

SENSE

MAKING

OF AN

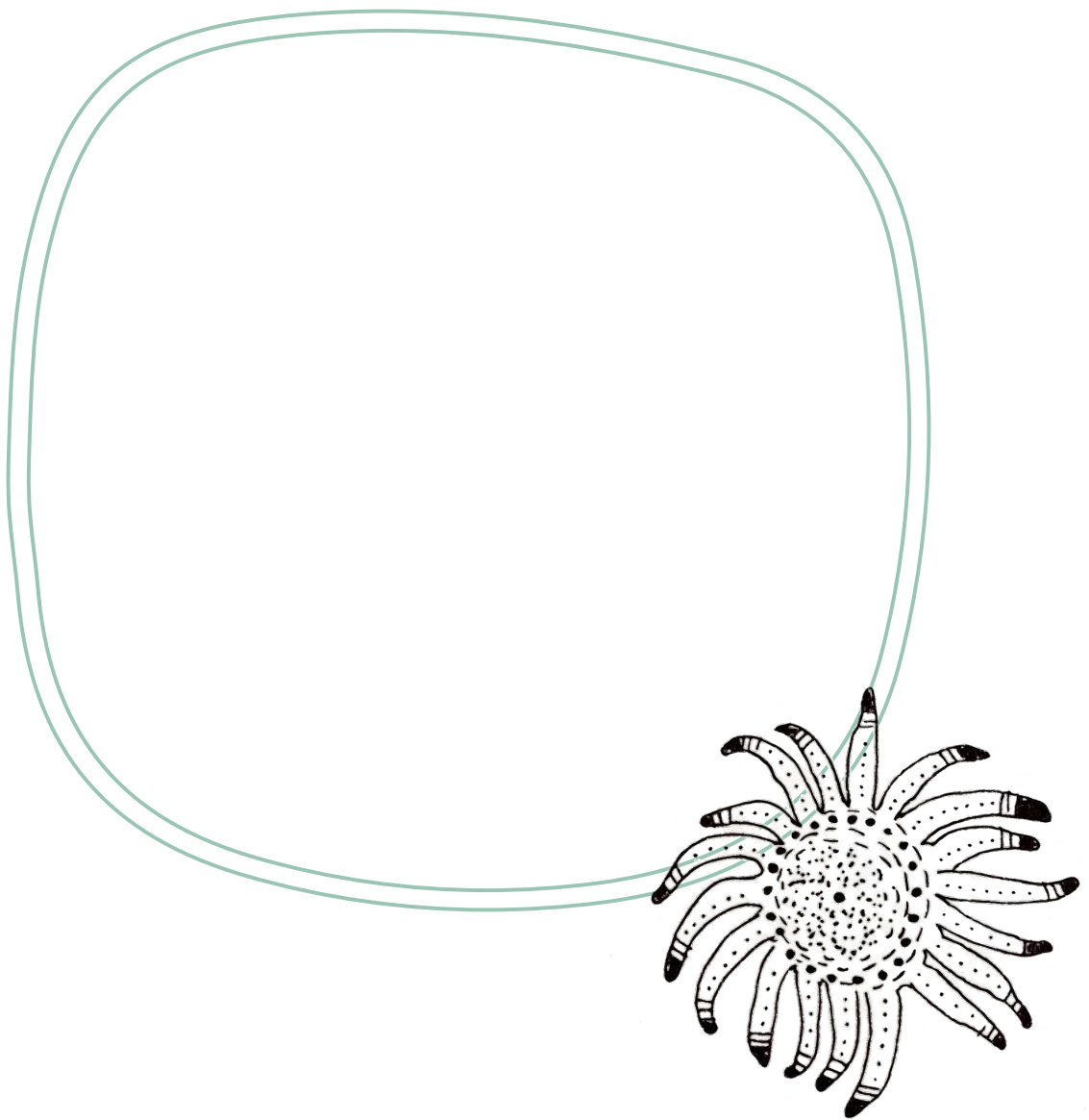
*a companion guide
to the anthropocene*

EPOCH





To begin, we invite you to write one sentence that describes your relationship with the land you are currently on.



HOW TO USE THIS WORKBOOK

*this book is yours to write in,
draw in, cross out, or tear up.*

The exercises that follow are invitations to reflect on the idea of a global epoch called the Anthropocene. These prompts are not all-emcompassing, not a map for how to get from Point A to Point B. Rather, they throw up sparks, lead one astray from master narratives & leave their meaning up for you to decide.

What are we talking about when we talk about "the Anthropocene"?

Part I of this guide will introduce you to this proposed epoch and prompt you to explore your own perspectives on it.

What is it like to be living during this time?

Whatever you choose to call the times you are living in, **Part II** hopes to bring you into deeper relation with them.

How do you want to live inside these changing worlds?

In **Part III**, we offer prompts for considering ways you would like to be living differently in the times that you are in.



*Part I:
An introduction*

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ANTHROPOCENE

In the year 2000, atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen and ecologist Eugene F. Stoermer penned an opinion in which they declared that our planet was no longer in the post-glacial epoch named the Holocene (1). Instead, they argued that humanity now has a larger impact on the planet than any active geological force, an impact visible in the earth's stratigraphy (rock layers). They called for this epoch to be officially named the Anthropocene. In 2016, a group of scientists formally recommended that the term "Anthropocene" be adopted as a new epoch by the International Geological Congress (2), citing the "magnitude, variety, and longevity of human-induced changes" to the earth now detectable as chemical and physical deposits in the layers of our planet (3). According to these scientists, this necessitated a new way to describe the current geologic time period; a way that registers humanity as the most impactful environmental force on the planet.

The concept of "The Anthropocene" (from the Greek *anthropos*, meaning human) quickly spread from scientific debate to mainstream discourse, where its implications resonated on levels far beyond the geologic. The term has grown to represent a political statement that "we" humans are so powerful and so destructive that we've quite literally written our names in the layers of rock that we walk on. "Anthropocene" signifies that humans have now "overwhelmed the great forces of nature" (4) to spell our own doom in the shape of habitat destruction, rising CO2 levels, and industrial waste. It has become both an environmental death knell and, in some circles, a call to turn our folly into more masterful control via technological innovation and geoengineering.

(1) Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000.

(2) Davis & Todd, 2017.

(3) Lewis & Maslin, 2015.

(4) Steffen et al 2007.

This workbook takes for granted that the harms at the heart of the term Anthropocene – climate change, extinction, pollution, and so on – are devastating to life of all kinds and must be worked against. But it does not take for granted how this epoch is defined. There have been many spirited debates about the notion of the Anthropocene, and the ways in which it does not account for unequal power relations among the humans it describes. A small proportion of the population is living "the good life," while many more humans and more-than humans face domination, suffering, and death. We catalog a few terms and counter-proposals in subsequent pages as food for thought while you make your way through this book. They include disputes over when this epoch began, if "Anthropos" is the correct prefix, and who gets to decide a global epoch's name.

This workbook does not aim to provide answers to those questions, nor could it. In fact, this workbook follows the idea that the Anthropocene, and the discourse that surrounds it, is not "an empirical no-brainer, but instead a reflection of reinforcement of the anthropocentric actionable worldview that generated 'the Anthropocene' – with all its looming emergencies – in the first place" (5). That is, we believe the debates around this term are useful for our reflection, but not because they will deliver an accurate start date or master narrative of our crises. In this book, we aim to use the word Anthropocene without reifying its inevitability.

