist for millennia in some cases. And to think about that as a kind of storytelling, setting in trade stories that will play out over countless human generations, I think brings the Anthropocene and its implications right to the heart of literary studies, of writing, of literature, in general.

**AD:** Well, let me ask a related question because we've been talking about the Anthropocene in the context of geology and scientific disciplines. But of course, when you want to extend this idea to larger cultural practices — but engagements with science play a significant role in the poetry that you examine in your book. I'm thinking of the kind of ecological quadrat that would be used for ecological science that [\[Philip\] Larkin](#) uses in thinking about clumps of woodland or beekeeping, apiology, polymer chemistry and [\[Evelyn\] Reilly, genetic engineering](#) and [Christian Bök's \[The\] Xenotext](#). Does a poetics of the Anthropocene call out for an integration between art and science? Do the poets need to get together with the scientists? Is this one way of reading the kinds of consequences or repercussions of your book, of the kinds of arguments that you're making?

**DF:** I think yes, collaboration is essential. It's through collaboration that we are going to respond positively if we respond positively to the challenges ahead. And I think there's a great deal to be gained from this kind of collaborative exercise where poets and scientists get together and explore the different ways in which they perceive and pursue patterns. This is something [that is] a common denominator, and fundamental to both practices is this endeavor to notice, to pay attention and to see pattern, whether that's pattern in sound or pattern in terms of chemical reaction to what can be predicted. There's a great deal to be gained from this kind of collaborative working. And it's something that I was really struck by in terms of [Anatomic](#), your most recent collection.

**AD:** Sure. I'll just say also that I completely agree with your characterization of pattern recognition and the importance of that to both science and art. I mean, it seems to me that science and art at their disciplinary limits are, ultimately, engagements with patterns, with yoking disparate forms of thinking together. I mean, this is how we solve problems — reaching into unexpected territories of knowledge in order to attempt to find some common links that might help us look at a problem differently. And certainly, my interest in poetry is very much related to this. I am interested in looking at scientific practices and procedures as a way of reimagining poetic forms and methods. What might these intellectual pursuits, through experimental, scientific practices offer a kind of poetry that seeks to reframe or rescale some cultural questions that have a bearing on some of these larger environmental issues that, of course, themselves are bound up with scientific practices and data. My most recent book, [Anatomic](#), was an attempt to look at how the outside writes the inside, so how our environment writes our bodies for good and for bad, so to speak. So, what I did was I tested my

body for chemicals and microbes. I tested myself, my blood and my urine for a whole suite of chemicals, flame retardants, phthalates, PCBs, heavy metals, insecticides, all kinds of things. I followed the protocols actually used by the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States](#) and also [Health Canada in Canada](#) as well, to sort of look at some of their biomonitoring protocols. And I used those as my precedents. And so, through this, I was able to look at the way in which my body is written over by my environment in all kinds of potentially toxic ways in terms of the pollution that I found inside my blood and my urine. But I wanted to balance this approach with looking at the way in the context of evolutionary history, the body has always been overwritten, so to speak, by its environment. And so, I sequenced my microbiome as well, because there's all kinds of evidence now to suggest that the microbiome, the microbes on and in our bodies play extremely, if not vital roles in making us human and keeping us alive. There are neurotransmitters, the vast majority of serotonin, for example, in your body — 90%, 95% of it is produced by microbes in your gut. And the serotonin is an essential neurotransmitter necessary for modulating moods and personality. So, in a sense, we kind of outsource the maintenance or production of our personalities to these nonhuman organisms. And I find that fascinating. And there's all kinds of other examples of how microbes play necessary roles in physiological development and the maintenance of a healthy immune system. And so, I wanted to put these two things in tension. How is the outside writing the inside, and how might I create this kind of catalog of these chemicals and organisms and then attempt to, in a sense, try to tell their own biographies? What stories do they have in the context of evolutionary, cultural, industrial, military, political history? Because some of these chemicals, for example, have very interesting political histories, and the microbes themselves have fascinating relationships with evolutionary history and also with culture. And so, I've essentially used the book as a way to kind of tell these stories, but inflected through my own body as a way of looking at a kind of metabolic poetics. Here's my body situated within the global circulation of energy and capital. If we want to think of that as a kind of metabolism, the way that the energy flows around the planet, the kinds of exchanges and circulation of money and oil that maintain that kind of metabolism and how that inevitably writes the local metabolism of human and nonhuman bodies; we're always connected. I mean, this is another way, I suppose, that I think of the Anthropocene as an example of these sort of metabolic connections between the global and the local and how it was possible for me to look into my blood and see the signature of a multinational company. In this case, [Monsanto](#), which raised all kinds of questions for me. And so, this is really what [Anatomic](#) was trying to do.

