

Salar Mameni

Terracene

A CRUDE AESTHETICS



TERRACENE

BUY



ANIMA: Critical Race Studies Otherwise

A series edited by Mel Y. Chen,

Ezekiel J. Dixon-Román, and Jasbir K. Puar



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A CRUDE AESTHETICS

Salar Mameni

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*This book is dedicated to the sensoria of those enduring
war and environmental catastrophes.*

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FIGURE CS.1 The world is balanced on the horns of a bull, who stands on a fish, who rests in the wings of an angel. Salar Mameni, *Creation Story*, 2022.

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Creation Story

Creation stories bring worlds into being. I know a creation story narrated in Islamic poetic and visual arts that reads:

The world was once a flow that fused into a mass of rocks we know as mountains. The mountains rested on the two horns of a bull, who stood on the back of a fish. The fish, in turn, balanced on the wings of an angel.

As transmitted knowledge, creation stories are told and retold by various speakers across generations, taking different formal qualities every time they are brought into the present through poetic, performative, or pictorial depiction. I rummage through my colored pencils, graphite, ink and ballpoint pens to draw an image of my creation story (see figure CS.1). I deliberately use what is available to me: the oil-based wax of my colored pencils and my ballpoint pens pressing colored ink mixed with Benzyl al-

cohol and phenoxyethanol onto my acid-free, postconsumer sketch pad. These are materials that bring the creation story into the present, a present shaped by the contradictions of merging synthetic microplastics and recycled paper on an earth overwhelmed by extractive economies that churn precious resources into cheap consumer products.

If my choice of contemporary materials seem at odds with the creation story I am recounting here, it is because we are habituated to the demands of historical thinking, which asks us to avoid scrambling the neat order of chronological time. Historiography asks us to plot every object into a fixed, allocated spot that does not deviate from the existing chronological schema. In the context of my creation story, the demand would be to provide accurate dates and regional specificity so that the story could be attributed to the thought systems of a particular people in time.

Complying with the demands of historiography requires the disclosure of the following facts: I can tell you that this creation story appears in different hand-painted copies of a manuscript known in Arabic as *‘Aja’ib al-Makhlūqat wa Ghara’ib al-Mawjudat* (Wonders of creation and the oddities of existence). The oldest existing version of the manuscript dates to the late thirteenth century and is currently housed in the Staatsbibliothek in Munich, yet many later copies exist in multiple archives (and languages) since the manuscript remained popular across the Islamic world until the nineteenth century.¹ As a cosmography, the manuscript is concerned with the nature of existence and is divided into two parts, the first concerning the celestial realm (of the planets, the heavenly bodies, and the fixed stars), while the second tells about the earth (the climates, rivers, mountains, vegetables, animals, and birds that roam alongside humans, demons, and jinns).² These are facts compiled by historians of medieval Islamic manuscripts, who have meticulously photographed, translated, and studied the folios of the multiple versions of *‘Aja’ib al-Makhlūqat* and who have commented on the shifting pictorial and rhetorical styles of the codex as well as the religious milieu and the professional ateliers that hired and trained the calligraphers who produced them.³

Yet historical contextualization goes against the grain of what creation stories ask us to do. Creation stories are neither bound to, nor derive their meanings from, particular historical moments. The creation story under discussion here, for instance, does not belong to the medieval Islamic period. Muslim writers in this period simply recounted a pre-Islamic creation story, many elements of which were indeed at odds with Islamic cosmographic perspectives of the time.⁴ Muslim writers archived and transmit-

ted pre-Islamic knowledge-systems within their manuscripts in a syncretic fashion. The historical data we produce about the manuscripts themselves minimize the function of creation stories as living knowledges that resist the very idea of historical time.⁵

As stories that are meant to convey the notion of “creation”—an event that by definition precedes us—creation stories defy the very idea of history. They rupture linear time and confront our attachments to logical schemas according to which historiography is organized. Furthermore, they compel us to contemplate our ongoing existence in relation to species and environments they conjure. Thinking alongside this creation story compels me to ask the following questions: What is the ecological imagination of this pre-Islamic creation story? How does it intervene into current scientific historiography, according to which we have entered the new epoch of the Anthropocene? How does engaging this story as a living knowledge-system disrupt the hegemonic secular scientific worldview?

