

# The Anthropocene Contract. What Kind of Historian–Reader Agreement Does Environmental Historiography Need?



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**Abstract** The paper is an attempt to reply to the question on how environmental history can participate in public debates on contemporary world concerns in a reliable and socially relevant way. I argue that the answer to this question lies in environmental history's reading pact, which I call the Anthropocene contract. Its most important element is the principle of equality, which concerns the relationship between historians and their readers. In the first step, I invoke Graeme Wynn's statement to point to important questions about the challenges that the Anthropocene posed to environmental history. Next I critically discuss the answers to these questions provided by historical theory. I then formulate a proposal for a reading pact of environmental history using the theoretical insights of Kalle Pihlainen and the philosophy of Jacques Rancière.

**Keywords** Environmental history · Reading pact · Anthropocene contract

## Introduction

Environmental history intervenes in public debates on contemporary world concerns. For this reason, it asks itself how to participate in them in a reliable and socially relevant way. In this paper, I argue that the answer to this question lies in environmental history's reading pact, which I call the Anthropocene contract. Its most important element is the principle of equality, which concerns the relationship between historians and their readers. In the first step, I invoke Graeme Wynn's statement to point to important questions about the challenges that the Anthropocene posed to environmental history. Next I critically discuss the answers to these questions provided by historical theory. I then formulate a proposal for a reading pact of environmental history using the theoretical insights of Kalle Pihlainen and the philosophy of Jacques Rancière.

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During his 2019 Presidential Address to the American Society for Environmental History, Wynn discussed the challenges facing the modern world and environmental history, and proposed a historiographic approach that could offer a partial response to them. He claimed that historians—both as citizens and as scholars—are currently dealing with global warming, the Anthropocene, the passing of tipping points and planetary boundaries, as well as rising nationalist, populist, nativist sentiment and neoliberalism destroying public institutions and income disparities. In response, historians produce narratives about the fall and the end of the world, which serve both to articulate despair and mobilize action. In Wynn’s opinion, however, the dissemination of such stories causes fear, which in turn evokes apathy or fosters a selfish struggle for survival rather than encouraging action for the common good. A more fitting solution would be to build narratives of hope that are critical of the state of our world, that resist the forces that threaten it, and that propose alternative visions of a better future (Wynn 2020: 3, 20–21).

For Wynn, such narratives are the stories of the past endeavours of social change and, particularly, the biographies of thinkers and activists who opposed political and economic power and sought to construct better forms of life in the world. In his speech, Wynn goes straight to two detailed biographical stories: of the ecologist, Pierre Dansereau, who researched the scale of human impact in the biosphere, and of the political theorist C.B. Macpherson, who studied the influence of economic inequalities on the functioning of liberal democracies (Wynn 2020: 5–13, 13–20). According to Wynn, their activities and ideas in the field of environmental protection and creating a democratic society, anticipated our contemporary struggles (Wynn 2020: 3–4).

I have taken note of two important issues here. Wynn strongly emphasizes the social role of environmental history and contributes to the discussion on forms of historiography that would productively carry out this task by indicating one such form (i.e. biography) and then offers examples of its use. The first passages of his speech suggest that Wynn sees the political engagement of environmental history as natural. In the biographical stories, however, he underlines that in the recent past, during the careers of his two protagonists, the academy was convinced that scholars should focus on methods and facts, not on using their knowledge and skills in the political struggle for a better world. It is only in the last few decades that the political commitment of scientists has gained a rank similar to epistemic tasks and has become strongly intertwined with them. Historical approaches that have been linked to social movements outside academia, such as anticolonial, feminist, and environmental history, seem to contribute to this change.