**DF:** That's such a fascinating project. And I love the way that the initial collaboration gives rise to so many other kinds of collaboration and connection. As you said, this idea that we are being written by what's within us, by the

communities that dwell within us and the way that connection just proliferates. Did it have any significant effect on your sense of your own practice? What really struck me, in particular, reading it is I'm not entirely able to tell where the poems begin or where they end. I feel like more than perhaps you would get, even in a conventional collection, that this is just a snapshot on some much larger and open-ended process. I mean, these poems begin in one sense in a lab before they find their way anywhere near the page.

**AD:** Oh, definitely. It was very challenging. I got the idea for this book as a result of a book I'd written previously on plastics, called [The Polymers](#). And as I was researching that book, I discovered, I thought more carefully about endocrine disruptors, which are chemicals, additives to plastic. And so, as I was researching plastics, I was interested in this. And I was sort of thinking about, alright, well, how might one play with this as an endocrine disrupter, as a kind of poetic form, but also, what would it mean to sort of think of this as a kind of poetics, or the endocrine system itself in the body, the exchange of hormonal messages that's always maintaining the inside of our body in relation to an exterior. When you're hungry, your endocrine system releases hormonal cues to make your stomach rumble, etc. When you're cold, shiver. All of these things are sort of hormonal cues prompted by the endocrine system. So, this system of messages really fascinated me. And it occurred to me to think of this as a kind of poetics. And so, that's how I moved into thinking about, well, OK, what if I get my whole body tested? What can I do with this data? But of course, the data itself became this huge thing. I generated an enormous amount of it. I mean, there's some interesting stories about difficulties I had. I had to send a stool sample across the border, for example, which at first, was quite difficult because it was considered a biohazard. But turning it into poetry was a real challenge for me. It's something I still think quite a bit about.

**DF:** Well, I come back often to [Lyn Hejninian's idea of poetry as a form of inquiry](#), that the language of poetry is a language of inquiry. It's not so much a genre as a mode of finding out — that underpins my idea about Anthropocene poetics, that poetry can be a way to give us frames for thinking about the challenges of the Anthropocene.

**AD:** You know, it seems to me that poetry is that form of writing that most lives at the limits of writing, and it seems to be endocrine disruptors and the effects of some of these chemicals constitutes a form of extreme writing, if you like. And so, anyways, poetry was the most appropriate form — artistic response to this. If it's writing that's taking place in the endocrine system, well, what kind of writing art might one bring to bear on this?

**DF:** Yeah, there's a great deal of affinity, and it's really striking as well, how much intimacy is a concern. I mean, you and I have talked about this before, about how much touch is a preoccupation in [Anatomic](#). One of the lines that has stayed with me since the first time I read it is “the things we touch, touch us back,” which resonates in so many different ways with this Anthropocenic condition we find ourselves in. But intimacy is one of the primary concerns I have as well in defining an Anthropocene poetics; it's this sense of the proximity we have to things that we might otherwise have thought very different, distant from us — whether that's the deep effect of atmospheric carbon or the intimacy we have with future generations who will live in a planet that is profoundly affected by our legacy of excess carbon in the atmosphere — or whether it's the more immediate-term intimacies now, like people who live in the [Niger Delta](#) who have to live in an extractivist environment because of our demand for fossil fuels. So, intimacy is fundamental to the Anthropocene. It's a condition in which we are crowded by all kinds of intimate relation that it's incumbent upon us not to ignore any longer.

**AD:** Can you say a little bit more about how intimacy works or the kind of poetics, the different poetics of intimacy that function in the poets that you chose to include in your book? Some of them that you were talking about are important lyric poets, but also we're talking about quite experimental writers.

