

## Shapes of the Anthropocene: Unknown Flowers

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“Some say the world will end in flames,  
Some say in ice.”  
Robert Frost, 1923

### Abstract

At a time of accelerated change and heightened tension, less harmful ways of more-than-human coexistence can be enacted only by better grasping the complexities of current socioenvironmental dynamics. Inspired in terms of style and layout by a herbarium sheet (*‘habitat’ – ‘how to spot’ – ‘use’*) this paper signals that despite its reputation – as a period of general environmental ruination – the Anthropocene (also) encapsulates *some* new alternative realities. Given the scarcity of critical narratives that explore discontinuities in the business-as-usual environment-depreciation model, the paper seeks to present certain ways of engaging with such overlooked opportunities, which will be here referred to as ‘unknown flowers’. In other words, the aim is not that of inventing categories, but merely of drawing attention to existing ones, by exploring interdisciplinary pathways of assessing affirmative – regenerative – instances of more-than-human coexistence during a multifold socioenvironmental crisis.

*Keywords:* the Anthropocene, Unknown Flowers, multimodal communication, environmental humanities

### Habitat

The Anthropocene is a legitimate description of an interwoven more-than-human planetary dynamic where humans *et* appendages significantly partake in worldbuilding fluxes. Judging by *our* more-than-human future-straining capability, humans are among the most invasive species on Earth. A fact that cannot be offset

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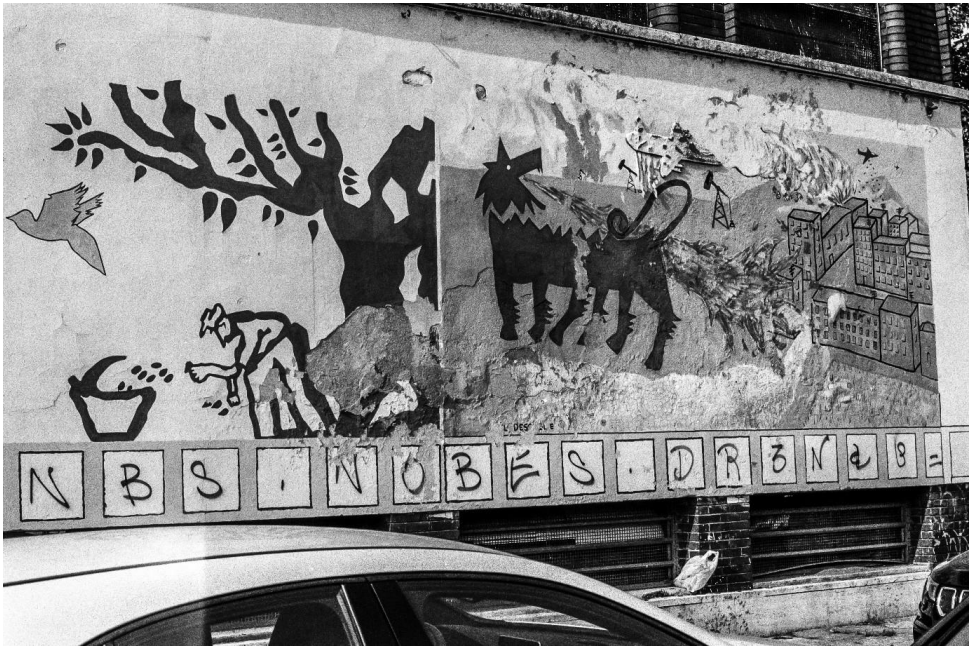
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from ecology; nor memory. Enacting complex, yet increasingly wayside, envioning processes (Sörlin & Wormbs, 2018) 20XX is spooling-out unprecedented acts of terraforming. (Re)shaping planetary ecosystems at scale (Brown et al., 2013).

