

**After Nature**  
**A Workshop on Dipesh Chakrabarty's**  
**"The Climate of History: Four Theses"**

Rachel  
Carson  
Center

**26 February–1 March, University of South Carolina, USA**

**Conveners:** Tom Lekan, University of South Carolina/RCC, Rob Emmett, Rachel Carson Center, LMU Munich, Germany

**Participants:** Jessica Barnes (University of South Carolina), Carol Boggs (University of South Carolina), Dipesh Chakrabarty (University of Chicago), Josh Eagle (University of South Carolina), Carol Hee (Duke University), Tim Lecain (RCC/Montana State University, History), John Meyer (RCC/Humboldt State University), Dan Richter (Duke University), Lisa Sideris (RCC/Indiana University), Laura Watt (Sonoma State University), Alexa Weik von Mossner (RCC/Universität Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt), Lori Ziolkowski (University of South Carolina)

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Special guest at this conference was **DIPESH CHAKRABARTY**, whose seminal essay "The Climate of History: Four Theses" (2009) argued that it is necessary to rethink our understanding of history in an age in which humans have become a geophysical force that is fundamentally changing our planet. The hypothesis that we are living in a new geological age known as the Anthropocene has become the subject of increasing attention, and the conference aimed to revisit Chakrabarty's call for a truly interdisciplinary approach to dealing with the challenges of global change. Held at the Center for History at the University of South Carolina and co-organized by the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society in Munich, the conference opened with a discussion of Chakrabarty's "Four Theses." Three doctoral candidates in different fields of study responded to the implications of the theses for their work in history museum studies (**KATIE CROSBY**), African-American politics and histories of environmental justice (**ROBERT GREENE**), and literary criticism (**VICTORIA CHANDLER**, presented in absentia). Subsequently, an audience of over 300 attended Chakrabarty's plenary lecture on "The Human Condition in the Anthropocene," which sketched further arguments on how the natural scientific evidence for the Anthropocene requires us to reconsider our approach to history.

On Friday, participants convened in a panel format. Three of the panels engaged more-or-less directly with Chakrabarty's four theses on climate and history. The first panel both foregrounded

and enacted “Breaching the Divide: Human and Natural Histories,” with biologist **CAROL BOGGS** presenting human niche construction as a primary biological behavior of our species that leads to the global anthropogenic environmental change; the loss of other species is an indicator that we are living in the Anthropocene. Cultural anthropologist **JESSICA BARNES** spoke about her work with farmers in Egypt and the perceptual gap between expert science of “global climate” and farmers’ local knowledge of the politics of irrigation on the Nile. When field crops suffer from water shortages, water politics and farmers’ practices mediate more than mitigating or adapting to climate regimes. **JOSH EAGLE** argued that legal structures built around water and air pollution regulation provide an already existing governance framework to address global change in the Anthropocene—an abstract schema that always incorporates the human factor in its recognition of nature. The subsequent discussion considered why the division between human and natural history exists in the first place, and how this developed over time. Chakrabarty sketched a trajectory from Vico to Lyell’s study of landforms and then to Durkheim’s retrospective critique of the nineteenth century’s category “society” as one that bracketed off human history from religious or deep time.

The papers in the second panel, “Politics and Practice,” looked critically at the idea that the Anthropocene must “severely qualify” humanist histories of modernity and globalization. **LORI ZIOLKOWSKI** questioned whether radioactive soil strata left by twentieth-century nuclear tests will persist long enough to appear as a clear signal for dating a new epoch. **JOHN MEYER** examined how and whether the vision of a “Politics in and of the Anthropocene” offers a truly new and effective approach to collective politics. **LAURA WATT** described how the global scale of human impact on biological systems does not always translate well into transformative pedagogy—might the advent of the Anthropocene drive more ambitious educational experiments and dramatic change? **CAROL HEE** proposed that corporations are better positioned to take actions on the scale and speed necessary to address the confluence of crises indexed by the Anthropocene concept, but only when they move “beyond corporate sustainability.”

**DAN RICHTER, LISA SIDERIS, and ALEXA WEIK VON MOSSNER** offered a wide-ranging set of papers considering how and why narrative form becomes particularly significant for expressing the ways in which Anthropocene framing pushes the limits of historical understanding. Richter emphasized the need for georgic narratives, stories about communities that rebuild and adapt to long-term change, such as the the US Southeast, where two centuries of Euro-American habitation have led to long-term soil erosion. Sideris took on the moral dimension of Anthropocene thinking as an extension of earlier natural sciences-dominated (though normative) discourse around global environmental change, from E. O. Wilson’s consilience concept to the proponents of the “good Anthropocene.” Weik von Mossner took up narrative in two other dimensions: using

cognitive studies of films, she offered a critique of the efficacy of climate narratives for social change; and through analysis of climate fictions and media, she posed questions about the future of Anthropocene cultures.

A final panel featured comments by **TIM LECAIN** and a response from **DIPESH CHAKRABARTY**. LeCain endorsed Chakrabarty's call for historians and humanists to engage with the Anthropocene. He suggested that new materialist scholarship, with its emphasis on ontology, can provide useful insights: for example, recent work on the mining and fossil fuels connects materials, political systems, and habits of mind (e.g., linking the rise of liberal democracy with fossil fuel extraction), which suggests a great need for Anthropocene-scale historical thinking. Chakrabarty's concluding comments circled back to phenomenology and responded in particular to the critique of Anthropocene discourse as itself repeating familiar tropes of novelty and rupture.

An afternoon forum on the "Future of Environmental Humanities" featured a conversation with **CAROL BOGGS** and **ROB EMMETT**. Boggs spoke about campus initiatives at Stanford that brought together research communities and nearby landscape management projects with the goal of preserving endangered species. Emmett presented insights from his work at the Rachel Carson Center in Munich about how environmental humanities research networks can be developed and expanded and called for humanists and social scientists to assert their expertise in addressing complex environmental problems more assertively. This needs to take the form of both public outreach and the funding of national research programs.

On Saturday morning a group discussion with Chakrabarty turned to two main topics: honing distinctions within the natural sciences between primarily geophysical and biological evidentiary bases for Anthropocene claims, and clarifying the relationship of material history and phenomenology in the philosophical opening of Anthropocene thinking.

The workshop concluded with a visit to Congaree National Park, established in 2003. Public historian and National Parks guide **DAVID SHELLEY** described the park's distinctive history as a wetland hunting and fishing commons that was used for generations by descendants of freed African American slaves. Recently, the park has increased efforts to historicize wilderness in its public communications. In addition, **JANAE DAVIS** presented her ongoing thesis research with community-based perceptions of land management and use in the National Park. With the floodplain cypress wetland as a backdrop, the workshop finished with a memorable reminder of the manifold ways that humans inscribe themselves on the environment.

-- Rob Emmett