**DF:** The starting point for the book was a question: What does it mean to live enfolded in deep time? So, when I first started to think about the Anthropocene, I had lots of conversations with colleagues at [The University of Edinburgh](#) where I work. I was part of a reading group that we called the Deep Time Reading Group, and this question kept coming up that we need to reconsider our relationship with the very deep past and the deep future to come, that these seemingly very distant, temporal oddities intrude on our present in all kinds of ways; that we are enfolded by deep time, that it shapes the world we live in, the deep time of the Earth is not static. It's always in process. But also, we are drawing upon the resources of the past in order to create a certain present for ourselves, but which will also create the present that many generations have to live in for millennia to come. And it's that crowding, it's that sense of what seems to be very distant and coming up very close. Deep time is a part of our everyday lives. It's conventional to think about the lyric poem as a kind of snapshot of an intimate moment where you see through the eyes of another person, briefly. And it was, in part, that sense of the poems' potential to encapsulate many different lines in a seemingly small context, it was the richness, the viscosity of the lyric form as a starting point for me. That was how I began to think about poetry's capacity to give shape to this curious intimacy of the Anthropocene, and it was from there, I began to think about what other kinds of poetry — more experimental forms, more innovative

traditions — also give us different expressions of these curiously intimate moments that we're living through.

**AD:** So, in some ways, what you're saying sounds interesting to me, as though it were the distinction between innovative and lyric might in fact, not necessarily be sort of helpful here. Or I should say it's not necessarily a dramatic form distinction as it is one of focus, transferring that focus of intimacy, perhaps shifting it from one dimension to another, shifting scale a little bit. Certainly, if you look at the experimental poetry of [\[Evelyn\] Reilly](#), she's still, in a sense, looking at this question of intimacy, but it's just done from a slightly different scale than, say, [Elizabeth Bishop](#) or [Seamus Heaney](#). So, you end up with a different kind of poetry emerging from that. But perhaps, the impulse behind it is not necessarily that different. Would you agree?

**DF:** Yeah, absolutely. I think that the impulse behind this is an impulse outwards. You were talking about the interplay between the inside and the outside. I think so much, we think of poetry as a movement inwards, a kind of inward-looking. That's the stereotype. And therefore, we do find poetry is a fantastic space in which to do that inward-searching. But I'm also interested in, so much of the poetry I was looking at is oriented outwards. And that to me is, in a sense, fundamental to a kind of lyric sensibility that I see at play in all of the poets I looked at, regardless of whether they look like or sound like lyric poets. [Peter Riley](#), who's a fantastic poet who seems to sort of straddle the boundary between lyric and more experimental forms, talks about lyric is not a kind of poetry, but a technique to create the “illusion of song.” But the song is not just a sound. It's not just a kind of musicality; a song is collective. It's about drawing other voices into communion. And I really think that's what joins the poetry of [Seamus Heaney](#) and [Elizabeth Bishop](#) to that of [Evelyn Reilly](#) and [Christian Bök](#), which is this sense of openness, opening out to connection. And coupled with this pursuit, what does it mean to be living in intimacy with deep time and the Anthropocene — the things that kind of bounds this, admittedly, quite eclectic group of poets together.

**AD:** Let's talk a little bit about the “clinamen” in [Anthropocene Poetics](#). I completely adore your idea of the clinamen here as something at the heart of “kin-making,” that dynamic of swerving or veering, that this is what makes kin-making possible. This is the sort of culminating chapter of your book. I love it, in part, because it links art with community in such a lovely way. Can you talk about the genesis of this idea in your book, the clinamen?

**DF:** The clinamen is as [Stephen Greenblatt](#) puts it, it's the swerve that sets off a ceaseless chain of collisions. And I think really thinking about clinamen as a dynamic in a poem, a turn, whether it's a metaphor, whether it's apostrophe

actually began for me in reading the work of environmental humanities scholars like [Thom van Dooren](#), [Deborah Bird Rose](#) and their idea of how life moves through deep time. [Thom van Dooren's](#) concept of the “flightway” that all creatures follow, an evolutionary path, a line through deep time; depending on all kinds of factors, interactions, these flightways can take any number of branching paths. That way of thinking about life situated in deep time really resonated with me. I was really looking for a figure that could articulate that in the poem. And so, that's where the idea of the clinamen came from because we are kin-making beings, as [Donna Haraway](#) reminds us. We're ceaselessly engaged in turning towards other creatures, other being, as it were, making connections, which is something that is right at the heart of [Anatomic](#) as well, which is a fascinating account of, among many other things, the ceaseless operations of kin-making, whether we like it or not, we're all involved in. And so, the clinamen seem to be a figure for this expansive way of thinking about connectedness to all of life as it were.

**AD:** Yeah, and of course, it has a rich history, as you pointed out, related to [Lucretius](#), but also very serious integrations of art and science. But of course, it manifests itself more recently in all kinds of more playful approaches to poetics and art. I'm thinking of pataphysics, for example, the clinamen is a kind of swerve for, I think you mentioned in your book, a bestial poetics or something. I forget the exact quotation — [\[Alfred\] Jarry's](#) description of the clinamen.