We, the authors of this workbook, suggest that the term "Anthropocene" is indeed most valuable as a sort of metaphorical lens through which we might unpack the assumptions, alienations, and hierarchies that flow through our varied relations to the many changing and already changed worlds. The term may be best considered as a suitcase that holds together our baggage (6): a bunch of dirty laundry about what it means to be alive "now." There is dirty laundry in the historical sense – of hidden or obscured stories that each of us must uncover in order to repair – but also in the immediate sense of the ongoing mess (and ongoing-ness): laundry that is washed and sorted only to be muddied again and again. There are no singular or final answers.

Many of the questions and prompts in this book are intentionally vague and up to interpretation. There are no right responses to these activities. We challenge you to not think too much about if "Anthropocene" is the "real" or "right" term, to rely on intuition wherever possible, and to suspend disbelief when necessary.

(5) Crist, 2013.

(6) A contribution from our colleague, Joan Bratty.

AIRING THE

what are the histories that produced the so-called anthropocene?

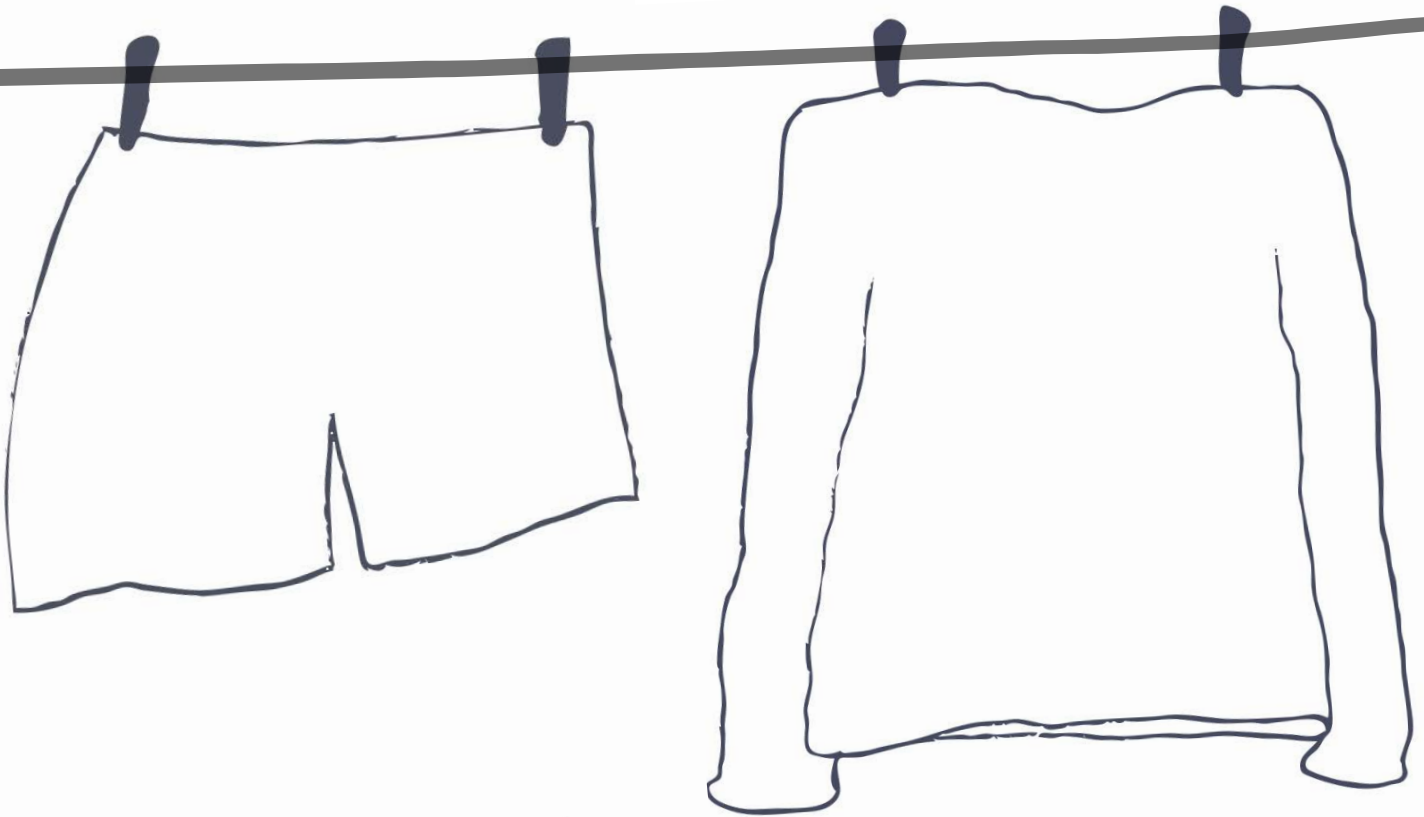
Write some ideas about how we arrived at the conditions of this epoch inside the pieces of clothing below. We're just getting warmed up – no need to capture everything.



DIRTY LAUNDRY

*what questions are you bringing to
this workbook?*

Brainstorm a few questions in the laundry, too. What questions about the Anthropocene are you carrying in your metaphorical suitcase? Feel free to draw more clothing as needed.



AN OVERVIEW

why name an epoch?

With the proposal of the **Anthropocene** came many dissenting voices. An argument about the **Golden Spike**, the moment that could mark the beginning of the Anthropocene in the **stratigraphy** (rock layers), ensued. Was the start of this epoch the invention of the steam engine, or the clearing of forests for agriculture? It quickly became clear that chopping up history into a "before" and an "after" was a fraught task. Moreover, who was the "**we**" that was implicated in this notion of humanity, and the threats to it? It's well known that all human beings do not contribute equally to climate change or ecosystem destruction, and that immense change and suffering has been ongoing for many peoples. Who gets to decide when change and suffering becomes "global?" These questions led one scholar to coin the term **White Manthropocene (1)**.

decolonizing the anthropocene

Some indigenous scholars called for **Decolonizing the Anthropocene (2)** by recognizing that the destruction described by the Anthropocene discourse is not just a recent result of increased emissions and production, but bound up in the colonial encounter and the subsequent genocide of indigenous people, their more-than-human kin, and their ways of life. They argue that indigenous people have lived through many apocalypses already, and that the universal logic of the "Anthropocene" replicates, rather than intervenes in, this violence and erasure.

capitalocene

Some critical social scientists also challenged the notion that our current trajectories were the result of something innately "human." They proposed the idea of the **Capitalocene (3)**, and argued that these circumstances are the result of economies organized around accumulation, enclosure, ownership, and speculation. The problem wasn't human greed or collective moral failure, but highly unequal power relations that allow domination and extraction to continue.

OF THE TERMS

plantationocene

Moving beyond the Capitalocene, other scholars proposed that the processes we seek to describe can be unified under the notion of the plantation: a modernized, mechanized, monocropped relationship to life and to the living world. Thus was born the **Plantationocene**. Early conceptions of this term were accused of reproducing some of the same flaws as the Anthropocene discourse in that they reduced our current conjuncture to a matter of human domination over nature. Black scholars in particular intervened in this debate to argue that our current conditions are fundamentally constituted by human domination over other humans, as well as nature, and that plantations were and are an exemplification of these relations (4). They also emphasized that in the historical black resistance to plantation economy and ecology are lessons and inspiration for how we might choose to structure life differently now.

more-than-human kin

Alongside the geologic changes that will be associated with this time is the extreme loss in abundance and diversity of life on Earth. Indigenous people, organizers, and historians have long argued that the constructed divide between humans and nature is responsible for a worldview that allows such loss of life to take place. This difference-making is also a foundational logic of racism, colonialism, patriarchy, and extraction (5). A recent indigenous-led report on biodiversity loss offers that "partnerships involving two-way healing, two-way knowing and mutual learning have great potential to contribute to the safeguarding of species as long they are based on mutual respect, reciprocity ... and accountability" (6). In this workbook, we use the term **more-than-human** to describe those other lives (including spiritual beings or inanimate beings) with which we seek to re-build, or continue to nurture, two-way healing, two-way knowing, reciprocity and respect.

