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## Refocusing the Anthropocenic Gaze: A Photo Essay

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**Figure 1.** Oceanfront view, Oostende



There are times when humans occupy a disproportionate amount of space. The Anthropocene, it seems, is one of those times.

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**Figure 2.** Last day of school, Gent



In the last several hundred years, due to industrialization, colonization, acceleration, and more, humanity has become a force with planetary impact (Chakrabarty, 2009; Wynter, 1995). As such, we are now in the midst of the Anthropocene, a proposed geological epoch that accounts for how humans have altered, and are continuing to alter, the planet we call home (Colebrook, 2019; de Caüter, 2021).





**Figure 3.** Cycling, Gent



The damage has been extensive. Nevertheless, on an everyday basis, the extent of the harm can be difficult to perceive (especially when there are more pleasant distractions to be found).



**Figure 4.** Tightrope trampoline, Gent



As humans, we have been taking from the world rather than giving to it, writing over the surfaces we find, consuming everything in sight. Now, it is as if we are all on a tightrope together, struggling to regain our collective balance. But what, if anything, can we do?





**Figure 5.** Parkside, Gent

We can all do many things, beginning with how we view ourselves. Rather than instantly rush in to fill whatever spaces we happen to find ourselves framed within, we can instead zoom out, decline close-up shots at the center of the viewfinder, and reconsider ourselves in relation to the broader whole. In other words, photography can help us put ourselves into perspective. It can help us see how humans are hurting where we live and the many people, lifeforms, forces, and elements with whom we live. Through visual encounters with landscapes around us, photography can help us see how we are but tiny humans co-existing with a larger world.

**Figure 6.** Canal, Groningen



There are other approaches to photography in the Anthropocene, and we will need those, too. Photographs of floating islands of plastic in the ocean are informative, as are artistic installations that highlight and repurpose plastic waste. In addition, aerial photographs illustrate the scope of surface-level scars from fracking, deforestation, and melting ice. But the more distant these images are, the easier it can be to lose sight of ourselves and how we contribute to the Anthropocene every day. As Arènes et al. write, “In such a planetary view, where earth is viewed as if from out in space, all life forms as well as humans are squashed to the point of becoming invisible” (2008, 3). The view from nowhere enables us to take no responsibility for what we have done and for what we continue to do. Which is why we might attempt to remedy the Anthropocene by approaching photography and writing from a different point of view.

In sharing this advice with artists and writers, Gan et al. suggest that our contemporary world is “best understood through immersion in many small and situated rhythms. Big stories take their form from seemingly minor contingencies, asymmetrical encounters, and moments of indeterminacy. Landscapes show us [how]” (2017, 10). In this spirit, just as Gan et al. conceptualize posthuman landscapes as “overlaid arrangements of human and nonhuman living spaces” (3), so have the photographs here.





**Figure 7.** Walking with horses, Groningen



As such, there are humans in each of these photographs, though they are not always easy to find. In part, this is due to the dimensions of the page: the images presented can only be so large. But it also reflects how the photographs were framed: by intentionally moving back, zooming out, and rescaling what it looks like to photograph a human subject within a more-than-human world. The human subjects in these images are not invisible so much as they are proportional.

The point of photographing humans in these ways is not only to produce photographs that might encourage us to think differently about the world and our roles within it, but to engage a photographic practice beyond disciplines to attune with ecological localities (Taylor & Ulmer, 2020) and support children in doing the same (Hofsess & Ulmer, 2019).

**Figure 8.** Lovebirds, Bruges



Given that humans already take up so much space in this world, perhaps photography can show another way. Perhaps photography can help us perceive ourselves from the perspective of the earth, in which we are smaller parts of a larger, interconnected whole. Such a move potentially involves adopting a minimalist ethics (Zylinska, 2014), one which encourages us “to think big, perhaps as big as we can, and then to issue the smallest injunctions possible” (100). And then, in using photography to do just that, we might, as Zylinska continues, come to see humans “as one more temporary cut made into the flow of matter” (100). In taking up minimal text and images, this is what I have attempted here.