I was surprised at Wynn’s choice of biographies as a type of historical writing that would fulfil the political tasks of environmental history in the Anthropocene era. Wynn does not propose a new, inventive form but an established type of writing specific to political or intellectual rather than environmental history. Moreover, within life writing itself, there are many new approaches that question the coherence and agency of the subject, as well as the purposeful order of their life story, such as ecobiographies, autotopography, anti-biographies, or imperial biographies that present life stories as entangled with not only the environment or landscape, but also social,

economic, and political conditions (e.g. Glotfelty and Fromm (1996); González 1995; LeGoff 2009; Lambert and Lester 2006). Wynn, however, uses the highly conventional form of the teleological biography of a scholar, presenting his protagonists as consistent, strong and independent subjects, and their whole life as aimed at a goal defined retrospectively by the biographer. This form refers to the ancient model of pragmatic historiography subordinated to the literally understood rule of *historia magistra vitae*, according to which the story of the ideas and deeds of former great individuals is to be a model for the addressees for how the audiences should manage their own lives. It produces an unequal relationship between the historian and the model biography and the audience, in which the ideal, closed story of the success of a strong individual is offered to—we may imply—lost and helpless readers as an example to imitate. This type of biography enjoys unflagging popularity among many reading groups, but its effectiveness as an instrument of environmental history in dealing with a planetary crisis is questionable.

Wynn's speech raises several questions: which narrative forms does environmental history need to help society cope with the threats generated by the Anthropocene? Does it need new narrative forms for this task, or are those it already has sufficient? To what extent might the environmental history of the Anthropocene be a teacher of life? Can historians help contemporaries better grapple with comparable risks and challenges today? In this paper, I will approach these questions with the resources of the contemporary theory of history, and I propose a new element for the framework of environmental history writing in the form of the Anthropocene contract, an agreement between historians and their audience.

## **A Response by a Theory of History**

Historical theorists participating in the debate on the Anthropocene (I refer primarily to Dipesh Chakrabarty, as well as Zoltán Boldizsár Simon and Marek Tamm, who comment with approval and augment the ideas of the former) point to the need to make changes in how we understand the historical. Instead of reconsidering the ways historians produce stories about the world, they concentrate on refiguring the subject of historical studies by broadening the scope of the historical to include new agents, temporalities and spaces.

Chakrabarty examines the terms 'planet' and 'species' as central categories for the humanities that would cooperate with Earth System Sciences in challenging the Anthropocene. He compares 'planet' with notions of 'earth', 'world' or 'global' to describe the spaces and temporalities of a new historical subject that combines planetary processes with changes taking place in the technosphere and biosphere, and replaces geological time with a more human-centred time (Chakrabarty 2018a, b, 2019). In searching for a term for the human collectivity that experiences the planetary crisis, Chakrabarty measures 'species' with 'human', 'humanity' and 'biological agent'. The latter is a category which operates in environmental history and removes the distinction between natural and human history, but only the term

‘species’ embraces humans as a geological force. In his analysis, Chakrabarty aims to demonstrate that experience and knowledge produced in the Anthropocene exceed the capacities of contemporary humanities and historical studies (e.g. Chakrabarty 2009).

Zoltán Boldizsár Simon and Marek Tamm share the same goal when reconfiguring the historical by including transhuman and non-human agents, multiscalar history and non-continuous history. They use a distinction between ‘more-than-human’ and ‘better-than-human’ to encompass not only the relationships entangling different species and the inanimate environment but also mechanical and digital agents. Similarly to Chakrabarty, Simon and Tamm postulate a multiscalar history that intertwines anthropocentric scales with geological time. However, they underline that it is not about expanding the time scope (as is the case in deep, big or evolutionary history) but entangling different scales (Simon and Tamm 2020).

Simon and Tamm also argue—and I would like to dwell on this here—that approaching the Anthropocene makes it necessary to break with linear, processual or developmental temporalities. The planetary crisis is producing sudden and radical changes with results that cannot be predicted, which requires putting more effort into elaborating on notions of historical disruptions (Simon and Tamm 2020). Simon describes the Anthropocene as an unprecedented event, a rupture between previous experience and expectations for the future, and, as such, it cannot be narrated. He explains that we can construct a continuous story about how it happened but cannot grasp the Anthropocene itself and its consequences, because it is a radically new phenomenon (see Simon 2015, 2017, 2020). I assume that the main consequence of such historical sensitivity is the impossibility of closing the story, which therefore provides neither the full meaning of the representation of the past nor a lesson from the past for the reader.