(1) Di Chiro, 2017.

(2) Davis and Todd, 2017.

(3) Moore, 2017.

(4) Davis et al., 2019.

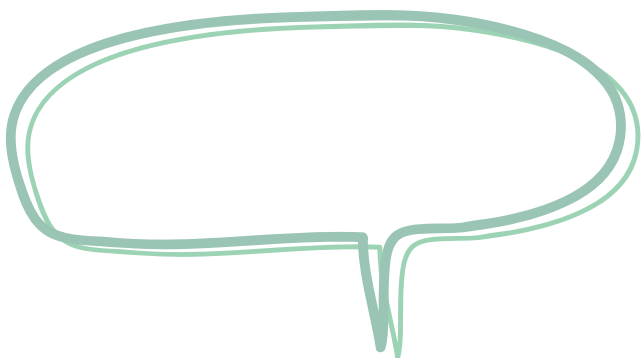
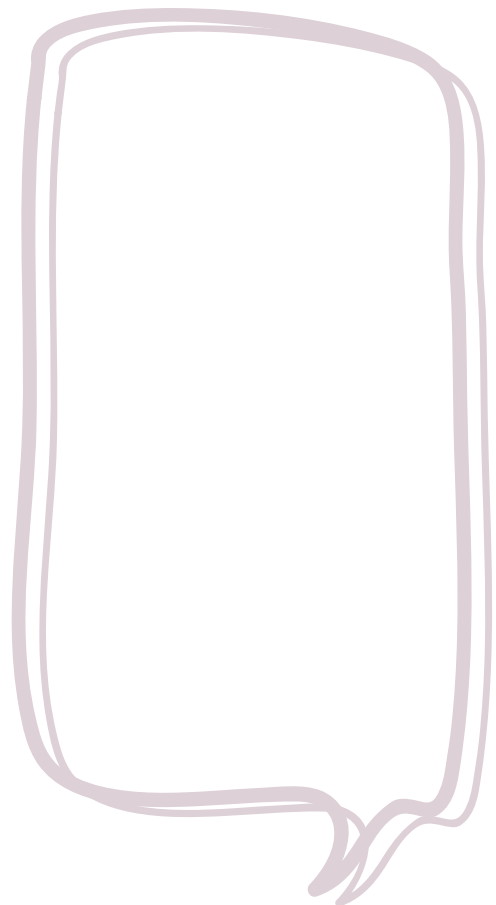
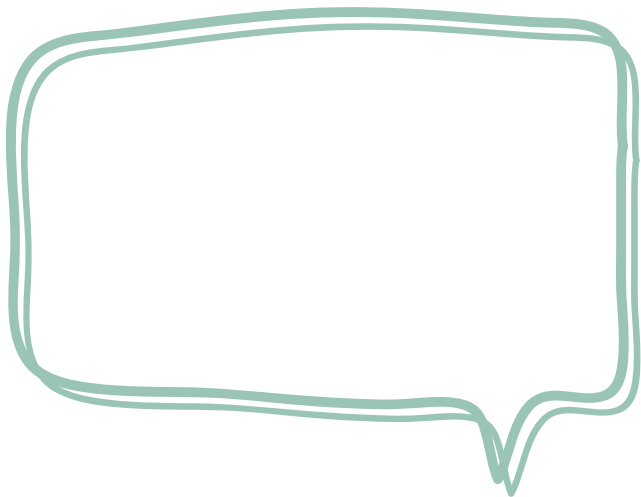
(7) Collard and Dempsey, 2018.

(6) Forest Peoples Programme, 2020.

SPEECH BUBBLES.

what might others say?

The term Anthropocene is still new to many people. A concept like this also takes on different meanings based on each context or conversation. Imagine you were to explain this term to some people around you: what might your parents say? Your neighbor? Your best friend? Consider a number of perspective from people you know, and fill in the bubbles with what they might say. These could be from your imagination, or you might call up some friends and ask what they think of the idea of this epoch. Feel free to draw or name any of your characters.





MIND MAP.

getting comfortable

In the few decades since the term "Anthropocene" was proposed, there has been a lot of debate about which term ought to be used and about if we should rely on the idea of a "globally synchronous" epoch at all.

Spend a few minutes creating a mind map of the terms we reviewed a few pages ago. Is there a concept in this debate with which you resonate with most? One that you don't like as much? What ideas, questions, memories, or beliefs come up for you in relation to these terms? You can start off with whatever term resonates with you most in this moment, or come up with your own name for this epoch and see where it takes you.



Note: in the rest of this workbook, we use the term "Anthropocene" as a placeholder for whatever name you might want to use. If you choose to use a different term, or reject the idea of a named epoch altogether, go forth and cross out Anthropocene to be replaced with your own ideas!

DRAW.

putting yourself in the picture

Take a few minutes to lie down comfortably. Start to imagine yourself in the Anthro-scene. Where do you fit in to these narratives of humanity? Notice how your body feels in response to this question, and where. Pay attention to the scale at which you are most comfortable thinking about the Anthropocene. What impacts or processes of it feel immediate, and which feel distant, or mediated? Why do you think that is? Upon your return to the workbook, draw yourself into the picture, with whatever scenery comes to mind. Add symbols or notes that relate to these questions, and to how your body feels when being placed in this context.

RESEARCH.

Exploring Your Anthropocene(s)

Taking cue from Indigenous scholars who ask us to "Decolonize the Anthropocene" (1) by resisting its universal logic, consider the history of the place that you call home. Jot down the many start dates or inflection points that could be considered a part of the Anthropocene. Pay close attention to local histories of colonialism, slavery, and extraction, and research what you do not know. Take note of these events without feeling bound to linearity. Use the space below to write or draw out your thoughts and findings.

A large, empty, rounded rectangular shape with a double-line border, intended for writing or drawing. The shape is centered on the page and occupies most of the lower half of the document.

(1) Davis & Todd, 2017.

DRAW NATURE.

The concept of the Anthropocene relies on certain distinctions to operate. Namely, the idea that humans are distinct from the natural world. Many critiques of the Anthropocene reject this separation and claim that drawing a line of difference between people and nature is counterproductive to any attempts at living well with the abundance of other life on this planet. There is much to unpack in these kinds of debates, but to start we invite you to draw yourself in relation to "nature," however you imagine it right now.



POP QUIZ

a brief review of terms

B F X C A R B O N Q B O Q T
I P N S U G I M G R Q H F I
O T L G O L D E N S P I K E
D F K A E X T I N C T I O N
I D H C N F L O U R R N Y W
V E Q A P T N M H U H H U M
E C L P N Q A V A Y U B K M
R O A I J T H T E E G V E T
S L U T M X H E I P L U E Z
I O N A Y K F R Q O O V S I
T N D L W F W M O A N C W X
Y I R Y P K D G S P R K H U
J Z Y P P I X P Z T O P S N
Z E N B X N U V I R K S D X



*Part II:
Getting intimate*

Quick check-in:



**WHAT KIND OF
WEATHER
ARE YOU TODAY?**

Write or draw below:

Draw.

Bodily reflections on capitalism.

Collard & Dempsey (2018) urge us to consider the Anthropocene at the level of the body, because "the human body and not the steam engine, and not the clock, was the first machine developed by capitalism", as Federici says. The conception of body-as-machine permitted the body to be caught in a system of subjection, 'whereby its behaviour could be calculated, organized...-a body suited to the regularity...demanded by capitalist work-discipline.'
In the box below, draw your body and its relations with capitalism.



