

Editor's Note

Anthropocene Humanities and the Institute of Body & Culture

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The Institute of Body & Culture, established in 2007, will focus its research efforts beginning in 2024 on the pressing question, "How should we live in the Anthropocene era?" The institute has put forth the following statement of purpose for the agenda of Anthropocene Humanities:

1. Necessity and Timeliness

Humanity has perennially existed amid crises. The history of civilization represents a continual response to environmental challenges. Yet, the realization that human actions can induce ecological crises is a relatively recent acknowledgment. More dramatically recent is the awareness that the Earth, which provides the backdrop for all human activity, might collapse. Historical collapses of civilizations and nations notwithstanding, humans have always harbored the hope that nature would welcome them back. However, with the dawn of the Anthropocene, this belief system faces considerable uncertainty. Questions such as "Is it truly feasible to restore the ecosystem's health?" and "How should we navigate life in this era?" abound. Although diverse questions, answers, and propositions exist, it is incontrovertible that they all ultimately address the concerns of the Anthropocene.

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Faced with the unparalleled challenges of the Anthropocene, what role can the humanities play? Some contend that the humanities are incapable of providing 'direct' solutions to geological shifts such as climate change, biodiversity loss, resource depletion, environmental pollution, and ocean acidification. They argue that the resolution should lie with the hard sciences that engage with matter and nature, rather than the so-called soft sciences like the humanities. However, in the age of the Anthropocene, no field is more vital than the humanities. The Anthropocene underscores that the crisis was not precipitated by scientific power per se, but by the human ideologies and desires that excessively exploited Earth's resources and compromised its health. The Anthropocene demands a significant paradigm shift from anthropocentrism to geocentrism in human thought and desires.

It is not only humans who seek health and happiness—all living beings on Earth strive for survival and prosperity. The Earth itself can be deemed healthy or sick, and it constitutes a network of cyclical relationships where myriad plants and animals exist interdependently. Humans are not the sovereigns of this Earth, nor the masters of all creation; rather, they are participants in its ecosystem. The Anthropocene suggests that the existing order and balance of this Earth community have been disrupted. The root of this disruption is anthropocentrism, which justified the unfettered exploitation and consumption of Earth's resources for human benefit. We now find ourselves at a juncture where breaking free from this destructive cycle of civilization is imperative in order to embrace ecological symbiosis and co-evolution.

Historically, the humanities have explored how humans can coexist with others, highlighting our inherent nature as social animals. However, in the Anthropocene era, the humanities must seek co-evolution not only with humans but with all non-human beings residing on Earth. Due to climate change, the units of life have expanded from societies to encompass the entire Earth, including the biosphere, the atmosphere, and the ecological sphere. Since Earth and humans are engaged in an inseparable cyclical relationship, human activities impact Earth's body, and Earth's changes, in turn, influence changes in the human body. Activities such as eating, drinking, and consuming, and our discourses and thoughts about Earth, exert performative effects on the planet. The interconnectedness between Earth and humans is more pronounced than ever before. Therefore, the humanities in the 21st century must evolve into Anthropocene humanities.

This Anthropocene humanities research presents a political, social, educational, and ethical framework and study on how we can lead fulfilling lives amid the uncertain future posed by climate change. The research acknowledges that humans, as inhabitants of Earth, are deeply intertwined with non-human entities and must co-evolve with them. If climate change is largely a product of a human-centric imagination and desires, then resolving this crisis requires a shift to a post-human-centric imagination and a desire for coexistence. Our actions towards Earth are shaped by our perceptions of it.

2. Purpose and Goals

The term "Anthropocene" denotes a period in which human activity exerts a destructive impact on Earth's ecosystems and geology, leading to extreme, unpredictable, and uncontrollable conditions characterized by climate change and ecosystem degradation. The natural crisis has been a subject of consistent discourse since the mid-20th century, with ecosystem restoration emerging as a mission of the era. However, the crisis signified by the Anthropocene represents an unprecedented and monumental challenge, exceeding previous human conceptions and inducing a sense of helplessness and panic, as short-term and localized solutions prove inadequate. In the face of this crisis, humanity could either become complacent or seek momentary relief by consuming crisis-themed entertainment, akin to apocalyptic movies and discourses. The humanities can guide us in navigating this loss of direction by transforming the abstract and vague challenges of the Anthropocene into tangible existential issues that require ethical and political decisions and actions by individuals.

