The exhibit, Anthropocene, by Edward Burtynsky, seeks to communicate the concept of the “human epoch.” From a social justice perspective, I found it strange that the only humans photographed were people of color. There were pictures from different places in north America, but people were absent from them. This brings to mind Said’s “Orientalism”, because in a way it portrayed black people as exotic, and the anthropocene as something happening “out there.” Many of the environments depicted looked like the aftermath of the so-called anthropocene, so in a way having only black people in those pictures felt dehumanizing, because they look as part of that aftermath “out there.”

The concept “Anthropocene” misguide us into distributing the responsibility for the environmental implications of capitalism among all humans without taking into consideration how some humans are responsible for it while others are not. Some populations have a much larger footprint on the environment than others, which is paralleled with a discrepancy in access to natural resources. Purchasing power is highly correlated with resource access and environmental impact. I thought this criticism of the anthropocene is missing in Burtynsky’s work, making it easier for the viewer to engage with it without taking responsibility for the negative externalities (not so external for those living in those landscapes) of our voracious consumerism. There is also 100,000 + years of human history in which we were not causing such a havoc as we are since industrialization. As it has been argued by Jason Moore in his paper, “The Capitalocene: on the nature and origins of our ecological crisis,” the concept of the anthropocene obscures capitalist relationships of power mediating our interaction with the planet (Moore, 2016). I find this to be the case in Burtynsky’s exhibition, as it is introduced in the AGO website, which notes that “We have reached an unprecedented moment in planetary history. Humans now change the Earth’s systems more than all natural forces combined. This is the central argument of the proposed current geological epoch: the Anthropocene.” (Web). I was disappointed that the exhibition going didn’t address Moore’s criticism of the anthropocene, because I expected the artist to be familiar with the literature related to this concept.

I also would have like to see in the collection at least one piece connecting mining with Canadian companies, because we are in Canada, and it could bring awareness to everyone’s involvement in the industry. I understand that an artist has to be smart in how to present her/his work, or else it risks being commercially ostracised. Yet, Canadian mining companies are responsible for a great deal of environmental and social harm in Canada and abroad. It would have been very valuable to have a picture of the Tar Sands, or one from a Barrick Gold mine. There was none.

From an aesthetic point of view, I found the exhibit insightful for capturing beauty in capitalist industrial landscapes and wastelands.

All in all, I find Burtynsky’s work relevant and valuable as a means to educate and foster discussions about our relationship with the planet and each other.
I’m including this short video of Raj Patel commenting on the anthropocene, which I found relevant.

Works Cited