The Net of Critique.

What's beyond examination?

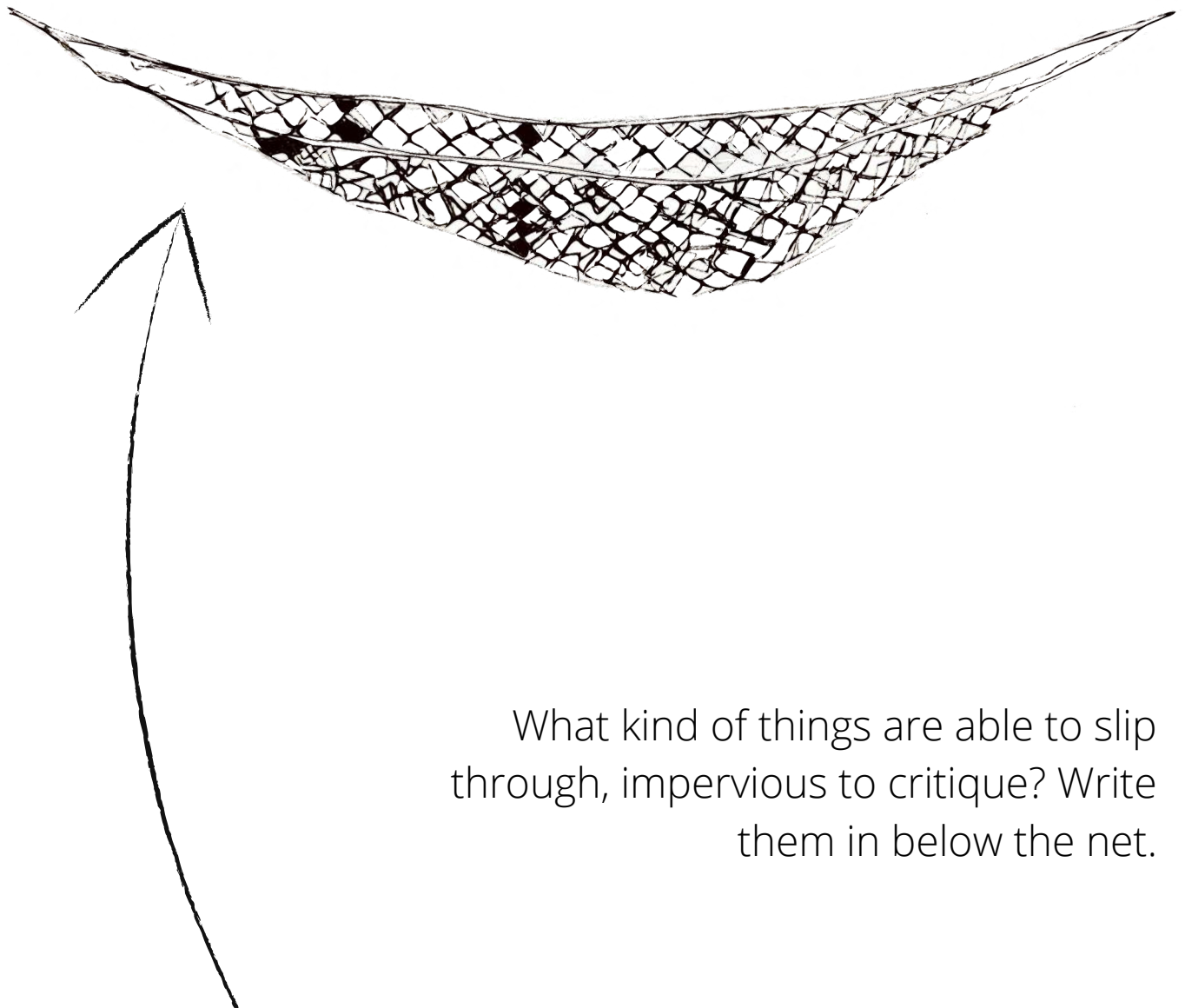
This exercise follows Eileen Crist's suggestion that some major social trends associated with the Anthropocene are allowed to "slip through the net of critique, accepted as givens, and consequently projected as constitutive of future reality" (2017, p. 131). That is, they are taken at face value, as immutable. What dominant trends of the Anthropocene (or modernity in general) tend to be treated as impervious to critique? Who dictates what can be critiqued and what cannot? Can assumptions be unassumed? Can we critique the uncritiqueable? Should we?

Use this space to brainstorm before completing the activity on the next page.



*For example, you might write "consumer culture" if you feel that it's something that goes largely accepted in the world around you

What dominant social ideas, concepts, principles, or actions are subject to critique? Write them above the net.



What kind of things are able to slip through, impervious to critique? Write them in below the net.

Who holds the net?

List.

Revolutionary Relationships

Toni Cade Bambara said that we will need "revolutionary relationships," if we want a revolution (1). Extending this notion beyond our human kin, make a quick list of some of the more-than-human beings you have close relationships with. These could be beings that live in your home (or inside you, such as bacteria), feed you, make your life possible in some way, are culturally or spiritually important to you, or anything else you can think of.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.



(1) "On the Issue of Roles," cited by Alexis Pauline Gumbs in *Pleasure Activism* by adrienne maree brown.

Map.

Enclosure in the Anthropocene

Enclosure describes the process by which land is taken out of the commons and put into private ownership and use. This enclosure of land may also lead to an enclosure of labor, as subsisting off the land is no longer an option, and people must sell their labor in order to survive. Many argue that acts of enclosure are closely tied to the Anthropocene, as they transform what types of lives and relations with the land are permissible, force people into the "formal" economy, and prioritize private ownership in order to consolidate power and profit. Reflect on when and where land or labor was enclosed for or by your ancestors, biological or otherwise. In the space below, draw a memory map of what you know, have heard stories about, or speculate about these lives.



MIND MAP.

dis-tance in the anthropocene

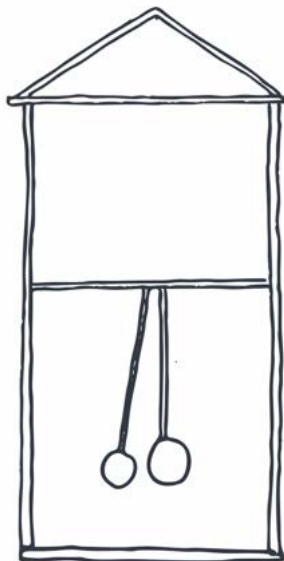
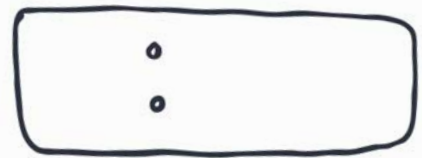
In this workbook, we have asked you to consider the embodied and proximate nature of this epoch called the Anthropocene. However, many of us do not experience all of its impacts in close proximity. Instead, they are mediated by borders, city planning, supply chains, wealth, race, gender, and more. We may also be separated from things, people, or places that we miss and long for. Here, we invite you to create a mind map of what you are distanced from, and how, under current conditions. We invite you to start with words like: *dispossessed, dislocated, disassociated, or distanced*, and see what flows from there.



DRAW.

telling time

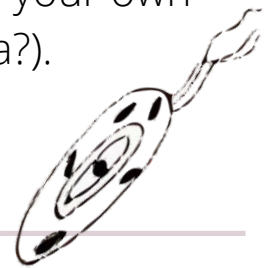
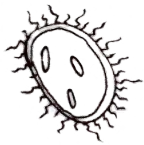
We all tell times in different ways. You might tell time by the schedule human and more-than-human animals need to be fed on, by a time difference with a loved one who is far away, or on a calendar that extends far longer than 12 months, to name just a few examples. Below, we invite you to draw and label 5 clocks that structure your life right now.



