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Book Review

Book Review: *At Home in the Anthropocene*

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About the Author

Nicole Seymour's most recent book is *Glitter*, part of Bloomsbury's "Object Lessons" series. Her previous monographs include *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination*, which won the 2015 Ecocriticism Award from the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, and *Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age*, which was listed in the *Chicago Review of Books*' "Best Nature Writing of 2018." She has held fellowships at the Rachel Carson Center in Munich and at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities in Edinburgh. She is currently Associate Professor of English at California State University, Fullerton.

Book Review

Nicole Seymour

Propen, Amy D. 2022. *At Home in the Anthropocene.* Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

"Bomb cyclones," megafires, commercial development, and other environmental disasters do not merely upset human habitats. They also upset those of our nonhuman kin, displacing them temporarily or even permanently, and often bringing us all in closer proximity. If ecology is the study of home—the word coming from the Greek *oikos*, for household—then the very foundations of that pursuit have been destabilized. Amy D. Propen's 2022 book *At Home in the Anthropocene* takes this situation as its premise, asking us to explore "what counts as home?" (29) in such a fraught era.

Divided into five chapters and two interspersed "interludes," the book tells us various contemporary stories of losing as well as (re)making home. To give just a few examples, these stories focus on an injured mockingbird being cared for by volunteers at a California wildlife rehabilitation center, an Oregon woman who famously opened her house to a fire-displaced mountain lion, the construction of a wildlife corridor to allow animals to safely cross over freeways in Los Angeles, and efforts to determine the impacts of wind farms on Vermont black bears' patterns of eating and hibernation. Propen analyzes various types of texts as her primary sources, from animal behaviors and scientific data to public policy and institutional messaging—such as the campus police alerts she received when mountain lions were spotted on her campus at the University of California, Santa Barbara in 2019. Throughout, Propen reminds us that home is not static but in fact defined in part by movement: "when species are unable to move between places or return home—when connectivity is threatened or lost—then so potentially is biodiversity, and so potentially is all of our ability to thrive" (21).

Propen's analyses are guided by several foundational concepts. One is philosopher Lori Gruen's notion of "entangled empathy": an "'experiential process . . . in which we

recognize we are in relationships with others and are called upon to be responsive and responsible in these relationships by attending to another's needs, interests, desires, vulnerabilities, hopes, and sensitivities'" (2015, 6). Another is the "gift mindset," articulated by Potawatomi biologist Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013), which entails recognizing that nonhuman lives constitute gifts—crucially, not "resources." In response, humans must figure out how to reciprocate those gifts generously and empathetically. (Thinking back to Propen's point about movement, "the gift of room to move" [21], such as that enabled by a wildlife corridor, might be an invaluable one to offer to nonhumans.) Finally, Propen takes a posthuman approach that refuses the idea of wilderness as something somewhere "out there." Instead, she shows us how our everyday patterns and decisions impact nonhuman lives and livelihoods, whether we recognize it or not.

One of this book's greatest strengths is its engaging, accessible style. For example, Propen weaves simple yet profound personal anecdotes throughout her analyses, from detailed narrations of her daily nature walks to insider knowledge of the "baby bird room" at the wildlife sanctuary—she's one of their volunteers—to descriptions of her experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced all humans to experience their homes differently, for better or worse. In this way, Propen models the kind of intimacy and sustained attention that is so often lacking in our Anthropocene regimes. Similarly, she encourages us to consider the individual perspectives of nonhumans, such as when she intersperses the story of the Oregon woman with italicized narration concerning the mountain lion in question: "*At first, the smoke intuitively prompted her to leave her den. . . . but then the sound of the helicopters had also spooked her, and so she kept wandering*" (47).

If I were pressed to offer criticisms of *At Home in the Anthropocene*, I would point to its heavy reliance on a few select thinkers, especially Gruen and Wall Kimmerer, who appear on the vast majority of the book's pages. As important as their work is—as many readers will know, Kimmerer's 2013 book, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, has become a mainstream bestseller—I wished for a greater diversity of perspectives, and more citations of Indigenous thinkers in particular. As someone outside of Propen's specific field of environmental rhetoric, I also wanted to hear more about how she sees the book fitting into that field. What new or different approaches does it model? How might it push the field forward? In short, at the risk of sounding cynical, I wanted the book to "sell itself" more—but mainly so that readers can fully appreciate its intellectual contributions and context.

But its non-academic contributions are clear and, arguably, most important. For one thing, *At Home* offers us clear calls to action that can mitigate the kinds of disasters

described above. For instance, Propen ends the book by urging us to communicate environmental knowledge and memories to younger generations, especially given the problem of what Daniel Pauly has called "shifting baseline syndrome" (2015, 430): the way that species losses and ecological changes can become normalized as past memories fade. We can also engage "more fully in environmental policy- and decision-making that accounts for humans as well as other animals and life-forms and the ecosystems we share" (134). Finally, we might learn to adapt to the presence of wildlife that human actions have brought in the first place—such as, for instance, the coyotes that are now ubiquitous to my urban home base of Southern California. As activist Beth Pratt-Bergstrom puts it, "'wildlife can adapt to human spaces. The real question is: Can *we* adapt to wildlife?'" (2016, 90). And in fact, Propen asserts that "[i]n the Anthropocene, 'home' . . . means an openness to adaption and a willingness to rethink our assumptions of boundaried places" (2022, 109). Home, in other words, is wherever intermeshed, dynamic life can flourish.

As I was finishing this review, the reports had begun circulating in my news feed of the death of that famed L.A. mountain lion—P-22—whose stranding in an urban park indirectly sparked the freeway corridor construction referenced above. Sadly, one of the major causes of his decline was injuries sustained from being struck by a vehicle. Clearly, human and nonhuman lifeways clash in myriad ways. But we might take heart in how Propen's book honors the individual life of an animal like P-22 as well as his larger influence. More broadly, while there is clearly much work to be done in terms of (re)making home in the Anthropocene, Propen has given us both the motivation and a roadmap for doing it.

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