**DF:** It's “the unforeseen beast” he calls it.

**AD:** Now, that's it. Thank you. “The unforeseen beast.” Exactly.

**DF:** It really calls to mind that sense of not just the unexpected, but, you know, the animal element, because so much of the kin-making that I was interested in was to do with our multispecies relationships.

**AD:** Can you talk also a little bit about how the clinamen swerving dynamic might connect to your idea of a diffraction-based poetics or even a kind of diffractive methodology that you potentially employ here in your study? And what is diffraction and how is it important to your work, to your book?

**DF:** So, “diffraction” describes the coexistence of waves in a space in a kind of “superposition.” So, if you have light or sound or water passing through a series of narrow grates, diffraction grates, the waves that proceed as it passes through the grates will begin to overlap. And this is for [Karen Barad](#), a kind of figure of a principle of interaction, the way in which forces collaborate to create conditions, to create the world, as it were. And it's a really powerful way of thinking about our entanglement in a whole range of relationships that we have become numb to,

immune to, lying to. We tend to think of ourselves as separate, the “nature-culture binary” has worked through the roots of our society. The way we think of ourselves that negates the whole series of complex, entangled interrelationships that are fundamental to making us human. And so, diffractive poetics is a way of thinking with differences that make a difference — as kind of our output, finding ways to uncover the entangled connectiveness in circumstances that might seem very homogenous or very thin. So, one of the examples I give in [Anthropocene Poetics](#), I look at the work of [Evelyn Reilly](#) and her collecting Styrofoam, which thinks about the liveliness of plastic, a material that we tend to think of as very inert. Plastic almost appears, in many respects, in our everyday lives as a kind of absence. We tend not to see it, we're so used to it. So, it has been absorbed into our sensorium. And yet, plastic is an intensely lively material as well as a very long-lived one in the way in which it interacts with its environments. And so, diffractive poetics is a way of reading work like [Reilly's](#) that looks to explore that sense of liveliness and interactivity and connection that lies just behind that impression of absence and fixity.

**AD:** Yeah, that's wonderful. I really like your use of [\[Karen\] Barad's](#) “difference that makes a difference.” But it's interesting to me too, because that's also [Gregory Bateson's definition of the sign](#). But speaking of differences that make a difference, entanglements — your book explores the way in which these poems manifest and engage with all kinds of entanglements. At the end of your book, you also quote [\[W.H.\] Auden and his famous line, “poetry makes nothing happen.”](#) And I'm just wondering here, so at the end, thinking about the significance of these poets' work, and thinking about the Anthropocene also as a real kind of cultural question for us as a political issue as well. What do we do? What kind of activism is possible in the face of all that we have done, the anthropogenic pollution, what is the role here? Do you see the poets that you've been looking at and their engagement with entanglements, temporal entanglements, spatial entanglements, conceptual entanglements, do you see them as activists? Is activism the right word here? Or again, is there another way that you would characterize the work of these poems and poets, mindful, of course, as you point out of [Timothy Clarks' caution that ecocritics](#) tend to overestimate the role of culture and behavior change?

**DF:** Yeah, I think we must always be cautious about the claims we make for poetry. And I think [\[W.H.\] Auden's caution that “poetry makes nothing happen”](#) is a useful limit to put on maybe some more ambitious claims that we might make as ecocritics. But for me, poetry is about language. Any poem, regardless of what its subject might seem to be, is also thinking about language, thinking about poetry and what poetry is, what language does, how it works to create our sense of the world. And I think that's the contribution that poetry can make, however modest that might be. And I certainly don't think that it's poetry that's going to

save us. But I think when we do turn to poetry, we can find resources that help us to think about how we construct our sense of the world and how we construct our sense of the Anthropocenic world, how we reimagine our relationship with the planet and with deep time as well.

**AD:** That's right, I agree. I think that poetry offers us the ability to ask questions that we haven't asked before, to render legible that which is otherwise illegible in the various cultural contexts. And I think that sometimes, we get caught up in demanding the work of art somehow lead the revolution and turn it into some kind of policy that will give us the utopian world that we desire. But of course, it can't do that. Art doesn't do that. But art can provoke us to look at the world differently in a way that can enable us to ask questions that we haven't asked before or engage with marginalized perspectives and come to different conclusions of things and therefore, assist in building the world that we want. But yes, I take your point here about the way that entanglement is functioning. The poets that you're examining. You wrote this book, [Anthropocene Poetics](#), but you have also recently written another book called [Footprints](#), which is a nonfiction book that engages with a lot of the same subjects. How was the process of writing these books different for you?