BONUS: draw at least 1 clock that you know exists, but that you are not in touch with right now.

WRITE A LETTER TO YOUR HOLOBIONT

"Human" is a tenuous term. The idea of the "holobiont" posits that instead of singular beings, "humans" are really a multiplicity, made up of lots of different species that support us and allow us to exist. The idea that we are one thing, but many at the same time, is provocative. Respond to this by writing a letter to your own holobiont (may we suggest your gut bacteria?).



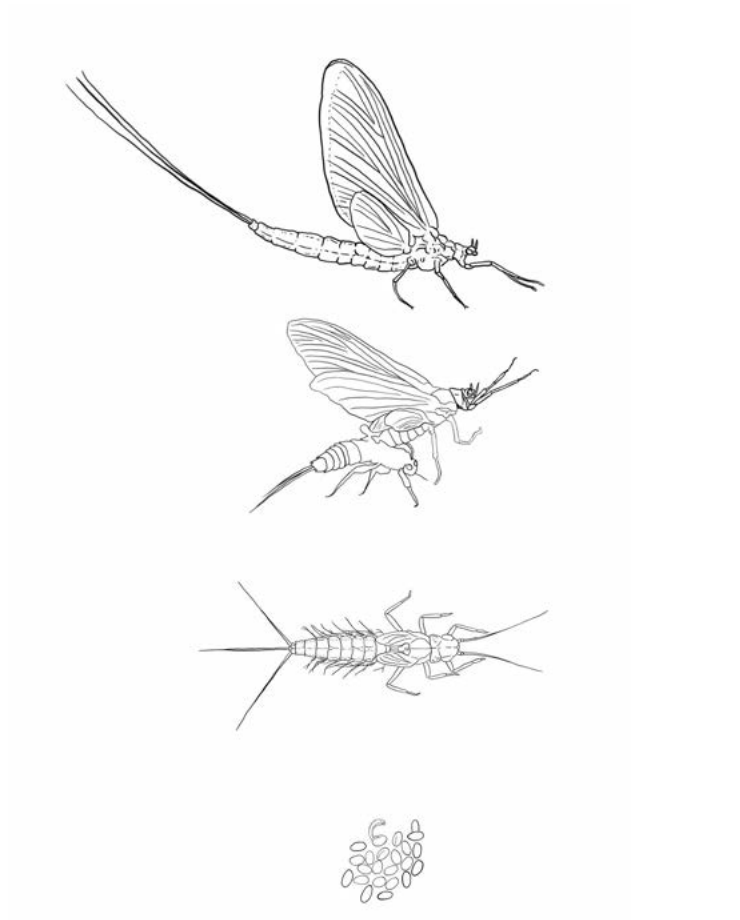
WHO IS THE WE OF THE ANTHROPOCENE?

RESPOND IN ONLY SIX-WORD STORIES:

HOW WE DOING?

a mind-body check-in

Take some slow breaths, just for the heck of it. Look around.
How are these exercises making you feel so far? Have you
moved your body recently? Had a glass of water?





*Part III:
Living*

Free Write.

Redefining the Good Life

In response to claims that the Anthropocene has resulted from humanity's quest for the "good life," some have argued for a reevaluation of what actually makes life good. This involves considering how people's lives that are categorically bad by the standards of modernity (abundance of wealth, access to technology, etc.) are actually very rich and meaningful by the standards of things like depth of relationships, community, and connection to the more-than-human world. Part of the work of addressing the Anthropocene, then, is to unfix the standard notion of what makes a "good life," and to highlight what type of good life we (individually and collectively) want to be striving for.

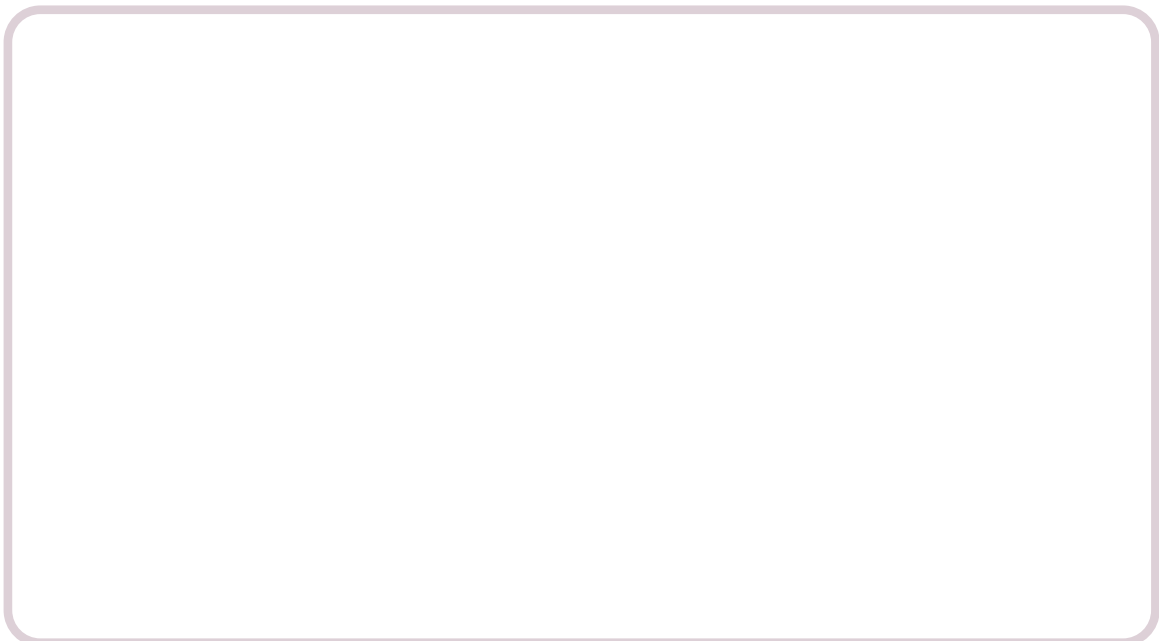
Is your life "good"? Don't overthink it, just answer.

yup.

