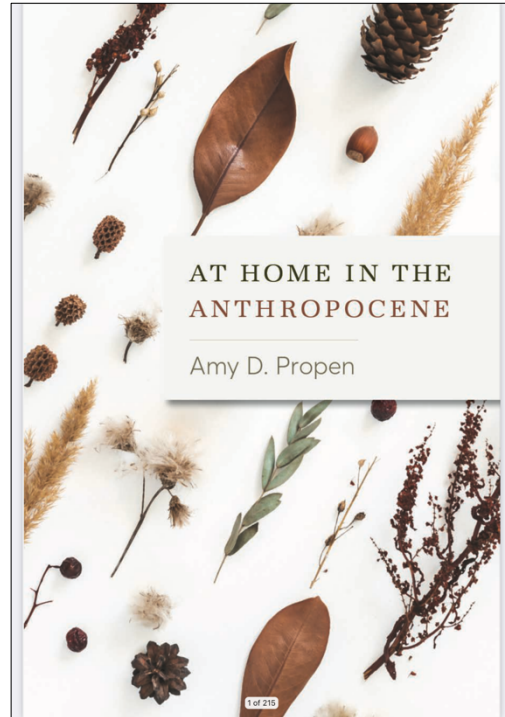


Amy D. Propen, **At Home in the Anthropocene**, Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2022, 201 pp., \$99.95 (hardcover), \$29.95 (paperback), \$29.95 (e-book).

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That we are living in extraordinary times is exemplified by the phrase *Anthropocene* as the proposed name for a new geological epoch recognizing the influence of human activities on the earth system. Geologists have recently selected Lake Crawford in Ontario, Canada, as the proposed location for confirming evidence of the Anthropocene. If the stratigraphic evidence from this lake is validated, it will lead to the formal establishment of the Anthropocene Epoch. This transition would signify the end of the Holocene Epoch, characterized by stable climatic conditions that enabled the growth and prosperity of the human species. While no other geological age or epoch has grasped the attention of scholars of humanities and social sciences, Chakrabarty (2021) considers the Anthropocene as a fundamental clash between world-history time and geological time—a clash between human understanding of their place in the world and the overwhelming geological evidence of the detrimental impacts the species has wrought on the earth system, to the point of an “epochal crisis” (Foster, 2013).



***At Home in the Anthropocene*** sets about its central inquiry to reflect on, grapple with, and extend ideas of “home” at this time of epochal change. To this end, the author explores the idea that encounters with nature can be, and indeed need to be seen as gifts. Along with this “gift mindset,” (p. 26) the author introduces concepts of entangled empathy, compassionate conservation, and respect. This is to underline how a more rounded sense of “home” is required to take account of species whose homes are increasingly threatened by human activities. Related to this is the concept of reciprocity, where the author proposes a more holistic relationship to nature that replaces notions of a hierarchical *anthropos* with a more inclusive perspective. It challenges home as an exclusively human phenomenon to considering home as also ecological niches and habitats for other species.

After the introduction, where the author lays out the foundations for her conceptual understanding of the key issues addressed in the book, there are five substantive chapters, punctuated by two interludes, which are more personal and informal reflections on developing the work during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first chapter introduces the concepts of entangled empathy and compassionate conservation. Compassionate conservation is the principle that “every individual body matters; do no harm” (p. 30). To illustrate, the author provides a vignette of her engagement in a mockingbird

rehabilitation process following a cat attack. The point of this is to see conservation practices as a form of “entangled empathy,” described as “being able to understand what another being feels, sees, and thinks, and to understand what they might need or desire” (p. 32). The act of compassionate conservation requires entangled empathy and appreciates that a web of life exists between and around humans and ecosystems.

Mountain lions, in escaping wildfires, wander into human areas. This example in the book further develops ideas of entanglement and community beyond the human realm, to urge consideration of multispecies community. Communication is key, the author noting that “the wildlife speak in their own ways of the impacts on them” (p. 49) through their behavior, such as when a mountain lion was found resting in the home of an Oregon woman, the lion found “napping quietly behind her couch” (p. 50). This exemplifies the entanglement between humans and other species and allows the author to introduce the concept of a “grammar of animacy” (p. 52). This calls for an extension of the grammar of language to also include nonverbal cues that animals use for communication, and by extension this grammar can also be applied to ecosystems. In the case of the mountain lion, the homeowner practiced a form of entangled empathy and a grammar of animacy to be sensitive to the animal’s needs—she let it sleep and stayed outside for several hours to allow the animal to recover.