These are some of the central questions of this book. As I outline in detail in part I, the notion of the Anthropocene proposes a new geological epoch in which humans are agents who shape the earth and cause climatic and geological change. The Anthropocene is a universalizing proposal that does not make room for multiple knowledge-systems and various modes of being human. Scientific proposals hold hegemonic status in the hierarchies of knowledge and are taken as facts based on the data they produce. The circular logic by which the criteria for what counts as data determines what counts as fact disqualifies knowledge-systems that have different standards for understanding and producing knowledge. This book engages numerous disqualified sites of knowledge as relevant to the environmental discourses of the Anthropocene. These include the ahistorical worlds of poetic ecological imaginations, syncretic spaces of Islamic cosmology and jinn possession, contemporary sense perceptions of war victims living in militarized zones, and the intelligence of nonhuman organisms. The data that such sites provide do not appear in graphs and time lines but ask that we question who intelligent actors are in a world thrown out of balance by the very data-collecting, historicizing, industrializing, secular humanity.

In order to launch us into the book’s broader thesis, I want to think alongside the pre-Islamic creation story I have retold here and foreground some of the ecological insights it provides. One of the most striking aspects of this creation story is that its worldview does not revolve around the human. While it certainly assumes the existence of a human (by whom and

for whom the image is created), it provides a set of relationships between physical and metaphysical entities that do not center the human. Living entities belonging to the terrestrial plain (the mountain, the bull, and the fish) are all held up in the wings of an angel, the invisible and the atemporal realm of the spiritual and the divine. In such a relationship, the living world is given a divine status and is offered to us as sacred. Within Islamic cosmographic traditions, the mountain referenced in this creation story is known as Qaf, beyond which is the realm of the unknown.⁶ While there are a number of different physical geographic locations attributed to the mountain over time, what remains significant is that all mountains are understood to be connected to Qaf, hence endowing all mountains on earth with sacred status.⁷

I emphasize the sacred nature of Qaf (and by extension all mountains) in order to insist, at the outset, on the possibility for the coexistence of the sacred and the ecological, which contemporary scientific thought often disregards. Qaf's sacred status in creation did not pose a problem for pre-modern Muslim thinkers who explained phenomena such as earthquakes in relation to it. In one version for instance, Qaf is said to have spoken about how earthquakes are produced. Qaf says: "These mountains are my roots; there is no town in the world that is not connected with these mountains through some root ('irk). When God wishes to produce an earthquake, he orders me and I make this particular root vibrate, so that an earthquake happens to the grounds of this or that town."⁸ In other versions, earthquakes occur when the bull tosses the earth from one horn to another or when the fish writhes underneath.⁹

Engaging with the sacred nature of natural phenomena, such as earthquakes, requires an entangled disposition toward the world. It requires that we move beyond a localized understanding of cause and effect toward a broader acknowledgment of the interconnectedness of all things. In part 2 of this book, I engage contemporary understandings of earthquakes in relation to explosions and oil-extractive industries. I show that the intensive military bombardments and extraction industries in the Persian Gulf region produce vibrations that are akin to earthquakes. This phenomenological conflation among war, industrialization, and climate is what I term *Terracene* in order to highlight the catastrophic ways in which the "natural" environment becomes a site of ongoing terror for those who inhabit militarized and (settler) colonial extractive sites. The result is weaponized ecologies that create zones of terror that are bordered off and distanced from the beneficiaries of military extraction.

Living in the Terracene requires a shift in thought: a shift from anthropocentric visions of the earth that see it as a site of resource extraction and militarized (settler)colonial occupations to one where the world is a sacred and intelligent site of interconnected beings. Our pre/Islamic creation story emphasizes this point by laying each figure on the back of another. Mountains are balanced on the back of a bull, who is balanced on the back of a fish, who rests on the wings of an angel. In such an image, the earth is not seen as a mere resource for the animal but is reliant on the bull to carefully carry the earth's weight on its horns. Indeed, if the delicate balance between the bull's horns and the mountains are lost, the earth is said to fall out of balance and shake (as in an earthquake). The inherent balance through which the cosmos is organized in the creation story is in direct contrast to extractive logics by which the earth becomes a provider of resources. The stacked image emphasizes instead the earth's reliance on the animal (and the fish and the angel in turn) for its existence.

The counterintuitive order in which the world is stacked in this creation story also asks us to contemplate the limits of rational thought and by extension human mastery over the workings of the cosmos. Not only is the human eliminated from having any central role in creation but is asked to understand positivist, verifiable knowledge to be at odds with creation. The thought of mountains standing on a bull's horns defies rational thought, as does the thought of a bull's weight being carried by a fish, not to mention the difficulty the metaphysical being of an angel poses for positivist understandings. By withholding the hubris of rationality, we acknowledge not only the futility of human mastery but, more importantly, that positivist reality is at odds with the sacred world we occupy. This is of utmost significance in a contemporary world in which solutions to anthropogenic climate change remain secular and anthropocentric, proposing more technological interventions through more advanced forms of data collection.