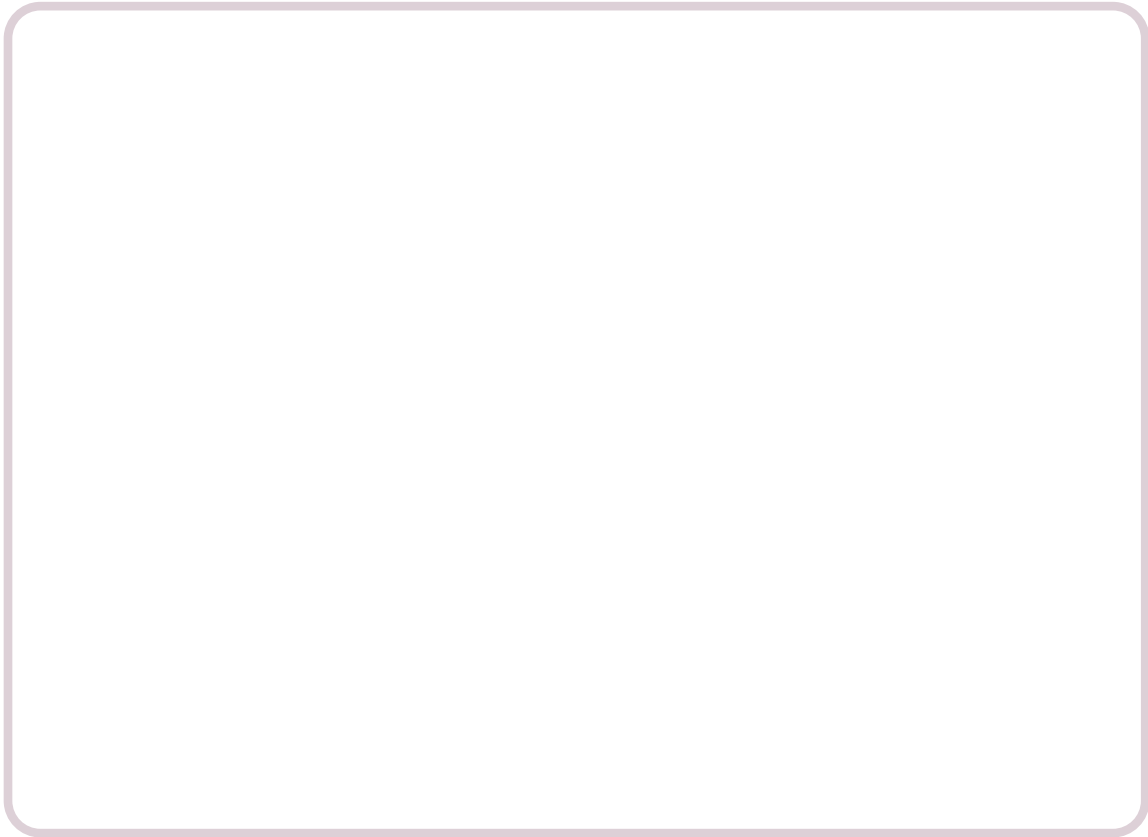
mmmmm no.

Some parts are!

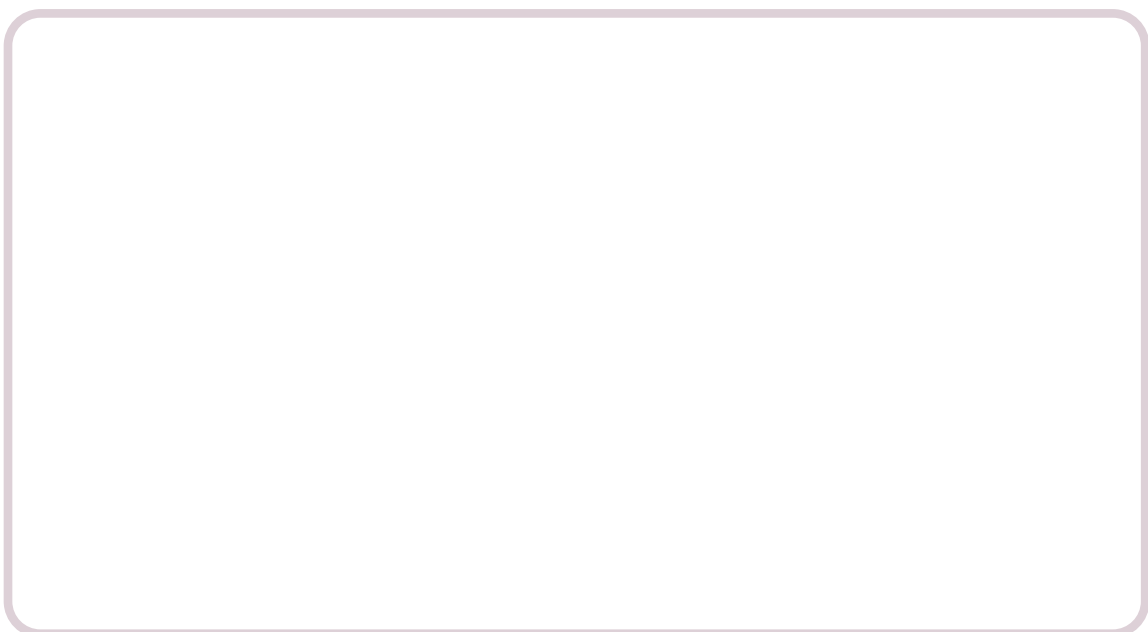
What would make your life closer to "good"?

A large, empty rounded rectangular box with a light purple border, intended for a free write response to the question above.

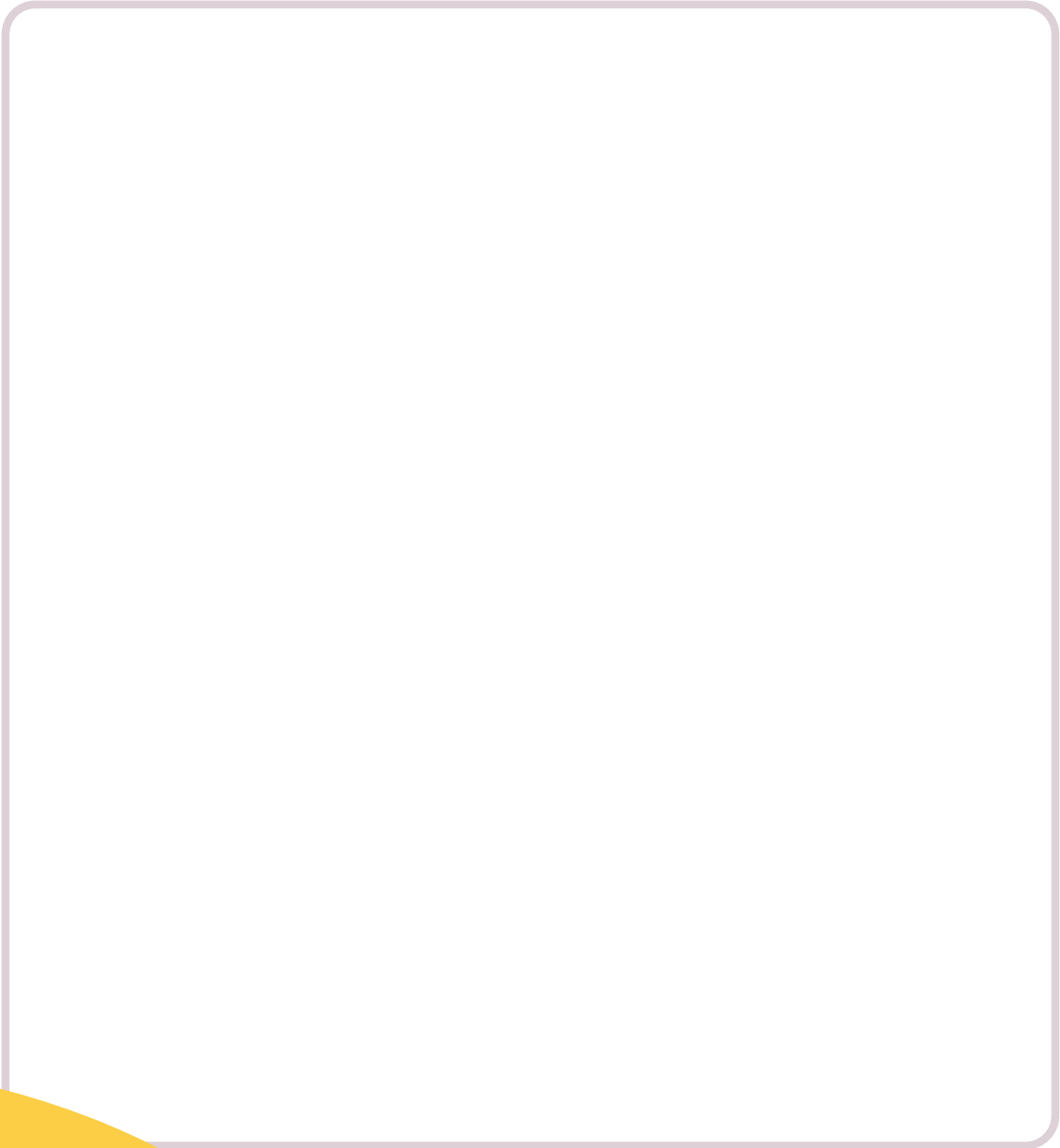
What is your utopia? Or the best version of life you can imagine.