This way of understanding the historicity of our times is not new. It has been circulating in Western societies since the Second World War, at which time it had already become a challenge for those who attempted to articulate it in narrative form. As a result of the wartime experience, the conviction that Western societies were heading in the right direction was fading, and modern coherent stories of economic and technological progress and emancipation were increasingly subjected to questioning. A sense of confusion and instability dominated, as well as the conviction that no one was able to predict what the future might hold (Gumbrecht 2013).

Nonetheless, treating the Anthropocene as an unprecedented change may have great persuasive value. If we show audiences that the world is in an unprecedented situation, it will be easier to mobilize them and convince them to act quickly. Conversely, if we present the situation as an element of long-term and continuous change, our listeners will believe that it is nothing new and does not require radical decisions. Coherent narratives domesticate the Anthropocene, reconfiguring it into something natural and harmless (e.g. Simon 2020).

Chakrabarty, Simon and Tamm all encounter impassés in their considerations, as they recognize the contradictions in the Anthropocene historical subject. These impassés concern the universality and transdisciplinarity of such a history. The response to the Anthropocene seems to require the production of a universal history,

while this way of presenting historical knowledge has been discredited as an instrument of Western imperialism. On the one hand, a universal narrative is justified because the agent in the Anthropocene, as well as the potential victim of the new era, is that of humans as a species. On the other hand, however, the participation of various social and political groups in the exploitation of the planet, which has led to the disturbance of the Earth's system(s) and continues to destabilize it, is very uneven; therefore, it is difficult to use the homogeneous figure of humanity, as this would violate the principle of justice (Chakrabarty 2009, 2018a).

A transdisciplinary approach combining the practice and knowledge of life sciences, Earth system science, social sciences and the humanities is also indispensable to a historical narrative of the environmental crisis. However, as a separate paradigm, Earth system science, within which the concept of the Anthropocene was constructed, cannot be integrated with other disciplines of science. Due to the incommensurable differences, when discussing the phenomenon they label as the Anthropocene, each speaks of something else. Therefore, cooperation between these fields of science encounters problems and is more at risk of errors (e.g. Simon 2019; Chakrabarty 2019).

## The Question of Readership

The above-demonstrated important insights and recommendations are focused on reconfiguring the historical, but in doing so they ignore an important issue related to reflection on historical writing: the relationship between historians and their audiences in the Anthropocene era, including the question of the contract that environmental historiography can establish with its readers when it tries to support societies that challenge the planetary crisis. I think it is the process of reception of historiography that may be crucial in answering the question of what sort of environmental history we need. If historians wish to intervene in public debates on environmental crises, they have to consider what their audience makes of their intervention.

Historical writing is, after all, a communicative action which has a sender and receiver. An important element in the process of reading history is the relationship between the historian and the reader. It is inscribed in the text that assigns specific positions to the author and readers. The reading contract established by the text can influence the reception of the knowledge it contains, as well as the relationships that the reader builds with other people, the world, and the planet. Just to be clear, I am focused here on the reading contract that each and every one of us historians inscribes in their writing; I am not focused on the social contract between scientists, researchers, academia and society, states, and power.

Although history theory has for many years been focused on historical writing as a communicative action, it has paid little attention to the question of reader and reception. This question was introduced into the debate by Kalle Pihainen, who argues that historiography is a genre of writing in which the author and the reader are bound by a pact of reference. Under this agreement both acknowledge the separation

between fact and fiction, and the author is committed to writing about what is real and true. Unlike fictional writing, in which, according to Pihlainen, the author commits himself primarily to providing meaning for his readers, historical writing provides extra-textual evidence for presented accounts of past reality (e.g. in the form of quotations from sources and footnotes) (Pihlainen 2017: 115–131).