While impeding biosphere contingencies (ad-hoc more-than-human triangulations, climate stressors, socioenvironmental action, techno-political innovation etc.) grow ever more consequential, the human condition is bioaugmented, geofracted and digitally distorted. Thanks to their collective accumulation and (biogeochemical) coordination, anthropic affairs now harness a highly-irregular envioning force that stands at the heart of planetary issues. Downright palpable in both the individual and (geo)political infrastructures of (ordered) social life (Palsson & Swanson, 2016), and their skyscraping upkeep weight, the current socioenvironmental reality comes out as a natural consequence of the century-old human exceptionalism doctrine. (Plumwood, 1991). A worldview that rendered mastery over nature as *de facto* symbol of (western) civilization; an egocentered premise that legitimized the widescale socioenvironmental reorganization of biospheric proportions we inhabit today.

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“Man is a part of nature, and his war against nature is inevitably a war against himself” (Carson 1972). Anthropic landscapes are most vulnerable to environmental changes. But today’s precarities and uncertainties are no poster-child produce of environmental vicissitude. Accordingly, the challenges of the future announce themselves to be different from those of the past. Critical socioenvironmental studies show that: 1) current versions of (ecosystemic) vulnerability are anchored in sociopolitical (re)configurations (Worster, 1994; Blackbourn, 2006; Subrahmanyam 2022); in intersectional (multiscalar) genealogies (Yusoff, 2018; Morton, 2013; Morton, 2018), and in their myriadic more-than-human fabrications. In series of passing projects, ideas, ethical/aesthetical sensibilities and expectations, and in marauding more-than-human superimpositions that can’t be downplayed as some sort of unintended (development) utilitarianist collaterals (Douglas, 1984; Plumwood, 1991; Williams, 1995; Nixon, 2011; Renn, 2020; Whyte, 2016); 2) the combination of shortsight and privilege is never stable; turning rapidly noxious when amplified by power accumulation in only a few. All this routinely propagates rampant hostility and disadvantage; endangering all life on Earth.



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During troubled times, insidious disruption and multifaceted transformation, the conversation surrounding the Anthropocene serves socioenvironmental knowledge refinement well beyond academia. When it comes to colliding previously (formally) un-alignable facets, knowledge traditions, histories and localities, thanks to its interdisciplinary plasticity the unconfirmed geological-layer (currently) grants thought-sanctuary to remarkable socioenvironmental perspectives, multidisciplinary critical articulations, and astute more-than-human imaginative modulations. The Anthropocene is the forum where human history clashes natural history, an interdisciplinary conversation in which global inequities, ecocide and (anthropogenic) climate change are not a hoax. But common knowledge: testable well-established scientific facts.

Nature/culture binaries linger on though, but— for better or worse — under this specific framing they openly and directly in/form each other. Perhaps this is one of the Anthropocene’s most significant conceptual strengths: the capacity of epistemologically imploding the centuries old nature-culture separation paradigm by tossing into ambiguity. Making it a two-way street in which —yes! — culture accommodates nature.

These are compelling circumstances for unknown flowers; for multimodal narratives, depictions and nuanced/nonlinear understandings regarding socioenvironmental coexistence. For continuing probing unknown, un(fo)reseen -

yet relevant - socioenvironmental shapes, facets and voices of climate resilience and adaptation histories.



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### What to watch out for

Game-changer, (re)worlding phenomenon, historical all-round (risk/opportunity) multiplier, climate change is not everything (Hulme, 2023) but *may* permeate everything. Similarly to the Anthropocene, - thanks to its fluid scale and asymmetrical manifestations this bignarrative syntagm infers that the biosociogeo contract is being reshuffled, by a recalibration event that calls on  $\infty$  amalgams of possible subjects objects and agents. Both an *under-* and *over-*estimation, what is certain is that such a more-than-human ontological magnitude infers irreversible changes to planetary (co)existence that are far from any clear or singular outcome.

Of unclear shape and fuzzy border, anthropogenic landscapes are the groundzeros of climate change. The individual – yet tightly interconnected – sites where the Anthropocene can be locally decoded and the socioenvironmental processes that reside under its banner *provincialized* (Deloughrey, 2019). Methodologically this implies oscillating learning curves, constant fine-tuning, reflexive sociological acts (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), new perspective(s) finding, and repeated dives into the archaeology of the present (Sedgwick, 1997).