A large, empty rounded rectangular box with a thin purple border, intended for writing a utopian vision.

Look carefully at what you've written above. What makes this a utopian vision for you? Where do standards of modernity (technology, wealth, status) fit in? What other values come through in your vision?

A large, empty rounded rectangular box with a thin purple border, intended for reflecting on the utopian vision.

What obstacles or structures stand between you and the ideals just reflected on?



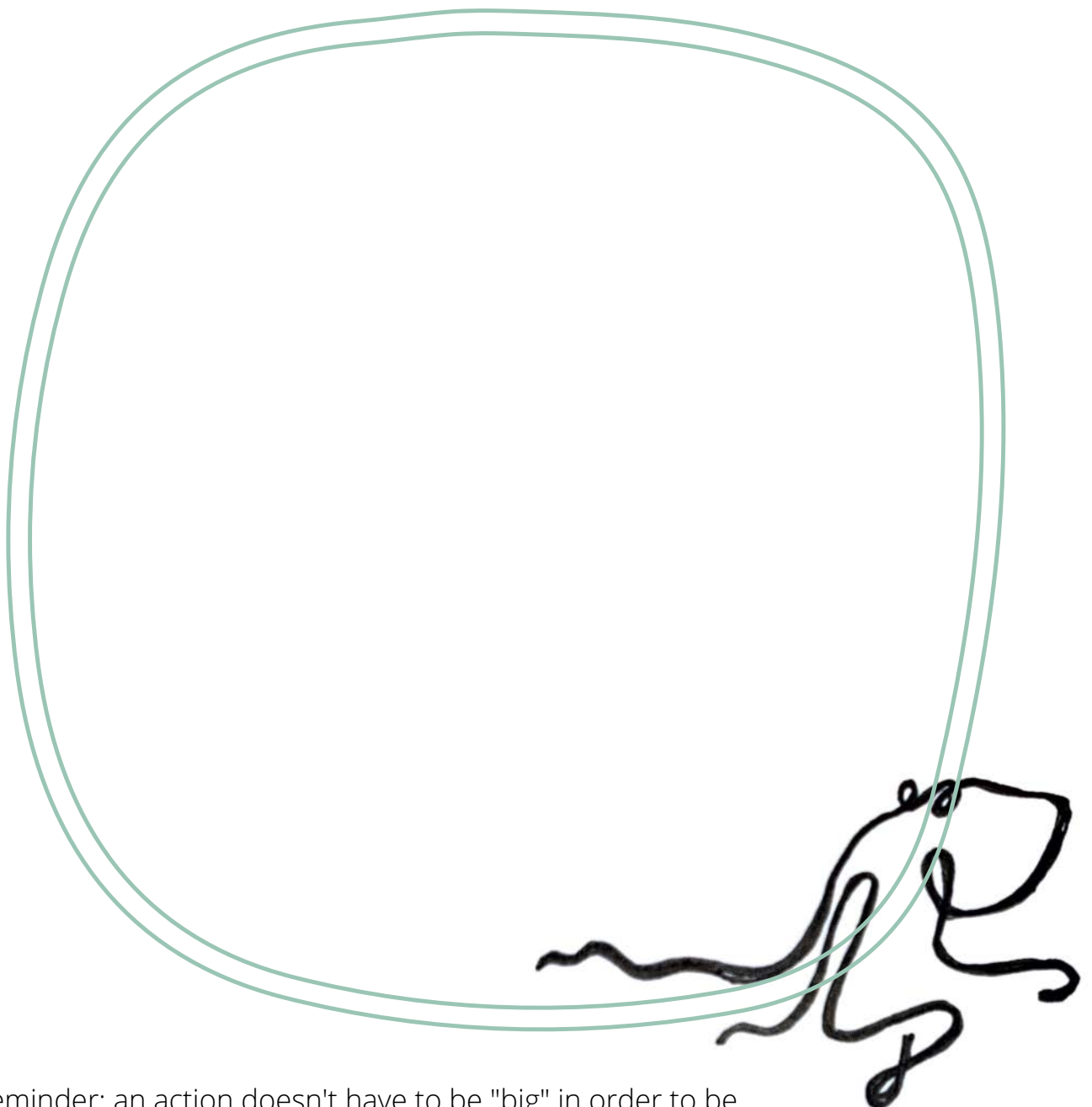
"Utopia is in the horizon. I walk two steps, she retreats 2 steps; I walk forward, and the horizon runs ten steps back. What, then, is utopia for? It is for walking forward."

— Eduardo Galeano

Brainstorm.

Revolutionary Relationships

Select one more-than-human being from the list you made earlier on in this workbook. Brainstorm some of the actions that you might take to transform your relationship with these more-than-human lives. What do you already do to this end? These could be acts of care, reciprocity, respect or more.



Reminder: an action doesn't have to be "big" in order to be transformative! Transformation happens across many scales.

What are the rules?

Understanding power.

If we are going to undo the forms of power that have led to these current conditions – whatever we each may call them – we need to understand the rules that they operate under. Make a list of ten key rules, norms, or tenets that you believe govern the times you are in, and have led to the multiple crises sometimes referred to as the Anthropocene.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

Where you are inspired to do so, add specific examples of how these rules show up. For example, if you wrote "profit over people," you might add "fiduciary duty," the law that incentivizes profit-maximization over social and ecological considerations in certain types of investment.

Rewriting the rules.

Imagining otherwise.

How would you re-write these rules? What rules would support an abundance of good lives being possible? What are some examples of how these rules could be re-written in cultural norms, policies, or other institutions?

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.



Pretend that you are at (very expensive) couples therapy with Jeff Bezos.

Write three "I feel" statements to him:

1.

2.

3.

Twisting Timelines

Critics of the Anthropocene point to the fact that it relies on notions of linear human progress. A linear progress model of human existence posits that humans have achieved more prosperity, health, and happiness through things like technological and economic development. The threat of this notion in the Anthropocene discourse is that it enshrines the idea that we are only now veering off course by challenging the earth's limits. Scholars like Kyle Whyte point out that a timeline of "progress" does not look like this for everyone, because life veered off course a long time ago for many groups of people (1). For example, indigenous people have been subject to multiple apocalyptic collapses in which their health, prosperity and safety have been taken from them.