**DF:** Yeah, so [Footprints](#), which has the subtitle, *In Search of Future Fossils*, is really an inquiry into what our traces will be in the very deep future and what will be left of us and how we lived in terms of the materials that we leave behind, the impression we leave in the rock record, the chemical traces and the reshaped world that we leave. And I wanted to really find ways to tell the story that I felt really passionate about. I really feel it's vital that we embrace our relationship with deep time, that we think about ourselves as having an impact on deep future. It's this question, how do we act as good ancestors is the fundamental question of our time. So, [Footprints](#) was a way to perhaps pose some of those same questions about our relationship with deep time and these very urgent questions about our relationship with deep time in ways that might draw in other kinds of constituencies of readers. Really, it's all about telling stories. Any of the future fossils that I look at in the book, whether it's what will be the fate of our cities, what will be the legacy of our nuclear waste, our plastic, our effect on biodiversity and on the oceans, it's all thinking about these legacies as stories, as things we will be remembered for. Our descendants will live in a world profoundly shaped by us, full of the traces of how we lived, our concrete, our plastic, our nuclear waste, our carbon in the atmosphere and so on. And they will find both that, that world is speaking a story about us back to them and they'll take that story and interpret it and tell it to themselves. So, I was really motivated by this question of how do we want to be remembered? We are creating all kinds of legacies for ourselves. What do we want those legacies to be?

**AD:** I was really struck by your book. It's a wonderful book. The way it's divided, the way it explores different stories around what might appear to be very particular objects or phenomena like roads, ice coral, nuclear waste, plastics, microbes, etc. And of course, you come away after reading the book with the connections between all of these things. But as I was reading your book as well, I couldn't help but think about the way in which my own experience writing [Anatomic](#) was a kind of experience with seeing footprints when, for example, I saw PCBs in my blood or DDT; these are chemicals that were banned in some cases, before I was born. But there they are. They are the footprints of previous generations that are in my body, and so, it made me think about the ways, are there other examples of footprints that humans bear or will bear as we go forward? Will our future relatives look back at us through bodies changed by our behavior? In some ways, we already do. The concept of the footprint became quite intimate to me as a function of the research that I've been doing.

**DF:** Yeah, fascinating. And I absolutely see the resonance between what you're doing in [Anatomic](#) and what I was doing in [Footprints](#). I think you're absolutely right to say that, that the body is at the center. You know, the vulnerability of bodies is right at the heart of this. I mean, in thinking about our relationship with deep time, we need to guard against that sense of that chilly overview. You know, that sense of an extrapolated perspective, where the individual, where life gets lost. I think it's absolutely essential to think about the most vulnerable bodies that are exposed to the devastations of the Anthropocene. So, yeah, the imprints of the Anthropocene on our bodies in all kinds of ways, whether it's bodies that are picking up the trace plastics that you write about, or bodies that are kind of front line of other kinds of currency — extreme weather or sea level rise and so on. But I think we also have to think about this in relation to our connection to future generations.

**AD:** In thinking about my own work and the way in which I have been focusing on my own body, using my own body as a kind of subject guinea pig for these experiments, I want to stress that I'm acutely aware of the way that my body is marked by certain demographic privileges. But I'm also interested in a strange sort of what I see as a kind of democratizing power of this form of pollution and biological colonization when I think about the chemicals, the microbes. It's important to recognize the chemical and microbial signatures may be different for distinct communities of people. And that is the case, but the chemicals and microbes are in all of us. But of course, I do not want to minimize the fact that social class, race, gender, all kinds of factors come into play, especially in terms of poverty and race, where people live. You know, people with less resources are more likely to live in more polluted parts of cities, neighborhoods, etc., or to suffer racism from governments in Canada. I did try to write a little bit about this in [Anatomic](#), and when I discovered mercury inside my body, it made me think

about my own relationship to mercury poisoning in Canada as a privileged, Southern settler in Ontario. I couldn't help but think about the way in which an Indigenous community in northwestern Ontario has been suffering mercury poisoning for 50 years, and successive governments have failed to respond to this. So, the chemicals and microbes are in all of us. But there are, of course, differences to think about here when it comes to privilege. And so, this is one of the challenges of my work. But I do think that there's something useful in terms of thinking about the body's biological processes, metabolic processes and the necessary connection between all of us, between our local metabolism and the global metabolism of the gene capital. And I think it's important to ask these kinds of questions, but it is also important to be mindful of necessary differences and questions of privilege as well.