Dextrous hands-on/vernacular critical-associative, manoeuvres that navigate multilayered more-than-human traces (Napolitano, 2015), clues and actualities while simultaneously patching-out perception/knowledge gaps. Types and styles of lucid, humane observation neither structuralist/liniar science nor (memoryless) design/architectures (alone) can genuinely perform.

Chronically underfunded, (still) poor in inclusion, and curiously (self)restrained in outreach, the age of emerging generative AI, extinction and flared-up sociopolitical conflict (Armiero & De Angelis, 2017), puts the socioenvironmental conversation – as the social discourse at large – under doming pressure. Producing – far too many untailored models and explanations – too out-of-sync with realtime socioenvironmental developments (Kornhuber et al., 2024) – academic outreach seems to be faltering despite some outstanding – yet insular – effort(s).

The torrents of alarmist-output, (Simpson's) paradox statistics, and rigid tunnel-vision content is indeed staggering. But it isn't something (solely) attributable to affluence cultures' unease/anxiety; or to attention-economy's' doomloop-fixation on (cataclysm) commodification *our* conspicuous epoch (Veblen, 2006) distinguishes itself by. Uneven access to the channels through which knowledge is produced and circulated, combined with norms that dissociate nature from culture, narrows the horizons of useful knowledge generation. Understood as a feedback loop between propositional and prescriptive knowledge, useful knowledge depends on the reciprocal movement between theoretical understanding and applied practice (Mokyr, 2004). When this movement is constrained by epistemic exclusion or by rigid nature/culture divisions, communities are deprived of the conditions necessary for alternative forms of knowledge to emerge, stabilize, and circulate. Across generations, such constraints progressively diminish social trust, reduce collective capacities for interpretation and action, and limit the accumulation of plural knowledge traditions.

Nevertheless, next to the opportunities wedded to knowledge extraction, manipulation and mercantilisation, perhaps the most relevant task (social) science has on its hands to date, is the - whatnot laborious - chore of expanding the knowledge-diffusion *niveau*; not only to 'pierce the sealing' and 'sound alarms' but also to 'stretch the surface' by establishing common ground(s) that accommodate/empower a broad spectrum of voices to the conversation (Dyson, 2009). Whilst the disproportionality and fluctuating actualities of human-wielded ecosystemic change become ever more pressing, segregated knowledge (re)production units are (systematically) laid-out into bizarre matrices of bureaucracy and administration. Often morphing into convoluted scaffoldings of routine/ennui (and/or exclusion) regarding both inquiry and representation, that ultimately provide far too little direct heuristic-service to most people seeking-out effective benefit or something more or less soothing.

In the search for buzzwords with a ring, climate crisis can come out as a very dry euphemism indeed. But despite recent inflation in definite/oversimplified - neat assessments - that surrounds socioenvironmental issues, knowing nature, society, and the interwoven/multilayered facets of socioenvironmental entanglement is a messy business. By no means simple, or bespoke for specific groups, individuals, for brevity, or for the preponderant hopelessness packaging much socioenvironmental coverage has currently resorted to.



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### How to spot

The topographies of the Anthropocene unfold at uneven-pace and comprise scapes in which both intentional and unintentional acts are minutely being (geo)recorded. Unknown flowers surface in environments of hybridity; in matter-of-fact and speculative ecologies alike, and can (multimodally) be accessed through critical instruments and imaginative ways of seeing (Bohal et al. 2019; Escobar 2018; Berger, 1972; McHarg, 1995). Often torn, liminal and latent, unknown flowers are as natural as they are distinctly cultural/political contraptions. Morphisms and functional conglomerates brought to blossom by multispecies agency. Erratic when it comes to scale or fabric, and rooted in the (re)generative (forward-facing) implication the idea of ‘irreversibility’ infers (Prună, 2022), their

presence may trigger melancholia, inspire *Remembrances* – see John Clare’s (1816) homonymous poem –, or advocate nature-based solutions.

