

The Colonial Anthropocene: Damage, Remapping, and Resurgent Resources

The negative effects of the colonial and modern project are becoming increasingly apparent each day. At the global scale, “the sixth extinction” is observable through the scars, disappearances, and deformations produced by colonial domination and the industrial pollution that is unevenly distributed across the planet. Algae blooms, or “red tides”, and expanding plastic swirls materialize the accelerated warming of the oceans, currently measuring at the higher end of previous estimates. Such vast effects are most felt in their accumulative impact at the local level. For instance, Indigenous territories are left decimated in the wake of fracking, oil pipelines, damming, mining, and other forms of resource extraction. Steeped in polluted and unequal social ecologies, urban and rural communities of color disproportionately suffer exposure to toxicity and waste. In this slew of anthropogenic transformations, paying attention to the scale, decolonial mappings, embodiments, and experiences of what Rob Nixon first called “slow violence” matters for how we imagine beyond the colonial Anthropocene.¹

In our study of environmental impact, we must also not occlude the Western civilizational paradigm of war that continues to rage against the racialized other. *Humanity* is not universally implicated in the demise of our planet’s non-renewable resources, the diminishing of its biodiversity, or the history of capitalism’s destruction of communal interdependence. As Sylvia Wynter and Anibal Quijano have both extensively analyzed, beginning in the 15th century, European colonialism reorganized the world of the living into racialized classifications of death and disposability.² Indeed, the logic used to dehumanize the other is the same ideology that

¹ Rob Nixon’s now classic work *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Harvard University Press, 2011) describes the legacy of industrial pollution and spillage within low income communities in the Global North and Global South.

² See Sylvia Wynter’s “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation-An Argument” (*CR: The New Centennial Review* 3[3]:257-337, 2003) and Anibal Quijano’s

continually separates the human from the nonhuman. Producing distinction from his biodiverse environs, “Man” began to see himself as separate from the natural world, facilitating an extractive mode of seeing, doing and being within a global system of race.³ Racial and extractive capitalism puts a high premium on monoculture that leaves human and nonhuman communities de-resourced in its wake. In all of these ways, the nomenclature of the Anthropocene is inadequate and it reproduces the problem it names, both by universalizing its effects and by hiding the history and ongoing consequences of colonialism.

Given that consequences are disproportional, writing coloniality back into the long arc of the war against the Earth is essential to our scholarship and activism. In my own work, I have sought new vocabularies and methods for tracking racial and extractive capitalism in the Americas, pointing to the need to decolonize the Anthropocene.⁴ Even as the lexicon of the Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene does essential work,⁵ these terms do not unveil colonialism as the underpinning logic that continually wreaks havoc upon localized social ecologies. By using the term “colonial Anthropocene” I attend to planetary climate change and environmental destruction as a spatial and temporal structure with accelerating consequences, one that spans more than five centuries of colonial domination. If we consider the non-degradable impact of its refuse, tracking coloniality allows us to not only dig into the Earth’s archive of destruction, but also to make visible how the planet and local human and nonhuman communities are dramatically reshaped by it in the foreseeable future. In the era of climate science and species annihilation, we must continually make evident how industrial

“Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America” (*Nepantla: View from South* 1[3]:533-580, 2000). For a critical genealogy of Wynter’s work, see Katherine McKintrick’s *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* (Duke University Press, 2015).

³ See Denise Ferreira da Silva’s *Towards a Global Idea of Race* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

⁴ See *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives* (Duke University Press, 2017).

⁵ See Donna Haraway’s “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin” (*Environmental Humanities* 6[1]:159-165, 2015).

environmental damage was first organized by colonialism, its extractive project, and its desire to rapaciously rule over and decimate specific territories and peoples it constituted through difference.

My concern in this essay is to briefly review books that language our planetary predicament in new ways, and that make the historical, experiential, and local impact of colonialism apparent in the era of human induced geological and atmospheric transformation. The common thread in these authors' work is their effort to push against the grain of what I analyze as a dominant climate change knowledge formation, prevalent in the mass media as well as in certain quarters of the disciplining academy. Such work invites us to the urgent task of specifying the afterlives of the colonial Anthropocene and to give texture to the impact of the then-now-future of colonialism. These books show us why shifting how we imagine the root causes of climate change matters for how we narrate impending planetary crisis, even as they diverge in their methodologies, formats, and genealogies of scholarship.

Alexis Pauline Gumbs's *M Archive: After the End of the World* writes "after and with" M. Jacqui Alexander's *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*.⁶ Dedicated to an episteme that engages the memory of trans-Atlantic slavery and how it continues to shape lived lives in the Afro-diaspora, Gumbs reframes how we define climate change. Gumbs does not mark a discrete periodization for colonialism, but constantly references its effects with the phrase "after and with". In an early powerful passage that attends to intimate spheres of structural interconnections, Gumbs describes:

This is you beyond you. After and with the consequences of fracking past peak oil. After and the defunding of the humanities. After and with the removal of people of color from the cities they built. After and with Audre Lorde. After and with Toni Cade Bambara,

⁶ *M Archive: After the End of the World* (Duke University Press, 2018); *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Duke University Press, 2006).