Our creation story refutes the human's ability to fully grasp the world through verifiable knowledge (by which a bull could never hold up a mountain). Instead, it appeals to our poetic, speculative, and imaginative intelligence through which we can grasp what is to be known about the world. It is our poetic intelligence, for instance, that allows us to fathom the significance of the gravitational reversal in this image and the ethics that such a reversal implies. While our verifiable reality tells us that heavier, bigger, stronger animals (such as a bull) can step over and kill a smaller one (such as a fish), our poetic capacities allow for alternate worldviews, which could—if taken seriously—change how power relations are imag-

ined in the world. Taking this reading a step further, we might argue that the stacking of the heavier elements on the lighter ones emphasizes the unacknowledged significance of what positivist perspectives perceive as minor, small, or insignificant. Current mass extinctions of wildlife and shrinkage of biodiversity across the globe, for instance, are based in the diminished value of things whose absence or destruction are undermined or remain opaque to profit-driven economies focused on singular resources (such as oil). What our creation story makes apparent is that the elimination of any one element (a fish, for instance) can disrupt how the whole world is held up.

Why is it important to tell creation stories at a time of mass-scale planetary destruction? Today, epic narratives foresee planetary destruction in the form of climate disasters caused by war and industry. In the early 2000s, atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen and marine biologist Eugene Stoermer proposed the term *Anthropocene* in order to name a new geological era marked by human industry. “Without major catastrophes like an enormous volcanic eruption, an unexpected epidemic, a large-scale nuclear war, an asteroid impact, a new ice age, or continued plundering of Earth’s resources by partially still primitive technology,” Crutzen and Stoermer wrote in a May 2000 newsletter, “mankind will remain a major geological force for many millennia, maybe millions of years to come.”¹⁰ The Anthropocene tells a destruction story. It argues that humans, as a collective species, have become a geological force with the power to destroy themselves and the planet.

Yet destruction stories are not all there is to tell. This book offers the term *Terracene* to hold space for other modes of planetary imagination. On the one hand, the term *Terracene* highlights the dystopian present—a world of *terror*—with multiple endings in war, disease, and ecological damage. On the other hand, it foregrounds creation—a world of *terra*—earthly beings generating lifeworlds. If there is to be an epic planetary story, it is best termed the Terracene so that (a) the emphasis is placed upon the *terror* brought about by specific militarized (settler)colonial industries, and (b) the narrative is told from the perspective of *terrans*: the creative multispecies inhabitants of militarized and extractive regions who bear embodied scars of terror and who also propose and practice resilient strategies for living.

I offer the term *Terracene* as a rebuttal to the scientific notion of the Anthropocene. In part 1 of this book, I tackle two specific shortcomings of the idea of the Anthropocene. First, I foreground its Eurocentricism. The

notion of the Anthropocene equates a regional, European-industrial mode of production and its violent, colonial, and militarized expansion across the globe with the human (the *Anthropos*). This is a crude scientific generalization that cannot imagine—and more importantly refuses to see—other ways of being human. The second issue concerns the belatedness of the narrative arc of the Anthropocene. For those of us who have lived—and continue to live—in militarized and extractive geographic regions for generations, the novelty of the Anthropocene is incongruent with lives we have led, destructions we have witnessed, stories we have known. To our ears (and other sensorial modes of perception), the Anthropocene is not only an old diagnosis but simply a partial image of the planet.

This book joins a growing critical scholarship that challenges Eurocentric forms of knowledge-production that universalize planetary visions. My particular intervention centers contemporary artists and knowledge-producers from West Asia, a region that has been gutted and polluted by extractive industries (predominantly for petroleum production and refinery) backed by mass-scale military force. I think with artists concerned with the militarized ecologies of the Arab/Persian Gulf region—namely, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, and Yemen alongside Syria and Palestine. I travel with them to wastelands, excavation sites, and toxic lands on fire in order to experience the Terracene sensorially.