**DF:** I think that's absolutely right. And it's true to say as well that, the kind of colonial legacies that you find written in the body now will be written in the body of the Earth in the deep future to come, the traces of colonial extraction, the legacies of empire are going to be written into the geological record. The stories that are told by our future fossils will, in part, there'll be stories of ingenuity, the fact that Earth was home to civilizations that could create such lasting monuments or materials, but they are stories of inequality as well. And they will be just as apparent and available to be interpreted for anyone who happens to be around and able to do so.

**AD:** Yeah, absolutely. I'm interested in thinking about this in terms of [McKenzie Wark](#), as is talked about in [Molecular Red](#) about the kinds of metabolic rifts that have been in global metabolic processes like global warming. The greenhouse effect is the result of a metabolic rift. Carbon dioxide is accumulating in the atmosphere. The nitrogen cycle, as you point out in your book, has been interrupted. The rifts have been introduced into various cycles. But you could also argue that socially, we also have metabolic rifts. Income inequality is a form of metabolic rift where capital is not distributed equally around the planet. I mean, obesity epidemic are another form of income inequality. I'm doing some research now on metabolism and trade deals. I discovered that after the first Canadian free trade deal in the mid-'80s, the caloric intake of Canadians went up by around 150 calories [\[170\]](#), according to [TheCounter.org](#) a day simply as a result of the different constituents in food products that resulted as a result of this free trade deal. So, the free trade deals affect bodies in all kinds of ways, including their metabolism. So, this was another example of a relationship between circulation of global capital and the rift that's happening there and the local rifts in our own personal, biological metabolism.

**DF:** It's fascinating. And I really look forward to seeing where you go with that. And it's really striking to me that — a point of common interest for both of us is

that sense of the immediacy of the Anthropocene, that we need to think of ourselves as Anthropocenic bodies, that the Anthropocene is not just a context that we engage with and then step away from. It's in us and through us, it's the situation that we are absorbed by. So, that really resonates with me, to think of ourselves as bodies of the Anthropocene or Anthropocenic bodies is a really important part of this imaginative shift that we need to undergo.

**AD:** That's right. Yeah. We're already products of this. I also found uranium in my blood. As I talked to the toxicologist about it, there are various possible sources for this. One of them would have been the fact that I spent the first 18 years of my life drinking water that came right out of the [Canadian Shield](#) where I grew up in Ontario, which would have uranium in it. But we couldn't rule out the possibility that some of that uranium reflects the fact that I am a child of the [Cold War as well, the nuclear tests](#) that happened around that time. Those signatures we also bear.

**DF:** That reminds me of something else that was really striking about the book, which, because it's such a personal book, [Anatomic](#), and an intimate one. I found it so powerfully inclusive because although everything was about what information is being drawn from your own body and particular to yourself, of course, that's a story that all of us would be able to tell in some sense or another. And it really spoke to me about the complexity of identification and address in the Anthropocene, this fraught sense of we that comes up again and again and beats around the Anthropocene who is included in that, who is excluded. And we always need to keep wrestling with the difficulty of that, because while it is a fraught endeavor to claim a kind of blanket identification, and it's all kinds of risks of erasure, we still need to be reaching out for connection, for a sense of commonality or collectivity. And the way in which your own story, which you very rigorously frame as one that is marked by certain kinds of demographic privileges, as you say, is still, in some sense, listening to my story and the story of people who live in very different kinds of demographic situations, as you said earlier. So, I was really struck by the way in which this very intimate collection is nonetheless, an extremely inclusive one at the same time.

**AD:** Thank you, David, for that, I appreciate those comments. I was aiming for that kind of complex entanglement. I mean, yes, of course, the book is about my body, but it's about all kinds of other things, too. It's about other bodies. It's about different kinds of temporalities. It's about the ways in which substances affect all of us. So, I'm mindful, of course, of the difficulty, the potential problems with assuming a kind of universality when it comes to these experiences. But intimacy or being able to offer a kind of intimate engagement with some of these questions I felt is all I could do or was what I wanted to do. I'm glad that that came through.