To this end, this project aims to:

- 1) Foster symbiosis and co-evolution between humans and non-human entities to rehabilitate Earth's endangered ecosystems. This will involve acknowledging the existence, rights, and agency of all beings and incorporating non-human entities as stakeholders in ecological discussions. Here, truth is not merely an abstract concept but a matter of survival and sustainability.
- 2) Show that humanistic discourse can have real-world material impacts and influence. For instance, it is not only plastic that contributes to environmental pollution. Social awareness and discourse surrounding this issue, such as environmental protection movements and consumerism,

interact to either amplify or mitigate pollution levels. Indeed, discourse exerts an ecological impact that is comparable to that of technology, machines, and labor.

3) Concrete theoretical research on ethical practice explores questions of "how we should live" in our daily lives. Changes in daily practices contribute to transformations in the Earth's ecological environment.

4) It is crucial to disseminate research findings broadly to the public and leverage them in educational settings for practical applications. This entails developing courses on the Anthropocene at universities and publishing essential textbooks.

5) Offering education, consulting, and content to local governments and public institutions is vital for effective implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The initiatives by local governments, established in 2017, have so far proven to be ineffective.

3. Distinctive Features

The term "Anthropocene" leans more towards being an "essentially contested concept," a term coined by W.B. Gallie, rather than possessing a clear connotation and denotation. When atmospheric chemist and Nobel laureate Paul Crutzen first introduced the term in 2000, it highlighted the impact of the industrial revolution, particularly accelerated by the advent of the steam engine, on the ecosystem. However, since its introduction, a multitude of perspectives, theories, and opinions have emerged, disputing the definition and initiation of the Anthropocene. This debate has stretched beyond its initial geological scope to include scientific, philosophical, social, and civilizational dimensions. In this context, the researcher will avoid discussing issues such as the starting point of the Anthropocene, its formal recognition as a geological epoch by the International Commission on Stratigraphy, environmental shifts and ecosystem effects as noted in IPCC reports, or social and economic impacts outlined in the Brundtland report. Instead, the focus will be on reviewing prior cultural and humanistic research and commenting on the distinctiveness and originality of this study.

Most experts concur that we are experiencing a period of profound turmoil that could culminate in human extinction, despite the denial of climate change by

figures like. From this perspective, Anthropocene pessimists highlight numerous crises, including biodiversity loss, resource depletion, climate change, rising sea levels, expansion of plastic debris, and growing incidence of pandemics as contributing factors. Conversely, Anthropocene optimists believe these crises can be adequately addressed through scientific advancements such as renewable energy, energy storage technologies, carbon capture, and utilization processes. They also investigate the potential for environmentally friendly agriculture and forestry practices. This research team distances itself from both Anthropocene pessimists and optimists. While acknowledging the importance of science and technology, the team argues that we must be cautious of the anthropocentrism inherent in such approaches. However, this does not mean that the research team aligns with the pessimists. We do not agree with alarmists who claim that if the average global temperature rises about 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, we will reach an "irreversible point." We believe that overemphasizing the crisis does not help in resolving it. Instead, the research team adopts methodological optimism.

The research team aims to find practical pathways for a desirable transformation to tackle the challenges of the Anthropocene. We will contextualize the Anthropocene within South Korea and integrate it into our daily lives, requiring changes in our energy consumption habits. To address this, we will narrativize the Anthropocene as part of our everyday experiences rather than a distant concept. Constructing narratives is crucial; they include protagonists, settings, actions, crises, resolutions, and objectives, shaping the story. We will recognize plants and animals as equally important agents alongside humans, understanding that narratives shape our worldviews and lifestyle choices. By attributing agency to non-human entities, we aim to foster a more inclusive and balanced perspective on our ecological interactions, promoting sustainable living and deeper appreciation of the interconnectedness between all forms of life. This approach challenges the traditional human-centric narrative, emphasizing the significance of all living beings in shaping our environment and influencing our choices.

The following features characterize this attempt to personify the Anthropocene in everyday life:

- The problem with the term Anthropocene:

Who or what constitutes the "human" in Anthropocene? The term Anthropocene, while homogenizing humans into a single category, potentially dilutes the geometric, ethnic, and economic diversities

among humans, thereby dispersing responsibility. To counter this, various alternative terminologies will be explored.

- The paradox of climate inequality:

Wealthier nations or social classes, due to their excessive consumption of resources and heightened environmental pollution, face relatively lower exposure to its detrimental effects. Disproportionately, the damage concentrates in socially vulnerable and low-income regions, exacerbating existing social disparities such as economic, health, and ecological inequalities. Research will focus on strategies to address and mitigate the escalation of these inequalities.

- Imbalance between humans and non-humans:

The concept of the Anthropocene signifies the detrimental legacy left by a human-centered civilization, which has led to the destruction of wild habitats, diminished biodiversity, and disrupted ecological food chains, culminating in the extinction of numerous species. To amend this broken ecosystem, efforts in post-human humanities will concentrate on recognizing the rights and agency of non-human entities and fostering a co-evolutionary and coexistent approach.

