Anthropocene Unseen

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Here we are now, exposed to the Anthropocene. Within an Anthropocenic logic, we are exposed to ourselves. Human-induced environmental change at a global scale has hopelessly exposed everyone and everything to grave danger. No outside! No shelter! Such lamentations conjure the origins of the concept of environment: eighteenth-century Western Europe, when industrialization, built upon colonial resource extraction, got this Anthropocenic ball rolling.

Let’s think through exposure in three broad, cumulative strokes, situated in an industrialized world as it shifted over time and space and as the constitution of exposure, the self, and outsides and insides shifted along with it. We find: (1) permeating exposure emerging in eighteenth-century European industrialization, when selves and places were predicated on constant interrelation and when the experience of shelter underwent profound transformation; (2) particulate exposure ascending in the mid- to late nineteenth century in well-resourced Euro-American locales, when intensified industrialization made or-
organisms into bounded selves that weren’t necessarily altered by their external exposures; and (3) Anthropocenic exposure arising in the present moment, when exposure amid industrial destruction is both impossible to prevent and self-altering. These three exposures are not metaphorical: they name differently situated historical-material realities (Landecker 2011). Nor were they everywhere at once — that is, until maybe now.

Permeating Exposure

Derived from a Latin root, expose means to put out, but what out was, and is, must not be taken for granted. Vladimir Janković (2010), one of the only historians of exposure, tells us that it predates environment. It was the eighteenth-century British way to live the in and the out. Bodies lived in acknowledged relation to the world around them, shaped by them through and through (Rosenberg 1979; Temkin 1977). In this period in Britain, as well as Western Europe more broadly, health was a social asset that could be augmented, protected, and dissipated, reflecting the notion that vulnerability came from sunbeams and moisture, and also from insults and voyeuristic eyes. Sickness, especially for the wealthy and delicate, came from limited bodily capacity to ward off the effects of the permeating outside world.

This management of permeating exposure paved the way for environment to embed class distinctions from the very beginning. British middle-class domestic interiors, new in an industrializing economy, brought with them what we now call “first world” problems of increased anxiety about external influences. Recall Jane Austen’s heroines, who survived storm exposure by convalescing from chills in well-appointed homes. Environment became a new way not only to describe physical location, but also to draw distinctions between the pathology ascribed to ambient change and the achievement of healthy, ambient uniformity indoors. These descriptions were made possible through new industrial commodities like heavy draperies and cleaning products used by invisibilized servants. Distinctions were also
maintained through worrying about the chaotic and unhealthy environments of the poor (Janković 2010).

**Particulate Exposure**

Think of the mid- to late nineteenth century as the beginning of the period (which extends into the present) when industrial prosperity provided some people with the experience of individuality — as isolated particulates that remained constant despite contact with other particulates (Keller 2010). These individuals, insensitive and impermeable to external conditions, were hearty, rational, masculine actors who could operate unaffected by the world around them. Almost everyone, though, even the irrational and easily influenced, came under an external threat from germs — newly experienced particulates that made people sick without fundamentally transforming the self (Rosenberg 1979).

Alongside industrial prosperity, the bacteriological revolution (germs) shifted the relation between bodies and places. The scale of industrial manufacture harnessed and produced microbes, antimicrobes, and other chemicals, dispersing them into the environment — now a proper entity — as if these particulates would have no lasting effect on individuals or the world (Landecker 2016). It became possible to talk about voluntary and involuntary exposure, a distinction previously unimaginable as exposures could only be managed, not banished (Mitman, Murphy, and Sellers 2004). Particulate exposure benefited greatly from what I have called “infrastructures of individualism” (Roberts 2014) such as transportation, waste, postal, and educational systems, unseen supports delivering impermeability to the surrounding world.

These individuated bodies susceptible to, but defensible against, individuated particulates persist in the recent text *Exposure Science: Basic Principles and Applications*. The authors define exposure as “a person’s contact with the concentration of a material before and after it crosses a boundary (nose, skin or mouth) between the human and the environment over an
interval of time leading to a potential biological effective dose" (Lioy and Weisel 2014, 17). The scientific measurement of exposure, then, focuses on a single particulate signal, which facilitates “a learned inattention to other noise” (Murphy 2004, 267). Exposure science and the expososome, which attempts to model exposure as the cumulative measure of the sum total of the life of an organism (see Miller 2014), assume first, the discreteness of bodies from environments and individual bodies from particulates, and second, the maintenance of a constant self despite exposure.

Anthropocenic Exposure

While the expososome continues to conjure clear particulate boundaries, late-industrial collapse (Fortun 2012) produces a refreshed horror at our own permeability. This horror informs the epigenome and microbiome, both entangled in the co-construction of permeable organisms and environments (Jirtle and Skinner 2007; Jostins et al. 2012). The self is now alterable: we may not be protected by antibiotics or heavy draperies.

You may have surmised by now that this we, those living within particulate exposure, were and are particular in their particulateness. In my current work in Mexico City, with working-class people enrolled in a long-term chemical exposure study, I find little expectation of impermeability (Roberts 2017). I also find that the Anthropocenic headline proclaiming inextricable human-environment entanglement is not news among people living in a post-NAFTA, War on Drugs world that exceeds their control (Roberts 2015). Nor do they share in a particulate anxiety about, for instance, baby bottle BPA (Bisphenol A), since they live with a constant permeating insecurity at bodily, not molecular, scales.

The particulate exposure of unregulated industrialization that allowed some to live as impermeable exposed all to the Anthropocene. Nevertheless, an embrace of Anthropocenic exposure proclaiming almost gleefully that we are all hopefully
exposed all the time has its limits (Alaimo 2016). We could make more shelter for all by reactivating efforts, as with permeating exposure, to manage the insides and outsides, as well as acknowledging that exposure burdens have never been equally shared (Agard-Jones 2016).

References


Mitman, Gregg, Michelle Murphy, and Christopher Sellers, eds. 2004. *Landscapes of Exposure: Knowledge and Illness in Modern Environments.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.


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