**DF:** So, which poets do you think are addressing the Anthropocene in the most interesting ways at the moment?

**AD:** I'm interested in [Brenda Hillman](#) who is doing some fantastic work, especially her tetralogy, about the classic life elements of air, water, earth and fire. [Angela Rawlings](#), the Canadian poet, a Canadian Icelandic American poet, her work on geopoetics as well as on sleep and lepidoptery. She does very interesting combinations between those two, which is sort of specifically attuned to multispecies' metabolic intersections, the kinds of things that interest me. [Harryette Mullen](#), I love her work. I especially love her experiments on a social, racial, ecological metabolism of the nonplace of the supermarket. That little chapbook of hers, a short poetry book of hers a few years ago, I think is just phenomenal. More recent writers, I would say, well, [Juliana Spahr's \*The Transformation\*](#), I think is an extraordinary book, a kind of ethnobotanical exploration of the cultural infection precipitated by immersion, the complex politics of Hawaii and 9/11. [Jen Bervin's recent book, \*Silk Poems\*](#). It's a nanoscale poetic work on a silk biosensor designed to be implanted as a metabolic monitoring device into a human body. So, she's written this little poem on this device that can be implanted. [Alexis Pauline Gumbs's book \*M Archive: After the End of the World\*](#), it metabolizes the energies and elements in the work of foundational, Black feminist [M. Jacqui Alexander](#) and turns this into a kind of speculative, postapocalyptic research project that examines the possibilities of being that exceed the human. I think it's a really fascinating book, sort of part novel, part poem. [Liz Howard](#), an Indigenous writer from Canada. Her book, [\*Infinite Citizen of the Shaking Tent\*](#), it's an amazing exploration of intersections between pollution, landscape and Indigenous identity. I love everything that [Dea Antonsen and Ida Bencke](#) are doing as part of the Laboratory for Aesthetics and Ecology out of Copenhagen and Berlin. [Morten Søndergaard's \*Sugar Poems\*](#) came out of that, which is an edible book that looks at the effects of sugar. [Karin Bolender's book \[chapter\], \*R.A.W. Assmilk Soap\*](#), which is a favorite of mine, explores how historical myths and memories are part of landscape and how those landscapes are, she says, "inextricably intertwined with the fleeting, unwritten, embodied blood vessels and mammary glands of many species." Basically, she made some soap out of ass, the milk from an ass that she lived with and developed a kind of practice that is both a writing and a kind of artisanal, soapmaking practice. Quite extraordinary, actually. I could go on and on. [Amanda Ackerman's \*The Book of Feral Flora\*](#), where she sort of develops a method of allowing plants to respond to electrical stimuli, to contribute to the poem, things like this. I'm sort of interested in the kind of multispecies, metabolic angles that writers are doing right now to respond to their contemporary historical moment. Those are just a few. There's all kinds, of course.

**DF:** And such an exciting time. Absolutely. I'd add just a couple of names to that. [Craig Santos Perez's ongoing \*From Unincorporated Territory\* series](#) is a really important body of work and becoming more so in its formal range and its attention to so many different related contexts in terms of climate change, colonialism and so on. And I was really struck recently just going back to lyric by [Sean Hewitt's new collection in terms of bio](#), which is very squarely in a kind of lyric tradition of [...] — the situation of a gay man in a landscape that is sometimes hostile but also awfully rich and giving and just beautiful, beautiful poems of a kind that I think don't come along very often.

**AD:** Absolutely. This sounds amazing. I'm going to have to check out that collection.

**DF:** It's great. Give it a go.

**AD:** In terms of contemporary writing, especially a lot of the theorizing around the Anthropocene, and art, a lot of it from what I can tell, maybe you disagree, I don't know, but it's been framed through approaches to visual art and thinking critically around visual art. And certainly, but you are taking a different approach, looking at writing, looking at poetics, which I think is a kind of emerging take on this. So, I was interested in your approach, your angle here through writing, but I was also intrigued by the fact that you begin each chapter with a discussion of visual art. Why is that? Why did you choose to feature art in that way in a book on poetics?

**DF:** Well, it's also where the book started. I mentioned earlier that this question of what does it mean to live enfolded by deep time was what kind of animated the project, but one of the things that provoked that question was that I photographed the artist [Ilana Halperin](#) boiling a pan milk in a geothermal lake in Iceland, and it's an image that is now actually the cover of [Anthropocene Poetics](#). It really spoke to me, this confluence of deep time and the intimate — the intimacy of this gesture of boiling a small pan of milk, and all of that summoned, associated with nurture, the quotidian, the everyday, the ordinariness of it really struck me. And it was from there that I began to think about what does it mean to live in intimacy with deep time? What are the implications of this in thinking about the Anthropocene and having started with a kind of visual prompt, a kind of a figure for framing these questions, it seemed to me a good way to move on and other artworks began to suggest themselves. The chapter on [Evelyn Reilly](#) and [Peter Larkin](#) is processed by an artwork by a Scottish artist called [Julia Barton](#), called [#LitterCube](#). And it's a massive, PET, strapping of marine waste that she gathered from beaches around Scotland and formed into a view that she displays alongside a kind of itemization of the chemical contents of what was the energy quotient of this in terms of its fossil fuel ingredients and so on. And it's a