- The need for a new educational program:

The prevalent crisis in climate habits can largely be attributed to current educational models, which are human-centered, hierarchical, quantitative, and primarily abstract and delivery-oriented, thus unsuitable for the Anthropocene era. There will be a pivot toward project-based learning modalities, which encourage experiential understanding of the Earth's crisis, cooperative dynamics between educators and learners, and emphasis on tangible examples and practices.

4. Relevance to Previous Research Conducted by the Institute

Founded in 2007, the Institute for Body Culture Research was initiated to facilitate interdisciplinary study of various cultural phenomena concerning the human body. Engaging scholars from literature, cultural philosophy, history,

feminism, philosophy of science, psychoanalysis, sociology, and law, it has sustained continuous research outputs through seminars, conferences, and publications. Initially focusing on cultural interpretations of the body, the Institute has, over time, embraced studies in posthumanism and new materialism, recently concentrating its efforts on Anthropocene research, thereby extending its insights from the human to the Earth's body.

This transition aligns with broader academic trends in posthumanism and new materialism, signaling a significant shift in focus at our institute. Initially exploring the body as a cultural phenomenon, we encountered limitations and shifted towards examining the materiality of the body and its ecological context. This mirrors Maurice Merleau-Ponty's shift from early phenomenology to the ontology of flesh, where distinctions between human and non-human dissolve. Inspired by Stacy Alaimo's trans-corporeality, Jane Bennett's volatile matter, and Karen Barad's intra-action, we have hosted seminars, published related works, and collaborated with Konkuk University's Anthropocene Humanities Group, culminating in annual international conferences and the establishment of the International Journal of Body, Nature, and Culture.

Continuing in this vein, our institute has launched various initiatives to integrate posthumanist and new materialist perspectives into our understanding of the Anthropocene. We aim to emphasize the interconnectedness of human and non-human entities and the complex interrelations that define our existence within the Earth's ecosystems. Our research underscores the importance of recognizing the agency of non-human actors and the need for a holistic approach to addressing the ecological crises of our time. Through ongoing collaborations and interdisciplinary projects, we strive to contribute valuable insights and solutions to the pressing challenges posed by the Anthropocene.

5. Research Methods and Content

Since the mid-2010s, our team has shifted from focusing solely on the individual body to studying the materiality of the body within its ecological context, adopting posthumanism and new materialism as core methodologies. This shift marks a departure from traditional humanism and signifies the transition from the Holocene to the Anthropocene. Through this transition, we have recognized that humans are materially interconnected with non-humans and that both can act as agents. Our Anthropocene humanities proposal leverages posthumanism and new

materialism to effectively address the Anthropocene crisis. The Anthropocene is characterized by the significant impact of human activities on Earth's ecosystem. Methodologically, this research highlights the causal relationship between humans and the Earth, portraying humans as agents and the Earth as the affected environment. This paradigm suggests humans have the power to either destroy or preserve the Earth. However, this view overlooks that humans are not external agents but integral parts of the Earth's system, embodying the concept of being-in-the-world (Dasein). Thus, activity and passivity, agent and object, are complexly intertwined. The Anthropocene challenges the modern separation of humans from non-humans, culture from nature, and mind from body. Posthumanism and new materialism are robust methodologies for understanding the Anthropocene, emphasizing the interplay between human and non-human factors and proposing co-evolution within an entangled ecosystem. These methodologies offer several advantages. 1) They provide a comprehensive understanding of the interconnectedness of humans and non-humans. 2) They move beyond traditional human-centric thought. 3) They propose solutions for co-evolution within a multifaceted ecosystem.

- -Moving beyond anthropocentrism: Posthumanism facilitates a departure from human-centric perspectives by underscoring the symbiotic relationship between humans and non-human entities, offering a nuanced understanding of human impacts on the broader ecosystem.
- -Reevaluating the interplay between technology and humans: Posthumanism explores how technology interfaces with humans and nature, highlighting ethical dimensions and enhancing social acceptability while considering environmental degradation's effects on living organisms.
- -Highlighting the active role of matter: New materialism asserts that matter is not inert but actively engages in processes, showing how non-human elements (climate, geology, ecosystems) react to and shape human activities.
- -Understanding complex interactions: New materialism emphasizes the intricate relationships between human and non-human elements, moving from simplistic causal analyses to recognizing sophisticated interaction networks, fostering sustainable coexistence with nature.

- -Narratives of non-human agents: New materialism and posthumanism attribute agency to non-human materials, viewing them as entities with their own narratives. Recognizing the agency of objects like plastic and granite challenges the dichotomy between living and non-living, acknowledging the vitality of matter and enhancing our appreciation of environmental interactions.