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Symposium Reading Response on “Anarky”

In “Anarky,” Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Professor of English at the George Washington University discusses the conceptualization of the Anthropocene. Cohen admits that during the Anthropocene, human time and geological time find their confluence, marking an age where the two very different temporalities find common ground. Though the confluence of the two mark the Anthropocene, Cohen notes this chapter focuses on a vorticular reading of human and geological history. He defines vortices as “disjunct histories in contiguity binding lines into curved motions, a model of temporality that does not discreetly sediment into discreet layers” (Cohen 26). Cohen argues that the Anthropocene as it is currently defined is flawed. By constructing time linearly, it limits progress and stifles dealing with Anthropogenic climate change.

Throughout the paper, Cohen discusses the characterization of the Anthropocene. He admits that it is straight and narrow and spends the bulk of paper arguing for the reframing of historical and natural time. He believes the Anthropocene is flawed and does not accurately tell the store of anthropogenic climate change as it is narrow and stifled in its linearity. Given that the Anthropocene does tend to smooth over edges and erases meaningful differences, I agree with this assessment and see reconceptualizing the Anthropocene as necessary. Cohen reinforces my agreeance, when, in the paper, he works to reinforce the belief that the Anthropocene needs to be viewed as vorticular.

Throughout the chapter, Cohen discusses the way historical narratives are etched into human and natural time, periodization and stratigraphy being the vehicle of choice. Cohen then discusses how the two have affected how history is viewed for each field and begins to critically analyze how viewing things linearly impacts the Anthropocene. Cohen ends his analysis of the Anthropocene and the conceptualization of time by discussing why we must see time vorticularly. His argument is compelling, by noting that even the Americas before Columbus was undergoing Anthropocene related changes and by dating the Anthropocene as a period, it wipes away these histories. This is a common critique of the Anthropocene, as it happens to lump all people together, disregarding history, ethnicity, and even class. Vorticular reading places the Anthropocene around the history of humanity and the natural world but Cohen notes that a complete break with human history and deep time is not necessary, which helps makes his argument more palatable. He even uses the story of Noah's Ark as an example of Gyred (vortice) reading, to demonstrate that the theory has credence.

Cohen suggests that the Anthropocene hopes to bring humanity together with the natural world and all parts of it. This unity is in the face of contemporary ecological challenges. The Anthropocene eliminates the need for human and historical differences due to the way time is conceptualized. Cohen critiques the Anthropocene as being a "failed encompassing: a heterogenous yet vibrant tempestuousness that attempts completion of its circuits finds its course altered." This suggests that as long as humanity continues to make light of mundane differences, the Anthropocene epoch will never reach totality. Though a popular conclusion about the Anthropocene, Cohen argues that the Anthropocene will not reach totality because it might not be a time period. Cohen poses the question, "What if the Anthropocene names not a period, which relies on linear, stadial, punctual notions of temporality but a whorl" (Cohen, 38)? Cohen

urges caution in how we classify the Anthropocene and how we view it in relation to time, even suggesting that humanity may never know the origin of the Anthropocene and that it might not even be as important as the problems that are arising from it.

Cohen's chapter is illuminating to say the least. He argues that the way time is currently conceptualized is ineffective in how we study and combat the Anthropocene. Cohen argues that instead of viewing human and Geological time as a line, it should be considered to be a whorl. Though time flows linearly, inklings of the Anthropocene can be seen throughout humanity's history. Cohen's belief that the Anthropocene can be seen as a vortice, containing disjunct pieces that tell the story of the Earth and humanity, telling the story of Anthropogenic climate change is fair. By viewing the Anthropocene outside of how we normally conceptualize time can be beneficial.

Instead of trying to frame the Anthropocene in terms humanity can understand, Cohen's argument calls for dismantling the Anthropocene, citing it as a failure that will never reach totality. Cohen's most startling belief is that the Anthropocene is not even a period, but a whorl, again falling back onto his idea that the Anthropocene should be conceptualized through a vorticular mode of thought. Cohen's conceptualization of the Anthropocene as being a whorl is articulate and well documented. By changing how we view the Anthropocene, there is consideration for the longstanding relationship humanity has had with the natural world and moves away from seeing it as an epoch that describes Anthropogenic woes. By limiting how we read the past and present, the Anthropocene limits specific and necessary differences, both human and historical, and how they have contributed to Anthropogenic climate woes. By reconceptualizing the Anthropocene, there is space for a middle ground to exist, one that

constitutes the unconformities that are not seen as part of the Anthropocene, but may tell a major part of the story.