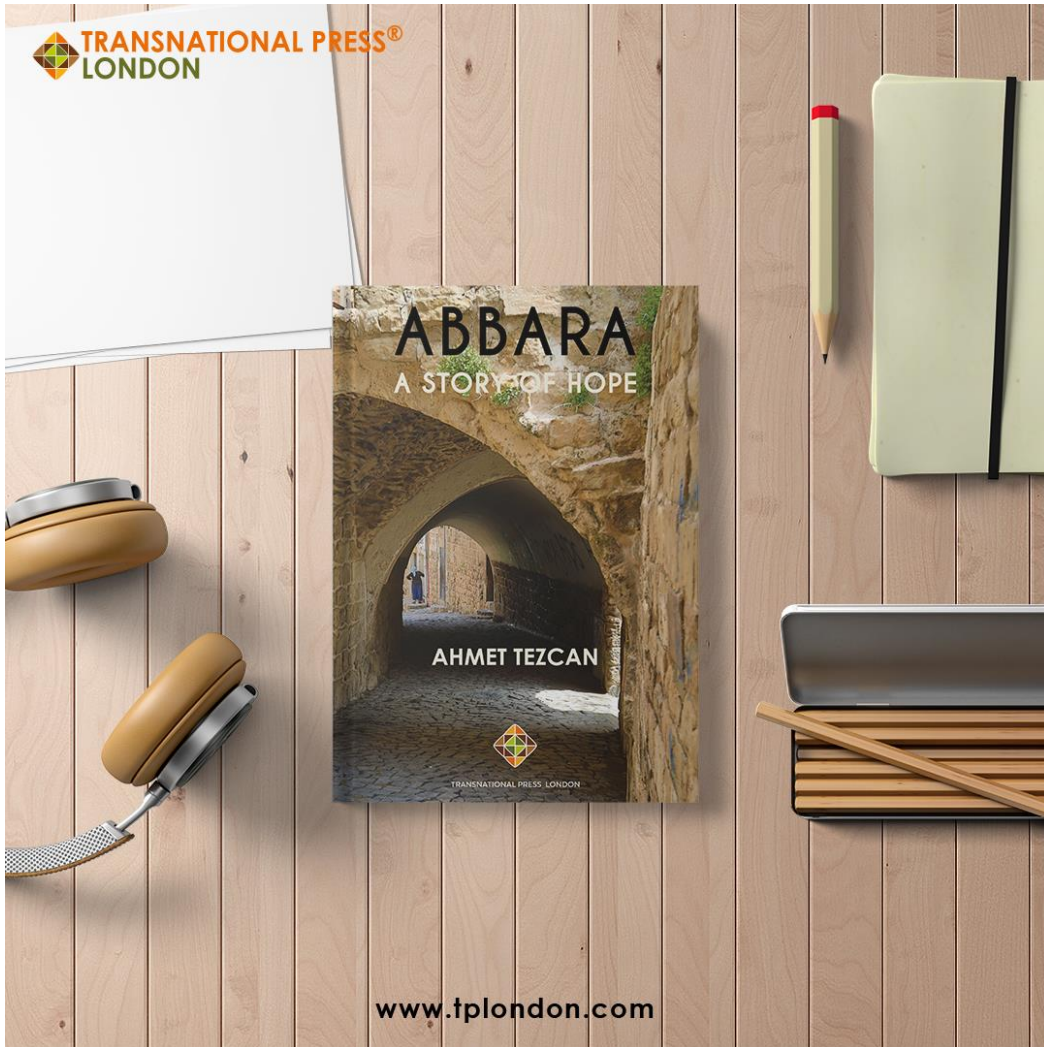
An approach to photography and scholarly writing that changes the scale of our vision might help us work toward meaningful futures in meaningful ways. When we share, there's no need to fill the entirety of every frame.

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