Pihlainen uses this definition of the reading contract in historical writing to make several claims, aiming to first point out the distinction between historical and fictional writing (Pihlainen 2017: 62–81) and second to grasp the features of historical narrative. These confines of genre impinge on historical narrative because, he argues, a focus on referring to extra-textual evidence clogs up the story and prevents it from closing. This in turn makes historiography less entertaining than fictional writing, because it will not provide easy interpretations of the past (Pihlainen 2017: 62–81). It also means that the reader reads in a certain way; as if the text is supposed to tell the truth and represent reality. Because of this, the reader is conditioned to constantly question what is presented to them (Pihlainen 2017: 83–98). Finally, the reader is thus active here: they examine the account presented by the author and give meaning to the facts provided. They are not a passive figure but merely a recipient of the message or lesson designed by the historian. This means that the reader, together with the author, becomes a co-creator of the text: they share with the author the task of presenting and giving meaning to the past. The reader is emancipated, endowed with agency and free to lead the reading process (Pihlainen 2017: 83–98).<sup>1</sup>

## Egalitarian Historiography

The only comments from theorists of history participating in the debate on the relationship between historians and their readers is Simon's attempt to influence the addressee and mobilize them to act using the rhetoric of an unprecedented event. Meanwhile, discontinuous stories combining different time scales and experimenting with the inclusion of inhuman protagonists may, due to their complexity, multi-threading, and lack of closure, create an impression that historical writing is clumsy and inconclusive. This way of reconstructing the past makes it difficult to create strong, unambiguous stories that could serve as an instrument for political mobilization. This is because it will not produce powerful images of reality and visions of change that could integrate people and drive their political activity.

I claim, however, that generating complex, voluminous, inconclusive and ambiguous narratives is a suitable practice for two reasons. Firstly, “strong” narratives can be ineffective, because the reader makes use of stories about the past beyond the author's control. Knowledge about the reception process generated by literary

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<sup>1</sup> The reader contract in historical writing has also been dealt with by Ahlbäck (2007), who analysed the possibilities of using literary theory resources to investigate the reader issue in historical writing (Ahlbäck 2007) and Marek Tamm, who proposed a pragmatic approach to the question of historical truth with the concept of “truth pact” (Tamm 2014).

studies tells us that we do not know what the reader will do with the message. Thus, the most cleverly composed, persuasive historical narrative, which was supposed to propel people to action, will encounter the problem of indetermination of the reading process. It is based on the conditioned personal and collective cultural experience, combines processes and generates meanings, senses, and images which have a vast number of variants.

Since “strong” stories produce a hierarchical relationship, they can also arouse resistance on the part of addressee, who does not want to be in the position of the one who does not know, passive and unaware, and to whom the author will explain everything. Such narratives may be rejected, because they do not offer recognition and cooperation to the reader but the role of the addressee who passively absorbs the knowledge tabled.

Secondly, the coherent, persuasive stories with a “strong” thesis enter into the didactic logic that produce an asymmetric relationship with the reader. Building an asymmetric relationship between academia and society is an unsuitable solution, simply because an unequal future is not a better future. Responses to the environmental crisis should be democratic and not reproduce inequality.

