

## IMMINENT DOMAINS

RECKONING

WITH THE

**ANTHROPOCENE** 

ESSAYS BY
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## **Book\*hug Press**

To love. To be loved. To never forget your own insignificance.

To never get used to the unspeakable violence and the vulgar disparity of life around you. To seek joy in the saddest places.

To pursue beauty to its lair. To never simplify what is complicated or complicate what is simple. To respect strength, never power.

Above all, to watch. To try and understand. To never look away.

And never, never to forget.

—Arundhati Roy, The Cost of Living

## INTRODUCTION

ome years ago, I found myself on a farm near the border of California. It was late June and drought had fully set in. The grounds were bone dry; the clearing by the barn had no grass left. Up on the distant hills, you could see where previous fires had burned swaths of the forest away: large patches of brown amidst the verdant green. I was there for a weeklong retreat that was part environmental action, part spiritual practice, and they gathered us in a circle once everyone arrived. We are in fire season, our hosts explained, dust rising from the cracked earth between us. If a forest fire begins, we will ring the farm bell continuously. And then we'd have to run, they told us, back to the clearing to grab shovels from a pile. Before the flames could spread, we'd have to

head toward them, and dig a trench deep and wide enough to keep the fire at bay.

The instructions alarmed me. Who runs toward a fire? Without training, without protection, without water. But around the circle, people were nodding. This is how most forest fires are contained: not with water, but with trenches. And deep in those drought lands, on that arid farm—a place used as a queer hospice, during the early years of the HIV/AIDS pandemic—we were hours from a fire station. There were no experts, no fire trucks, no beacons of safety nearby. Our best chance was one another; our best chance was to face the emergency with what we had, and to run—not right into the flames—but toward them.

This book is my effort to turn toward the fire. The trenches take all of us to dig; we each have a role to play. I may live with too much chronic pain to lift a literal shovel, to move earth with my arthritic hands, but the fire bell is ringing and this is what I can offer, so I do. I make an offering of this life, the memory and meaning that I carry, the research I've trained to do. I join my voice to the bell, head toward the rising heat. There is no perfect offering, I'm learning. No hero, no single protagonist. There is relationship. Kinship, estrangement, and entanglement with one another, with water and its absence, with the earth turned tinder and smoke rising through air.

RECENTLY, WHAT WE are facing has been called the Anthropocene—a new geological epoch, characterized by human intervention. The previous age, the Holocene, is marked by the melting of the polar ice caps nearly twelve thousand years ago. Before that, the Pleistocene—the Ice Age—lasted for around 2.5 million years. There is a natural widening of the earth's orbit

and a tilting of its axis that shifts how solar radiation lands on the planet. It's believed this causes ocean warming and increased carbon dioxide levels, resulting in mass extinctions and the rise and fall of glacial ages. But this process takes place in deep-time, over tens of thousands to millions of years. In contrast, the timeline of an Anthropocene is staggeringly quick; it's often attributed to the last century, the "Great Acceleration," where human activity has surged across the planet. There is now enough concrete on the surface of earth to lay a thin crust around the entire planet. Our plastic has reshaped global landscapes, ocean systems, and the very fabric of our bodies—now riddled with microplastics. The imprint of grocery bags will remain for millennia, and it's been suggested we are in the "Plasticene"—an age of plastic—not the Anthropocene.

Wherever researchers begin, most agree that humanity crossed an irrevocable line when we split the atom in 1932. In the decades that followed, isotopes from the testing of nuclear weapons, waste from reactors, the devastation in Hiroshima and Nagasaki: these are marks of something entirely new on earth, life cut and remade by human hands, indelibly imprinted on the planet. Marks, thumbprints of innovation—also known as violence, war—an Atomic age, a Nuclearocene.

This collection contemplates a more expansive timeline—and explores a different sense of us, as well: not as a singular force in a human-centred world, but as multiple forces with divergent tools, only some of which built this fire. Ice cores extracted from Antarctica carry a record of atmospheric change, and these point toward the early 1600s—the global advent of European colonialism and slavery—as the threshold of the Anthropocene. 1 Our current environmental crisis can be traced in these records, through stone and ice, etymology and illness, pathogens and invasive species, back to the onset of colonial violence. Violence that continues; occupation that carries on. So perhaps we don't need a new name for this epoch at all, but rather an increase in widespread comprehension that the climate crisis we face is a crisis of colonialism.

From my vantage point—limited and biased by white-settler privilege—I am not trying to pin down a singular name for this era. The luxury and the challenge of these essays is to study the patterns, uncertainties, and intimacies between us. I come back to the term Anthropocene because it's part of the public lexicon it's the main story being told—and I think those stories matter. Stories are a fundamental part of global systems; they not only interpret and define world change, they create it. The splitting of the atom began with a sequence of numbers, a theory, a conversation. The Anthropocene is a framework that can and will lead to research, funding, and policy; the idea carries geological weight. To me, what does seem fitting about the term is that it's personal and self-reflexive. Like anthropology or anthropomorphism, its bias is easy to find. The word points at us as we point toward it. It doesn't let the mirror disappear into a landscape of plastic bags and isotopes.

