

VISUAL ESSAY

Anthropocene Desire Lines: A Coal Story

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In this experimental visual essay, we follow an imaginary lump of coal across space and time from its Gondwanan beginnings, through its extraction from the Talcher Coalfields in Odisha in India, combustion in a thermal power plant in Ennore in Tamil Nadu, and into the future through its multitude of post-combustion afterlives. We do so through the figure of ‘anthropocene desire lines’, which draws on Karen Coelho’s idea of ‘water lines’ (Coelho 2022) and Gabrielle Hecht’s idea of ‘residual governance’ (Hecht 2023), to track how flows of earthly matter that begin in subterranean strata, and, mobilized by ideas of power, growth and national pride, result in indifference towards the molecular colonization of bodies, soils, waters and airs they produce (Mendes 2017). The essay compresses the deep, everyday and future times of coal and its geologic, territorial, microscopic and planetary scales into a single textual/visual narrative. In this way, it draws out simultaneities across time and interconnections across space, as a way of developing a relational Anthropocene imaginary.

Keywords: coal; relationality; governance; India; anthropocene

Introduction

This visual essay is an experiment in thinking with and about relationality and governance in the Anthropocene, by tracking a lump of coal through its metamorphoses from geological stratum to aerial particulate. It is influenced by the work of island studies scholars (Bremner 2016; Gryedejoj 2017; Hayward et al. 2012; Pugh 2016, 2018), which positions islands as part of ‘complex cross-cutting relations, assemblages, networks, mobilities, spatial fluxes and flows’ (Chandler & Pugh 2018: 65) and proposes that islands are paradigmatic of relationality in the Anthropocene. Just as islands are relational spaces (Stradford 2003), so too are other places, an idea that disrupts bounded understandings of place, space, time and agency. The essay explores the Anthropocene disruptions wrought on the wetlands of Ennore Creek in north Chennai and draws out their temporal, spatial, geologic and political extensions. It posits that the Creek and other wetlands-turned-wastelands like it are privileged sites from which to make sense of the emergent geological, atmospheric and biophysicality of the Anthropocene and how it is generated and governed (Coelho 2022; Hecht 2023).