really striking image. It's a brilliant, white cube of all these kind of tangled plastic threads and fibers against this dark black background. And it really spoke to me of that sense that plastic presents itself to us as this kind of black, this absence. But actually, it's a deeply rich and lively, amalgam material; the photograph really threw out that sense of the liveness behind that sense of the inert. And so, these visual figures just seem to act as prompts that really frame the initial concept and motivate the engagement with the poetry. But I think there's a lot of conversation between visual art and poetry, questioning what we pay attention to and how we pay attention to it, both of whom ask us to interrogate how and where we give our attention and our ways of suggesting pattern and relationship that we perhaps aren't always aware to.

**AD:** I thought that all of the works of art that you drew attention to in the book are extremely interesting. And even the last poet that you dealt with, [Christian Bök](#), the product of that is also a form of visual art. I know he's displayed the protein for the code that he's implanted into the microbe as a form of visual art. And certainly, the book is filled with all kinds of images. So, there's all kinds of interplay, obviously, between the poetics and visual art that you explore. Late in your book, David, you point out that an Anthropocene poetics must address “the knotty problem of love among knotted beings; the challenge of loving those creatures that seem to withdraw from or resist relation; the faceless, the swarming or the microscopic,” to quote you. This is such an interesting idea. How does something like our relationship with a faceless microbe, COVID-19, for example, have the swerve that we might say that it represents on so many different levels, how does it fit into this, if at all, in terms of thinking entanglement and the challenge, I suppose, of loving those creatures that seem to withdraw from or resist relation?

**DF:** Yeah, that definitely does seem like a sentence and a sentiment out of the pre-pandemic past, doesn't it — a knotty problem of loving COVID-19. Well, of course, I don't think we can or should in the conventional sense. But what I think love means here is a kind of acknowledgment and an embracing of our interwovenness, the fact of our being kin with all kinds of life forms that we don't really think of as kin. And it's not necessarily a kind of warm feeling towards an unwelcome microbe that has, as you say, kind of swerved so dramatically into all of our lives. But I think we are where we are with the pandemic because of the way in which we have treated the natural world.

**AD:** Notwithstanding all of the horrible things that are happening as a result of the pandemic, hopefully, in the future we might look back and see this as an opportunity to, in fact, love ourselves and our environments differently. Maybe something will emerge out of this, a different kind of social arrangement, a different kind of relationship with our environment, a different relationship with

public health, if nothing else, perhaps. Where we start to value things and realize the things that we took for granted, for example, front-line workers, all of those people doing tasks that we would otherwise consider to be quite menial. These are important people, and they deserve respect. They deserve support. And so, this kind of realignment of priorities, of resources, if this can emerge from the pandemic, then perhaps that will be a good thing. Right? I mean, that story, of course, remains to be written. We won't know, you know. COVID-19 as a kind of swerve, as a kind of clinamen is an opportunity for a remaking of kin, if you like, in the world right now, where we can create different kinds of relationships and value things that we haven't been valuing that we should be.

**DF:** [Arundhati Roy said something very similar, I think a few months ago at the very start of the pandemic that, you know, it's a portal to another world;](#) it's a threshold. And I think absolutely, if we can see our way to rethink what we value, who we value, how we express that and some good can come out of this awful situation. I think really, we can't afford not to, we can't afford to fall back into the way things were. The world has changed. The pandemic has altered how we travel, how we work. Some of these changes will be permanent. And any attempt to just kind of recoup a former status quo will just lead to more destruction. We need to embrace the change that has come.

**AD:** We need new stories, we need new narratives.

**DF:** We do.

**AD:** The poetry, I suppose, remains to be written.

**DF:** Nothing's written in stone or what I want to say is that there are many futures foretold, but we still have a chance to determine the kind of world that we're going to live in and the one that we'll leave behind and we need to embrace that opportunity before it really is too late.

**AD:** Well, thank you, David. It's been an absolute pleasure talking to you.

**DF:** Thank you. Yeah, I really enjoyed that. Thanks, Adam.

**Host altro:** For more information, please visit [z.umn.edu/poetics](https://z.umn.edu/poetics).

*This interview has been lightly edited and condensed for clarity.*