THE THRESHOLD OF an epoch is measured by geological change and widespread impact on the fossil record. Our plastic and tailing ponds—they leave an indelible mark. But records of world change are also—and mostly—living ones. Living records carried in each one of our bodies, our families, our stories, our lives. My ancestors live on in me through blood, through harm, through knowledge and responsibility. I come back to this fact

and anchor my work here. What I want to bring to this conversation of world change is not *discovery*—a doctrine itself entangled with colonialism; I want to bring what each person carries: my own thumbprint of this crisis, my own way to turn toward the fire. There are infinite variations, and that's what we need, I think that's what ecosystems call for to function: variation, contrast, divergence, multiplicity. There are no singularities or straight lines in nature; no heroes, no hierarchies in the forest. There is a deep understory; a mycorrhizal, fungal network that runs beneath the trees, tiny threads of mycelium that connect individual plants, transferring water, carbon, nutrients, and knowledge.

I've worked to reflect environmental patterns and non-human relationships in the structure of this book. Each section contemplates intimacy and entanglement with a different element: earth, fire, water, air, and finally spirit, or what others might call ether or mystery; the aspect of our world that is not tangible through the senses. A sixth section, The Understory, acts like the understory of a forest. Companion essays, additional research, and contemplations can be found there. This section can be turned to throughout the book, or at the end. This circular, elemental form was a way to contemplate the Anthropocene without prioritizing progress or human structures. This form also reflects how I relate to this world. In my Irish and Italian ancestral lines, and in the Reclaiming witchcraft tradition I am part of—a tradition of witchcraft that grew, in many ways, out of anti-nuclear protests in the Bay Area in the 1980s—there is a practice of turning toward these elements one at a time. To say, basically: hello and thank you; to deepen both relationship and responsibility to this world.

"Our body is a community," Thich Nhat Hanh once wrote. "The trillions of non-human cells in our body are even more numerous than the human cells. Without them, we could not be here in this moment." Interconnection is at the heart of our reality—that's what I believe. And that's where this book begins: reckoning with an epoch of interconnection and interdependence. Not as an era than can be given a singular name, not as a context that exists beyond my body and choices, but as a web of life to which I belong, as a road I am driving down, as a fireline of history that is still burning in the forest around me.

AS I WROTE this book, the pandemic began—a new threshold of interconnection; the immune systems of the world instantly bound to one another. The news kept saying: Imminent threat, imminent risk. And I kept thinking of the geyser I once saw in Iceland: how it kept blowing up, rising to the sky every few minutes in a shock of water and smoke. How we all stood around it: watching, waiting for it to hit again. There was no set pattern; you couldn't say how long it would take to explode. So, everyone just stood there with their cameras, recording the slow moment of water over rock, slushing around this hole that went toward the centre of the earth. We knew it was coming, but there was no preparing for the shock. Every time, we gasped.

Imminent threat, imminent risk. The words kept coming up, more than ever before. I had already named this book Imminent Domains; I had already planned to write about illness, uncertainty, and change. My life had been torn apart by Lyme disease; I knew something of zoonotic illness, loss, and adaptation. At least I thought I did. But COVID-19 was a reckoning of interdependence—a sign of how intimately we are bound to one another. And, paradoxically, the most profound isolation our world has known. By spring, I was facing long COVID, a significant concussion, and

isolating alone. I felt grief-stricken for the world. And due to my concussion, my right pupil went slightly out of alignment with my left. It was like I saw a different world through each eye. Through my left: the world as it had been. Through my right: a new reality. I couldn't write like that—I could barely walk from the vertigo it caused. To write this book, I had to learn to see again—to see in a new way—with one eye on the past, and one eye on the present.

My pupil didn't right itself; instead, my brain learned to compensate for the divergence. I know it's there and I still feel it sometimes—a sudden disorientation, a spin to the world, one eye flashing in pain. Even as I write this, spots and distortions are rising in that eye, and I'm reminded of the bridge in my vision the place where time converges, where loss meets adaptation. I'm reminded, as well, of the gaps in what I can see—lacunas that my experience of the world will never comprehend. Sometimes, lacuna means unfilled space or interval, sometimes it means the missing portion of a book or manuscript. And beneath these essays there is a deep contemplation of what cannot be known. By me, specifically. And by us, collectively, in the midst of this changing world.

When I was learning to see again, I turned off the news. I lay on a blanket on the grass and studied the sky instead. I sat in the yard with my imminent body, full of risk and change and threat. To love this world is not a simple thing. But no matter what you do, life happens. That's the funny, forgivable thing about the earth. It is not only loss that is imminent: it's creation. For months, I lay on that grass. And in June, cicadas that had been hibernating for seventeen years finally broke free. They sang through dusk, right to dawn. And it's their chirping that brought me back to language. Their shiny green bodies, and that ongoing song.