Promising pathways (regularly) face unacknowledged, untold/unforeseen marginalities. But in order to (re)navigate the (un)known (unknowingly), (close) contact-making and the cultivation of a sensible epistemological stance are prerequisite.

Meandering intercrossings between history and actuality, socioenvironmental subjects inflate (highly) amorphous/alembicated identities/meanings that often call on dissonant heritages. Plied together by massive fields of multispecies coordination, chance and labour, (multiscalar) hazards and volatile fluid mechanics (Krauss, 2018; Zalasiewicz et al., 2014; Ellis, 2011), unknown flowers grow organically, are recyclable, and can be indexed/ represented by as many voices, formats and mediums as needed.

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Thinking nature inclines to be outward facing and involves (much) more than the rational (Rolston, 1987; Plumwood, 1991). Lurching in the (usually) unquestioned vernacular acts of coexistence and (more-than-human) coordination (Pinker, 2025), the potential for socioenvironmental knowledge (re)production in the Anthropocene is (very) great indeed. A fact that further suggests that nature/culture disengagement rhetorics are ideological, self-defeating and overall detrimental to socioenvironmental regeneration and more-than-human wellbeing.

Yet amid planetary turmoil and unimpeded noise, humans also succeed at shouldering-in unique instances of environmental design and (re)organisation. Discerned on, or not, at various scales (and demographics) (beyond human) poli-benefit does emerge (Ritchie, 2024) - incubates and pops-up regularly - despite scarcely being reported on of late. Such realisations can be most rewarding.

Over fraught, uneven sociopolitical terrains, unknown flowers do manage to sprout. Shattered across and in-between in/formal socioenvironmental structures, during peace and conflict alike. They can be spotted more easily when contrasted by discontinuity (Braudel, 2023; Bray, 2016; Steffen et al., 2008), however their transgressive morphology poses prickly resistance to clearcut uprooting and conventional systematic bracketing(s).

Visible but not immediately understood, unknown flowers pinpoint perception gaps and confer access towards socioenvironmental heritages/overlapping(s) fit for critical inquiry. Valiant sites of irreversible yet *persuasive* environmental reconfiguration, during harrowing times (albeit dissipated, heterogeneous) they represent precious instances of multispecies (re)conciliation, of learning and resistance, relentless change and (re)generation.



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No matter how spent or debilitating, more-than-human routines, accidents and fallouts bind tacitly into a vast socioenvironmental (co)operation phenomenon of (unknown) sorts. With innumerable asymmetries and (re)configurations (like arguably most planetary ages and epochs) the environmental inhabitancy ethos of the Anthropocene remains: “dynamic, adaptive and contextual” (Muir et al., 2010, p. 259). From place to place, from a temporality to another, more than often, the fluid act of (re)worlding is carried out in bulk - by what appear perhaps to be banal, unspectacular stories – the invisible analog flow, the tacit/unknown build-up behind any (more-than-human) success or disaster (Haraway, 2016).

While “the gardens of [natural] history are being replaced by sites of [anthropocentric] time” (Smithson, 1968, p.105) communities across the world are indeed staying with the trouble (Smithson, 1968, p.105), (re)adapting and actively (re)configuring their stance in relation to an (increasingly) unruly planet (Mauch, 2015). Acknowledged/reported-on or not, numerous climate-change frontline locations, (mental) resilience lessons and stories of (re)balance (Solnit 2010), show that socioenvironmental challenges in the Anthropocene are by no means insurmountable. Albeit increasingly ruthless.



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## Use

Socioenvironmental communication is most relevant when meaningful to multiple audiences and to their everyday lives (Doyle, 2016). Enriching the overall scope, depth, and diversity of socioenvironmental knowledge (re)production, unknown flowers represent noncyclical, transient opportunities, generated by unique more-than-human timing(s), nimble cross-fertilizations and warring circumstances. Prone to create vociferation when uncovered, they require delicate foraging protocols if to be deciphered/made legible. Useful at multiple (conceptual and methodological) socioenvironmental levels, most importantly their presence suggests: 1) climate change does not necessarily imply abysmal challenges or cavalcades of Sisyphean failures; 2) sustainability doesn't equate permanently set (net-zero) balances with nature; 3) it is not the end; it is not too late.

