



*The Vital Lives
of Rocks*

Lee Hunter



BREATHING ROCKS

Just north of Las Vegas there is a small state park called Valley of Fire. The park is visually stunning and colorful. Most of the landscape is made of petrified sand dunes and the iron in the sand has oxidized causing bright coloration. In the park, there is a parking area with a vista view of the namesake rock formation, the Valley of Fire. To the left of the parking lot, behind the pit-toilets, there is an old road that is no longer used that heads north. I walked down the road until it stopped being a road and turned into a wash. Eventually I got tired and turned back. As I started walking back, I looked down and found a very large piece of petrified wood. I had kicked at it on the way down and now I could see that it was a nice sized piece of petrified wood. There was another piece buried next to it. I pulled the second piece of rock out of the dirt and analyzed it. I wanted to take it home immediately, but the State Park prohibits rock removal, but it was also in an area that people don't go into much—who would miss it? That was my mantra since I left the park and I'm still kicking myself for leaving that piece of rock.

For the past couple of years the idea of the Anthropocene has been growing. The term itself has been used since 2000 amongst scientists, but it has picked up popularity in

other disciplines for the past five or six years. There is a consensus in the scientific community that global warming is happening and it is due to human activity. The anthropocene defines a new geological epoch that reflects this activity. There are also a number of arguments within scientific communities about the golden spike, or place where this epoch starts. Is it the domestication of grain, or the steam engine releasing condensed carbon, or the first nuclear explosion? There are also arguments as whether Anthropocene is the right word. Should it instead be Capitalocene, Chthulucene, or Plantationocene? During the era of increasingly unpredictable climate changes there are signs of food shortages, severe droughts, heat waves, and powerful storms. The temperatures fluctuate between unseasonably warm and unseasonably cold. Predictions suggest that the weather will continue to get more and more dramatic and the consequences more extreme in the coming decades and centuries.

The focus on the anthropocene has renewed people's interest in understanding the relationship between humans and the non-human world. This era asks us to acknowledge that humans live in a super complex environment, that basically no one really understands and we are affecting it in ways that are indescribable. This conversation often gets apocalyptic, which should be combated. But the attempt to remove the human from the center of the world view, to understand humans as another force rather than a superior force is an important effect of the anthropocene discourse. This is an effort to undo hundreds of years of western thinking around science, philosophy, and religion. There has been a tendency in Western thinking to center the human as the most important creature on Earth. The logic is as follows: humans are separate from the animal and natural world;

because humans have consciousness and an ability to think about the future, they are by default the most intelligent species; therefore humans can do as they please to whom or whatever they please.

The above mind-set is related to a history of colonial and imperial policies that have left people of European descent with a significant amount of power. This power is economic, social, and political. The ideologies of superiority have been used as a reason to subjugate, enslave, and murder millions of people that do not resemble the *right human*. I think it's important to keep this in mind when discussing the human/nonhuman worlds. Breaking down the divides between Human and Nature is an important project for the future of the planet and all of its occupants. Dehumanizing people is not the goal. If anything this is a project to fight against political, social, and economic processes that are destroying the world for everyone but a very small group of people that have the most wealth and power. I shudder when I hear the words *human nature*.

It is hard to think about the environment when there is a war raging on in Iraq and Afghanistan, the police force in the United States are killing unarmed Black folks with alarming regularity, the nightmares and corruption of the political system, and capitalism is suffocating everyone with its invisible hand. The anthropocene is asking the humans in power to be responsible for their decisions. Conscious of the ways humans live and consume, because the actions in one part of the world affect other parts of the world. Everything that happens on the earth is part of a system that is effecting another system, whether we can see it or not.

The rocks will watch, they have far more endurance.