To describe the equal and unequal relationships among the historian, the reader and actors represented in historical writing, the ideas of Jacques Rancière are highly relevant. He has offered an extended discussion of the relationship between politics and aesthetics, in which he addresses the issues of political engagement of art, the relationship between a form of artistic presentation and the social world, and questions of visibility, identity, and agency. He is concerned with the philosophy of aesthetics but rarely discusses the objects of visual art, and the main focus of his analysis and examples is literature and, less frequently, historiography. In his opinion, aesthetics is a specific sphere of activity that produces forms of “distribution of the sensible” (Rancière 2004a: 12–13). The distribution of the sensible, in turn, involves selecting, combining, dividing, exposing and obscuring perceptual content and thereby granting or not granting visibility, position and agency to individuals and groups. Aesthetics is thus strongly related to politics, as Rancière puts it, as it “defines what is visible or not in a common space, endowed with a common language.” Politics, on the other hand, “revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and possibilities of time” (Rancière 2004a: 12–13). Articulations of the sensual can be democratic and produce images of egalitarian forms of relationships among things, people and events. Rancière treats historical writing as a space of aesthetics, as indicated by his analysis of the writing of the *Annales* school in *Names of History*, in which he reads the texts of historians in the same way as in his other works he reads Flaubert’s novels and from which he expects similar practices of sharing the sensual as from art forms (Rancière 1994).

In Rancière’s view, the pedagogical process is hierarchical, because it is based on two non-egalitarian premises that are reproduced in the course of teaching. First, central to the teacher is the premise of the student’s ignorance. This is the first knowledge they pass on to the student: the knowledge that the student themselves does not know and is not capable of acquiring on their own, and so everything must be



explained by the teacher. Teaching is thus a continuous reproduction of inequality. In other words, the teacher's role is to bridge the gap between their own knowledge and the student's ignorance. However, to reduce this gap, the teacher must constantly reproduce it (Rancière 2009: 8–9).

Second, it also assumes that the teacher knows the path the student must take to move from ignorance to knowledge. Thus, the teacher transfers their knowledge or knowledge from the textbook to the student in a process of uninterrupted transmission in the right order and in the right doses. The teacher explains to the student how to understand images, texts and actions. The knowledge that the pupil acquires should be identical to the teacher's knowledge, as the teaching process assumes the homogeneity of cause and effect. At the same time, the knowledge that the student acquires on his own is the knowledge of the ignorant. It is the duty of the teacher to interrupt his disordered acquisition of knowledge (Rancière 2009: 8–9).

Rancière points out that the positions of teacher and student can be changed without altering the asymmetrical nature of this relationship. Knowledge remains on one side, ignorance on the other. It is possible to claim that students should replace teachers and, for example, workers tell the intelligentsia how to change the world. But social change begins with the principle of equality, which means that teachers and students, workers and intelligentsia, are equal. The opposition of passivity and activity must be rejected—the student is active, just as the teacher is. They observe, select, and interpret data. By a similar principle, the reader is active, and the opposition of writing and reading should be rejected (Rancière 2009: 17–23).

In reality, the student knows a lot of things that they have learned on their own. The knowledge acquired from various sources is mediated by images, texts and actions, which the pupil reads and explains to themselves in their own way without reproducing the content and meaning contained in them by the author. The student may be accompanied in this by an ignorant teacher (i.e. a teacher who ignores inequality). They need not be ignorant but need only separate their knowledge from their status as master. The teacher does not pass on their knowledge to their students but seeks it with them (Rancière 2009: 10–11, 13–14).

Following Rancière's way of thinking, one can argue that historiography has a strong political potential: it can reconfigure the visibility of things, people and events, divide and communalize places, resources and modes of expression, and make various forms of collective life conceivable. What is not at stake, however, is history's ability to change social reality through critical instruments that expose and explain its mechanisms. Rancière has challenged this approach in a number of texts pointing to the undemocratic implications of thinking in terms of surface and depth, and higher and false consciousness (e.g. Rancière 2004b).

Rancière postulates a historiography that brings no message or lesson to contemporary society. In Rancière's view, the formulation and communication of such meanings would be inegalitarian, as it would introduce preferences and hierarchies of interests of groups or candidates for power (Rancière 1999: 98–100). Rancière does not define the recipient of historiography, so it can be anyone, and he is not afraid to entrust them with the task of making meaning or bringing closure to the ambiguous and unfinished historical representation. The attempt to control the reception of the



presentation, to impose a political thesis, enters into a didactic logic that produces an asymmetrical relationship with the reader.