Perhaps sometimes "the most beautiful world is like a heap of rubble tossed down in confusion" (Heraclitus, Fragment 124), but there is much more to it than that. When visualising *an* Anthropocene, however old, bad or good (Ruddiman, 2003; Fremaux & Barry, 2019), threat-priming constricts perception *per se*. And an outlook overcalibrated by the processes that equate havoc and destruction erodes away the significance of individual and collective (climate) action.

Helping making better sense of the world we live in, and to (re)negotiate our prospective role on it. (Environmental) Humanities hold unique conceptual-imaginary treasures that can link the particular to the general, the past to the present, and (possible) more-than-human future.

Albeit at face value not particularly poetic, ‘sustainability’ and ‘resilience’ are yet another pair of abstraction-enduring metaphors. Tokens of  $x^x$  possible (social) meanings and  $x^i$  realtime environmental variations traversed by irregular sociomaterial flows. Ecological architectures hitched to dynamic biogeochemical systems. Their firm appurtenance to the histories and geographies of ideas assists such (more-than-human) sociopolitically significant notions evade most overarching computations (Kidd, 1992). However in order to deal with the structural forces that drive havoc and *longue durée* destruction, framing the possible stances of resistance as something undermined, intricate and valiant - steadily plastered together by intertwined interests and voices of ecosocial traction - as something meant to be involved-in and continued, learned, tested and further inquired about – can *do* much more than portray regressions towards the mean, and can incrementally spike up (good-enough) steps forward.

Ecological identity doesn’t revolve just on ecofootprint charts and parameters, and nature is more than a preset environment for human cultures. Although obviously important and of firm standing in the matter of fact of the natureculture story, overreliance on the reductionist prism is detrimental to ecopolitics and impoverishing for social knowledge (re)production. Turning into unknown knowns the more subtle, covert aspects of the socioenvironmental story; systematically expelling them out of the academic conversation.



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Seeking both to better understand and to mitigate the unravellings of our time, knowing by hashing-out, is made possible by creasing and overlapping the (quintessential) familiar.

In 1689 John Locke (1988) envisioned humans as applying individual agency and labour to *a* nature otherwise inert and valueless. Although watered down, 20XX anthropocentrism still holds but we can't make full circle. Gauged at by the scale and depth of our present endeavours – being challenged at all levels and logics – humans in 2YK+ Anthropocene have (perhaps just about enough) (eco)ontological legitimacy – implicitly: privilege, accountability and responsibility (H. Jonas 1984) – to visualise themselves whilst occupying a certain scale of (co)operation with(in) nature.

Thanks to this 'ad interim' knowledge, human wellbeing is now contingent not only on providence, ability or preferences, but also on a now accelerating waning more-than-human multispecies-dynamic system.

Despite all caveats, and entrenched tendencies to overlook our submerged protuberance into the most fundamental levels of terrestrial life (Carr & Milstein, 2021), however uncanny or unilateral sometimes it might seem (Morton, 2013), billions of inextricably coordinated more-than-humans are responsible – sensible parts – in the socioenvironmental story piecing the world together at any given moment just by *leben und leben lassen*.

Will it be just enough?

If:

p1) most flowering plants (to date) are relatively well-indexed; and

p2) humans associate flowers with beauty, usefulness and multispecies coordination.

then:

q) 'unknown flowers' works as a poetic concept; as an Anthropocene-conditioned metaphor.

Note: Crafted with analog methods and devices, the visuals attached to this piece explore miscellaneous facets of more-than-human (well)being. Through the means of eclectic composition and superimposition socioenvironmental asymmetries and intersectionalities are being highlighted. It is a peer-to-peer approach that seeks to facilitate alternative avenues of visualising socioenvironmental entanglement(s) Portraying realworld ambivalences, overlappings, tensions and surprising flimsy balances, here the aesthetics are fed by the shattered fluidity of the socioenvironmental conundrum.

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