

# Chapter 11

## Anthropocentric Poetry: Arts-Based Research for a New Era

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter draws on a range of empirical arts-based projects and publications to explore how poetry helps us think about the limitations of human intentionality as curriculum design in the Anthropocene, in spaces of both formal and informal or public learning. The chapter sketches a chronology of arts-based research more broadly, and also specifically in relation to education, and includes examples of the author's widely published research poetry to demonstrate the evolution of this form of inquiry.*

*Disclaimer: This chapter may contain language that is profane, offensive, or colorful, especially in its poetry.*

### INTRODUCTION: DEFINING THE ANTHROPOCENE

Dating the beginnings of the proposed geological epoch of the Anthropocene is contentious. Some date it from the Industrial Revolution in the West, and others more recently, from the early, mid or late twentieth century. No matter which commencement date is correct, arts-based research in education is a Post-Industrial Revolution concept, appearing and evolving in the late twentieth century, as a subset of arts-based research, itself a subset of the broader paradigm of qualitative research. This evolution has continued into the twenty-first century, forming and reforming in

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the literature of the discipline, like a brief trace of sediment in the earth. Arts-based research has always taken place in the Anthropocene. As the word “Anthropocene” has become more commonly used, even prior to its official acceptance as part of the Geological Time Scale, arts-based research has also become more mainstream, and yet also under more intense attack from positivism.

This chapter sketches a general chronology (recognising this in itself as a humanist endeavour of ordering and managing time via human systems) of arts-based educational research in the Anthropocene, understood as a proposed geological epoch during which human activity has had an extraordinary impact on the actual matter of the planet, including both the strata of the Earth, and its atmosphere. I will also, however, incorporate a second definition: that of the Anthropocene as the period in which we have become aware of this impact, and what it might mean for the future. While the Anthropocene may have begun more than a century ago, humans have only recently become aware of this theory and begun using it to make sense of the enormous changes we face. So as well as taking place in the Anthropocene, educational research may now also be used to interrogate how human society and environment are constituted and understood in this recent period of heightened awareness, during which the label ‘Anthropocene’ has been widely adopted.

This “chronology” of a fabulously varied field is inevitably only partial, biased and even personal, as my own interests have guided my reading and research; these interests are particularly in poetry as a way to research curriculum design. This chapter makes no claim to mastery of a field, but provides a general account of how arts-based research has evolved, and suggests its potential for use in the Anthropocene. There are excellent recent resources that give much fuller histories of arts-based research in the social sciences (Jacobsen et al., 2014; Kara, 2015) and even specifically in education (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008), but the particular focus I take here is on how entities such as the human, or the planet, are conceptualised in arts-based research in the context of the Anthropocene, of living in an age in which we have become aware of enormity of how human activities have changed the world. This context also includes critiques of the arrogance and hu/man-centric limitations of the humanism that has underpinned White, Western or Northern projects of formal education since the Enlightenment.

In this more self-aware stage of the Anthropocene, post-label, even as we recognise our impact on the fabric of the Earth, we recognise the dominance of the figure of the human in educational research paradigms. Arts-based research is both guilty of this and also poised to help find ways to shift us out of this human male body-shaped armour around knowledge, and its attendant privileging of discourse, resulting from the Cartesian mind/body split. How can we put arts-based concepts to work to imagine an education that does something other than create better (Whiter, more male, more able-bodied, more elite, more adult, more *human*) entities? If education

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