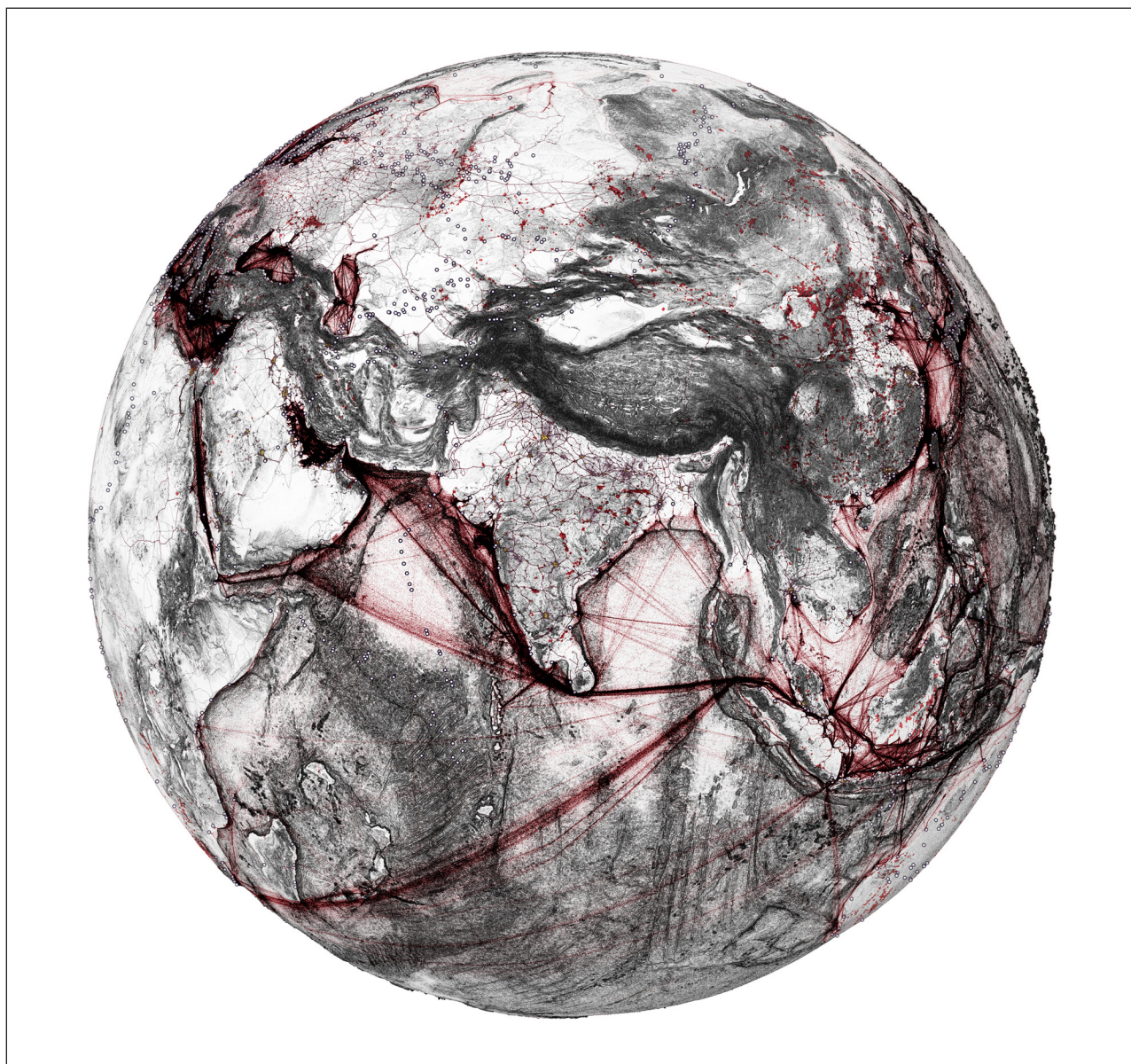
The aim of the essay is to explore how to present research into the workings of the extractive coal-based economy in India, and the forms of neoliberal statecraft that govern it, in ways that foreground the multiple, multivocal, multi-sited and relational sources of knowledge from which the essay draws. It does so using a follow-the-thing method (Appadurai 1986; Cook 2004; Cullen 2020; Gregson et al.

2010; Hulme 2015; Marcus 1995), tracking an imaginary lump of coal across space and time from its Gondwanan beginnings, through its extraction in the Talcher Coalfields in Odisha in India, during combustion in a thermal power plant in Ennore, and into the future through its multitude of post-combustion afterlives.

The essay arose from a grant-funded, activist-driven research project by a group of historians, social scientists, activists and fishers on Ennore Creek, in support of the struggles of fishers to survive in it. It positions the Creek within networks of Anthropocene sites and desire lines, along a continuum of deep, everyday and future times, and scales from the planetary to the microscopic. The essay is presented as an ArcGIS-drawn StoryMap hosted on the ESRI platform. We selected the StoryMap format for the facility it offers to view visual and textual material relationally and interactively.

To draw our maps and StoryMap we combined data from many sources – Google Earth, Open Street Map, NASA Black Marble Imagery, the ETOPO1 1 Arc-Minute Global Relief Model, other data found in online reports and articles and from our own photographic archive. We acknowledge the contingencies of our data sources, but the aim of our visual strategy was not to represent empirical data factually, but rather to tell a story and to bring the data we found into relation and into the realm of affective experience. This means that for all their cartographic detail, the maps set up resistances to being read empirically, instead offering the reader a rhetorical, aesthetic experience of coal’s transmutation and the accelerated Anthropocene it portends.

The remainder of the essay is to be found here: <https://arcg.is/1eKb9e>.



A globe of anthropocene desire lines as represented by mining sites, road and rail networks and shipping routes. Map drawn by John Cook.

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Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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