In part 2, I listen to the Terracene with the Kuwaiti American musician Fatima Al-Qadiri, whose album *Desert Strike* (2012) builds on the sonic landscape of war in Kuwaiti oil fields. How do we hear the Terracene? What do we hear when we listen? Al-Qadiri's compositions occupy sonic spaces that blur the boundaries between explosions and earthquakes, oil and water, extraction and bombardments. In the aftermath of the massive fires in Kuwait, which were caused by Iraqi military bombing of oil fields in 1991, many expressed their experiences in silence. The German filmmaker Werner Herzog traveled to Kuwait in order to capture the fields of fire raging into the atmosphere in his film *Lessons of Darkness* (1992) and to talk to local residents. The film presents language as inadequate for articulating the social and political brutality that had led to that moment of geological disaster. How does one address the faceless drone designed to drop explosives from soaring heights? How does one put into words the dynamism of petrochemicals fueling orange flames into a receding blue sky? What is speech when lungs are filled with plumes of smoke, when the traumas of oppression and dispossession from land are generationally transmitted and felt? The two local speakers appearing in Herzog's film are

mute, having lost their capacity for speech in the face of the magnitude of war and ecological violence. But silence can be a deliberate response to cruelty since the absence of speech does not signify a lack of meaning.¹¹ Voice, words, and speech are normative ways in which not only the human is defined, elevated, and separated from nonhuman animals but according to which an ableist hierarchical order of the human is achieved.

Parts 3 and 5 inquire about contemporary Iranian/Iraqi toxic sensoria produced as a result of geopolitical relations with crude oil. Literary, mythological, visual, sonic, and religious arts across cultures have proposed various aesthetic relations with crude oil that are far more diverse than the secular formulation of crude oil as fossil fuel. My task in these parts of the book is to map out a nonsecular mode of relating to crude oil by centering the works of contemporary Iranian artists such as Morehshin Allahyari, Gelare Khoshgozaran, and Reza Negarestani. I argue that contemporary Iranian artists have claimed crude oil as an Indigenous deity, whose powers can be conjured for developing new relations with climate change and the global war on terror.

The goddesses of crude oil, appearing in plastic forms, tell the story of Terracene in part 3, where I center the work of Morehshin Allahyari who replicates ancient Mesopotamian deities bombed and destroyed since the United States–led military occupation of Iraq in 2003. Allahyari’s 3D plastic replications conjure ancient Mesopotamian knowledge-systems that have survived within oral, visual, and textual histories across contemporary Iran-Iraq borderlands. By examining her works alongside Reza Negarestani’s fictional excavations of crude gods, goddesses, and jinns within telluric strata of the region, I read for a nonsecular geochronological story of the planet through the perspective of Indigenous Terrans.

In part 4, I follow a fictional resistance fighter known as the “Narrative Terrorist” in the work of the Palestinian artist Larissa Sansour, who confronts how territories are settled, policed, and resisted. Sansour’s work is aware that settler colonialism is enacted through the disruption of multispecies lifeworlds and the production of uninhabitable environments. Her video titled *In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain* (2015) follows the efforts of the Narrative Terrorist who utilizes carbon dating as a technique for drawing an alternative historiography of Palestine. For the Narrative Terrorist, carbon’s chemical qualities can unsettle settler-colonial archaeologies of time by intervening in the earth’s stratification. In my reading, the Narrative Terrorist offers a radical vision of being human,

one that tackles the military occupation of Palestine through the lens of the earth's carbon cycle.

In part 5, I think with the material intelligence of crude oil. I speculate whether crude oil can theorize. Can it aestheticize? Can we allow crude oil to narrate the entanglement of our present geopolitical and geological relations? To pose such questions is to ask about the intelligence and sensibility of all Terrans. It is to propose that it is the earth's storage of complex carbon structures that has fueled the Anthropos claiming our new epoch. Scientific historiography and other forms of knowledge-production have long been understood as the domain of the Anthropos. Intelligence, speech, and creativity are indeed how the human has been demarcated from other earth-beings in Enlightenment philosophy. Aesthetic theory has a tradition of placing the human at the center of perception from whose perspective the world comes to be known.