The core concept of home is also explored through this vignette, be it the human’s permanent home or the lion’s temporary shelter. The policy ramifications are observed, in that a broadening of entangled empathy can bring with it a culturing of a gift mindset in environmental policy, such as offering “the gift of respite, the gift of water and rest; the gift of having room to roam and the space to find one’s way” (p. 60). This contrasts with a typical response to sightings of mountain lions in human territory, where a university security team deemed them emergencies, issuing emergency alerts and updates rather than seeing the behavior through the grammar of animacy and practices of entangled empathy. To this end, the author imagines rewriting the guidelines for what to do if a lion is encountered: “Rather than: ‘Never approach a mountain lion. Give them an escape route,’ my revised bulleted list might simply read, ‘Give them the gift of space.’” (p. 69). What it means to be home in the Anthropocene therefore involves an expansion of the traditional concept of home as a dwelling for human families and extending it to include other species.

A brief interlude reflects on the concept of *solastalgia*, a form of homesickness that refers to “the pain or distress caused by the ongoing loss of solace and the sense of desolation connected to the present state of one’s home or territory” (p. 75). Perhaps *solastalgia* affects another displaced mountain lion, P-22, who has taken up residence in a park, or perhaps this is anthropomorphism. In this case the lion has become somewhat of a community celebrity, and locals increasingly see it as a neighbor, sharing a space with them. Indeed, for an urban wildlife campaign, a cut-out likeness of the lion was made with which the community could take selfies. This anthropomorphism is usually critiqued because of the potential for misunderstanding and further encroachment by humans, exacerbating the animal’s vulnerability. However, the author makes the point that when combined with entangled empathy, compassion, and an awareness of the grammar of animacy, anthropomorphic devices such as the selfie have the potential to increase both compassion and empathy for the impacted wildlife. This can further strengthen conservation and rehabilitation efforts, revealing that simple critiques of anthropomorphism may need to be reconsidered at this extraordinary time.

The book includes an insightful discussion on proposed wildlife corridors, which would connect habitats and reconnect animals with their natural homes. Two examples are outlined, with one already allowing animal migration more safely and cutting down on traffic accidents. This is an example of a culture of reciprocity that could be developed through rehabilitation programs once the problem is understood more expansively. Furthermore, the potential benefits of such crossings are experienced by the animals (rehabilitation of migration patterns) and humans (reduced traffic accidents, the sights of animals migrating), in an example of the gift mindset. The analysis of wildlife corridors thus allows the author to pivot back to her key inquiry of what it means to be home in the Anthropocene, questioning boundaries between the human and natural world, and showing how a more holistic and mutually beneficial relationship is possible.

Black bears and their symbiotic relationship with beech trees make for a thick description of entanglement between species. The trees provide valuable food for the bears and are frequently marked by bears, giving rise to the term "bear-scarred beech" (p. 123). However, it is thought that the bears do not just mark the beeches randomly but to communicate the availability of food and mark their territory. Thus, a holistic and entangled interpretation of this relationship reveals that "a more apt descriptor for these marked trees might be 'bear-storied beech'" (p. 123). This also highlights the role of storytelling and what it would mean to understand the stories of other species.

Along with the key concepts of entangled empathy, compassionate conservation, reciprocity, and the gift mindset, the book tackles biodiversity, climate impacts, and how to face the prospect of the Anthropocene. By decentering the human and placing it in the vast and interconnected web of life, the book challenges traditional (Western) concepts of the human/nature relationship. It is an engaging read, which is admirable given the nuance and complexity of the core issues addressed. It would be suitable for the reader who is interested in extending their knowledge of the human/nature relationship and who wishes to be introduced to contemporary ideas of posthumanism.

A critique could outline how the work should address the systemic dimensions of human impact, including human-to-human "othering." It could be argued that a more thorough treatment of the concept of the Anthropocene would strengthen the core message of the book. However, given the profundity of the epochal crisis, this book also challenges the limits of critique. In attempting to illuminate nature beyond human and anthropocentric understandings of it, it demands that the reader reconfigure their relationship to nature, place, appreciation, and the wonder of life beyond the human realm. This book addresses this in a coherent, engaging, and accessible way while also considering the limits to communication without entangled empathy, a gift mindset, appreciation, and care toward nature.

### References

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