The accurate course of action would be to seek historiographical forms that offer a reading contract which establishes equality between the historian and their audience. It is important to consider what textual means make such contracts and how equality contracts are practiced. This would likely require more analysis of how historians construct reading contracts. Preliminarily, it can be argued that egalitarian texts have open-ended conclusions and do not provide explicit explanations of reality and lessons for the future but instead leave it to readers to make meanings of the representation and draw lessons from the past.

Therefore, it seems that history should not follow the expectations of those who seek historiography with strong moral lessons for the present day. Complex and ambiguous historiography produces a more equal relationship between historians and their audience. Due to the lack of closure of the story, and thus without ascribing to it holistic meaning or moral lessons, in this type of writing the task of the reader is to make the narrative coherent and assign meaning to it. It does not specify who can be the addressee, so it can be anyone. It transfers the disposition to close the story and create its meaning to the reader.

It should be added that, according to Pihlainen, due to the character of their practices, historians' standard writing is unattractive, complicated and ambiguous. This is because historiography is constrained by a referential pact that imposes the obligation to provide a detailed reconstruction of the facts. Pihlainen claims that historians digging in source material struggle to consider the degree of its credibility, as well as discuss its various interpretations. In turn, this generates writing that is heterogeneous, incoherent, and excessively long. Of course, there are historians who move away from the commitments of their field in favour of producing compelling narratives with seemingly greater political and commercial potential. However, they might become commercially successful at the expense of discarding a detailed reconstruction of the historical past and the representation of their complexity. Pihlainen uses these observations to present an argument that historians should invest less energy in looking for new narrative forms for representations of the past and examine those we already have, because, surprisingly, they seem to meet some of the requirements needed to challenge the new circumstances we find ourselves facing (Pihlainen 2016).

## Conclusion

An analysis of historical theory's response to the challenges of the Anthropocene era suggests several adjustments to the production of representations of the past. The reading contract in historical writing requires changes but not radical ones. The new version of the contract with the audience would confirm the principle that has been gaining importance for several decades, which postulates the engagement of historians in responding to the social, political and environmental problems of the contemporary world. It would involve the participation of human and inhuman protagonists

in the historical narrative on equal terms and assembling threads of radically different temporality, from a short-term story to a history counted in the millions of years. The old rule that the historian seeks to diligently reconstruct historical facts would be preserved. There would also be an article—resulting from this principle—about the discontinuity and complexity of historical narratives and the reluctance of authors to make their stories more attractive by simplifying them and adding significant meanings. Although this would be a new clause in the contract, it would nevertheless sanction the existing state of affairs, as I have already mentioned, of historians who are driven by the obligation to reconstruct facts and produce complex, discontinuous narratives devoid of lessons or morals. The last element of the contract and, at the same time, its political framework would be an equality imperative which establishes the relationship between the historian and the reader as equal.

Wynn's speech from 2019 partially fulfils the above contract. Just as the contract does, Wynn postulates the involvement of historians in the environmental crisis and in the search for visions of a better future. He rightly criticizes the apocalyptic rhetoric of shock and despair, which is often employed by scholars wishing to raise audiences' awareness and guide their actions. Wynn's narratives of hope could be justified if they offered discontinuous, open-ended stories and invited readers to co-create them. However, he explains them to the audience, gives instructions on how to relate them to our current problems, and transforms them into a lesson for the reader. The two coherent, teleologically ordered life stories of Dansereau and Macpherson, each with a clear message embedded in them, recreate the pedagogical logic with its hierarchical ordering of the author and the reader. Meeting the proposed contract, environmental history cannot offer a lesson in the Anthropocene era which projects the passive audience absorbing what it teaches. In these new circumstances, history can remain a teacher of life only insofar as the addressee, discussing the stories delivered, gives them meaning and draws their own lessons from them.

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