Linear progress says that the "human" trajectory looks like this, with only the looming threat of a dip beyond the rightward arrow:



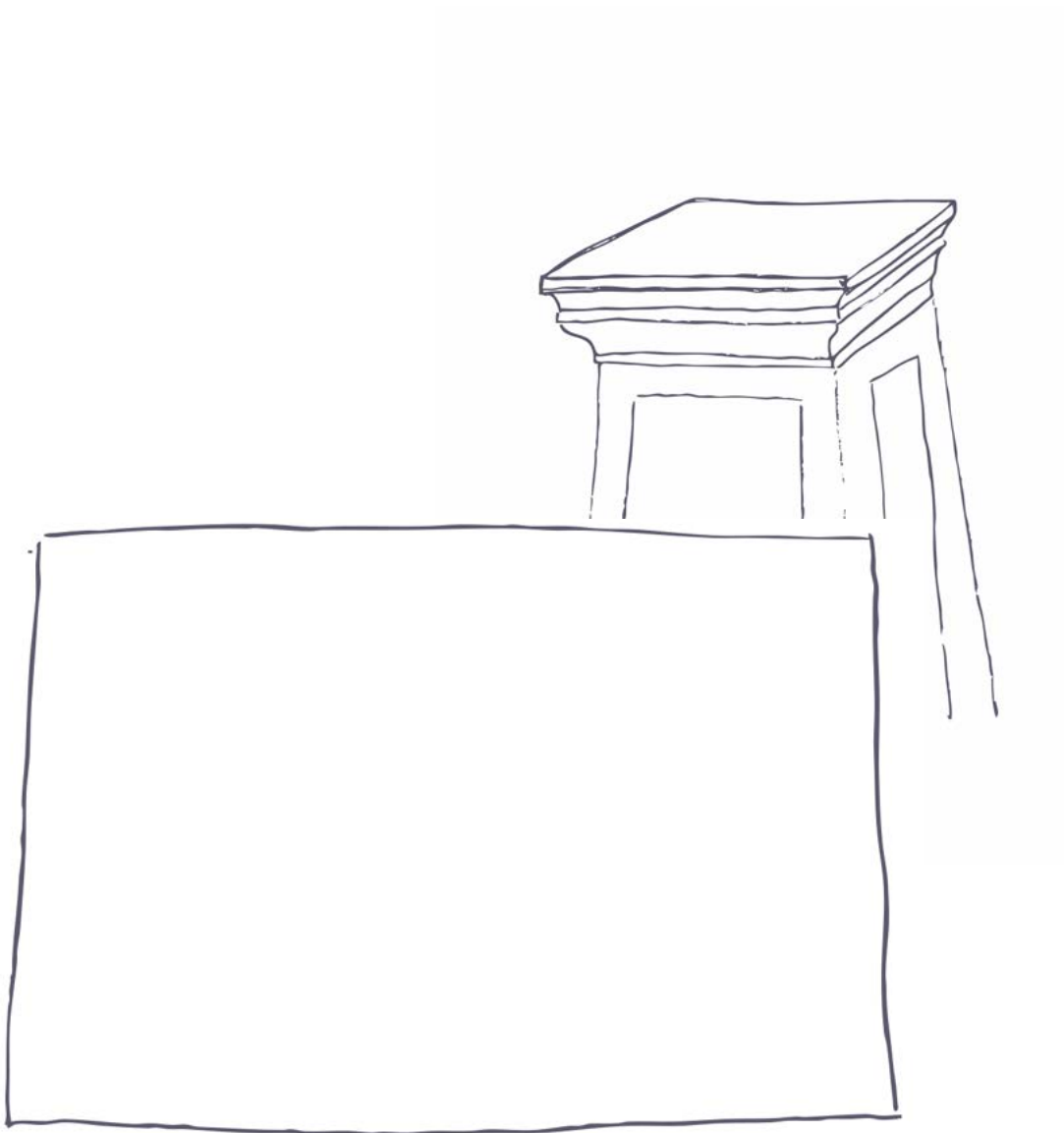
Draw an alternative timeline (or timelines) that demonstrates the path and future of the "human" trajectory. Strive for a new shape, and label it with whatever you think to be significant

(1) Whyte, 2018.

Curate.

Artefacts of the Anthropocene

Choose one artefact of your Anthropocene. Draw the item on the pedestal below. On the notecard, write a curatorial description of said artefact as if it were in a museum in a different time. What was this artefact's purpose or significance in the Anthropocene? Has it fallen out of use, been replaced, or met some other fate?

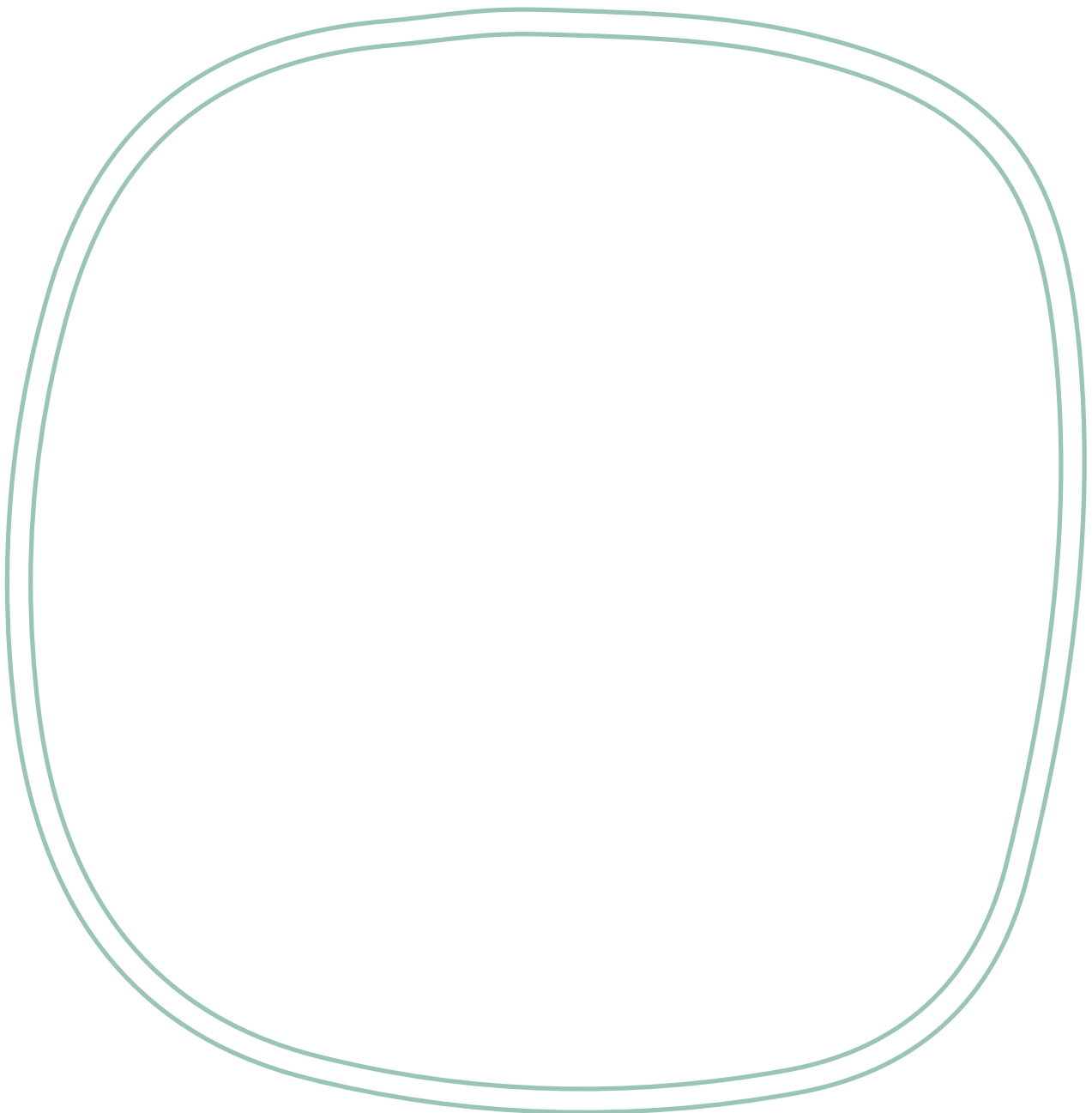


This activity is inspired by Neale et al. (n.d.), and a prompt from our the "Perspectives on the Anthropocene" course at the University of British Columbia.

Non-closure.

Reflecting on the Anthropocene

In the beginning of this workbook we said that there were no singular or final answers. But we must end somewhere, for now. Before shutting this workbook, we invite you to reflect once more on the idea of a global epoch called "The Anthropocene." How do you feel about this concept now?



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