In order to disrupt this genealogy, in part 5 I shift the domain of intelligence to crude oil in order to think aesthetics through crude oil's material intelligence. I do so by considering visual documentations of extractive industries, where explosions at oil-drilling sites claim the visual field. I examine a massive explosion at the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company's oil fields in southwest Iran, documented in *A Fire!* (1961), directed by the Iranian filmmaker Ebrahim Golestan. Following a distinct documentary film style, *A Fire!* is a poetic critique of the long history of British oil commission in Iran. Golestan's lens brings our attention to the formation of toxic landscapes in southern Iran and the pollutive bodies of Indigenous nomads living in the vicinities of urbanized oil towns. Despite the film's documentary frame, the director allows us to think with the agency of crude oil, whose explosive theater is the film's main visual element. In the film, crude oil is presented as an intelligent material that issues a refusal to those who attempt to drill it out of the ground. I use the term *petrorefusal* to name crude oil's sensibility toward humans it encounters at oil-extractive sites. Yet this is not the only possible relationship between humans and crude oil. When crude oil enters our bodies in the form of toxins, it transforms our senses, creating a radically shifted orientation toward the world.

While this book proposes the neologism Terracene as a useful term for thinking the present moment, I am also deeply aware of the limitations and inadequacies of language. As a writer, I am compelled to use words to create, formulate, and fashion new ideas, aesthetics, feelings, and states of

life. Yet as a multilingual speaker, I am also aware of the limits of linguistic meaning (certainly monolingual writing and speaking). I do not hold language, voice, and speech to be the predominant (or even the most effective) mode of articulation. As such, I also guide you in this book with a number of drawings, poems, and creative prose.

I hence proceed with an acknowledgment of the crudeness of words in times of terror and the necessity for multisensory thinking, dreaming, feeling, seeing, and listening to the residues of extractive and militarized cultures who come to be known as terrorists within the geopolitical order of the globe.

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10 CREATION STORY
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NOTES

Creation Story

- 1 Hayashi, "Scientific or Narrative?," 4702. Hayashi provides a chart of the known copies of the manuscript, including their dates and current locations.
- 2 Hayashi, 4701-02; *jinn*s are defined, by Merriam-Webster, as "one of a class of spirits that according to Muslim demonology inhabit the earth, assume various forms, and exercise supernatural power."
- 3 See Carboni, *The Wonders of Creation and the Singularities of Painting*; and Berlekamp, *Wonder, Image, and Cosmos in Medieval Islam*.
- 4 For a discussion of how Muslim cosmology incorporated a variety of Indigenous Arab cosmographic knowledge-systems, see Al-Abbasi, "The Arabs' Visions of the Upper Realm."
- 5 Hayashi, "Scientific or Narrative?," 4702.
- 6 Sariyannis, "*Aja'ib ve ghara'ib*," 454.

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- 7 Prior, "Travels of Mount Qaf," 425–44.
- 8 Quoted in Sariyannis, "*Aja'ib ve ghara'ib*," 455.
- 9 Bein, "The Istanbul Earthquake of 1984 and Science in Late Ottoman Empire," 911.
- 10 Crutzen and Stoermer, "The 'Anthropocene,'" 18.
- 11 See, for instance, the story of "The Mute Prince" with which Seshadri opens her book *HumAnimal*.

Chapter 1. Terror and the Anthropocene

An earlier version of this chapter appeared in essay form as Sara Mameni, "View from the Terracene," in *The Routledge Companion to Contemporary Art, Visual Culture, and Climate Change*, ed. T. J. Demos, Emily Eliza Scott, and Subhankar Banerjee (New York: Routledge, 2021), 100–107.

- 1 For a historical account of the concept of terrorism, see Collins, "Terrorism." For a discussion of Powell's comments on the "Terror-Industrial Complex," see Rana, "The Racial Infrastructure of the Terror-Industrial Complex."
- 2 Rana, *Terrifying Muslims*, 55.
- 3 Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History," 220.
- 4 Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education*, 373.
- 5 See George W. Bush, "President Bush Addresses the Nation," *Washington Post*, Sept. 20, 2001, https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress_092001.html.
- 6 Bush, "President Bush Addresses the Nation."
- 7 Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, 98.
- 8 Said, *Orientalism*, 10.
- 9 Malm and Hornborg, "The Geology of Mankind?," 63–64.
- 10 Dyer, *White*, 2.
- 11 Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History," 217. See also Povinelli's epilogue to *Geontologies*.
- 12 Povinelli, *Geontologies*, 19.
- 13 Povinelli, "The Three Figures of Geontology," 61.
- 14 Povinelli, *Geontologies*, 19.
- 15 Raza Kolb, *Epidemic Empire*, 8.
- 16 Raza Kolb, 17.
- 17 Rana, *Terrifying Muslims*, 6.
- 18 Raza Kolb, *Epidemic Empire*, 17.
- 19 Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, xxiii.
- 20 Puar, 17.
- 21 Raza Kolb, *Epidemic Empire*, 16.
- 22 Wald, *Contagious*, 158.