After and with Barbara Christian. After and with Nellie McKay. After and with June Jordan. After and with Cheryll Y. Greene. After and with Gloria Naylor. After and with Jayne Cortez. After and with Lucille Clifton. After and with Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press. After and with the Combahee River Collective. After and with clean water. After and with handwriting. After and with a multitude of small and large present apocalypses. After the end of the world as we know it. After the ways we have been knowing the world.⁷

“This is you beyond you” gives language to a social ecological imagination that connects the personal to coloniality, where the web of dependence and interdependence is made explicit. “This is you beyond you” does not refer to the individuated subject of capitalism, but instead references the uneven impact of the past-present-future of the quest for resources and global domination. “You beyond you” implicates us in “peak oil”, the theorized timeframe that marks the maximum extraction of petroleum. Yet, “you beyond you” is both a causal calculus and a historical fabrication, as if to say, “this you beyond you could have been different”. The “you beyond you” is also embedded in histories of resistance. Gumbs documents afterlives to include a war on the humanities, a war on urban populations, and a war on the bodies of women of color intellectuals, academics, writers, and activists whose cancer and other life-threatening illnesses were and are produced by the colonial Anthropocene, by racial capitalism, by disproportionate consequences. The trans-, cross-, and intersectional list of doing work against war is exhaustive and exhausting. It is mind numbing. It is body and earth depleting. Yet in Gumbs’s vision, she tethers structures of destruction to the refusals brought forward by those immersed within a collective project of freedom that sees with and beyond the colonial Anthropocene.

Following the foundational work of M. Jacqui Alexander, in Alexis Pauline Gumbs’s book, “M” stands in for a Black feminist radical archive, where the effects of the colonial

⁷ *M Archive* (p.xi).

paradigm are connected to specific Black intellectual activist histories and bodies as well as to particular landscapes of enslavement and extraction. By including large scale destruction such as peak oil, the defunding of the humanities, and the removal of people of color (which could also be taken to refer to Indigenous removal), Gumbs writes historical accountability into a project of naming afterlives, one that shifts how we perceive the violent trace of coloniality. Gumbs makes visible the consequences of the colonial Anthropocene that targets those that struggle against white supremacy, hetero-patriarchy, and the history of Black feminist refusal. The poetic fragments represent a constant search for the retethering of social life in the face of economic determinism, and in the wake of brute death. It is the collective tethering of these bodies and histories and refusals present in the terminology “after and with” that allows for another kind of imaginary, one replete with possibility.

The book is divided into the archives of dirt, sky, fire and ocean. To begin with the elements is to destabilize the teleology of past-present-future. To center the elements is to support other ways of knowing outside of the extractive view. Playing with the dualities of colonialism that constitute the enslaved as possessive of magic and devilish power, Gumbs writes:

... and so in a way they were right. we did find god in the ocean, in what it took to adapt to the ocean. in what sound of breathing in the open middle in the name for gods that we needed. in what was required of our shaking loves. we found god in the ocean or the god of the ocean found us. or actually we found ourselves so melted and submerged in what we had become that we had to become deep.⁸

Referencing the crossing of the Middle Passage, and the spiritual force of the oceanic in relation to slavery’s violence, Gumbs transposes the quintessential metonym of the Anthropocene, or the

⁸ *M Archive* (p.117).

melting iceberg, to the lives and afterlives of the African enslaved. “We found ourselves so melted and submerged...” The submerged perspective here is what is found below the ice caps, and buried within the particle afterlives of six million plus African lives. To perceive the iceberg in this way is to think from an episteme that does not disappear coloniality, but reveals its submerged foundation. Colonialism and the consequences of trans-Atlantic slavery are not an afterthought of the Anthropocene: they are its very constitution.

Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet, edited by Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan and Nils Bubandt, focuses on modernity rather than coloniality per se, but it offers a sustained critique and new methods for contending with the scales of anthropogenic destruction.⁹ It scrambles reading as a linear act by dividing the book into two parts: “Ghosts on a Damaged Planet” and “Monsters and the Arts of Living”. This division physically organizes the book with two beginnings, depending on which side of the book you open first. Let me elaborate further. As a way to make explicit the sheer magnitude of the problem that writing on planet Earth’s rapid destruction presents, the reader is asked to make a Julio Cortázar choice between beginning with its ghosts or attending first to its monsters. In my own work, I always begin with ghosts. If Avery Gordon’s elaboration of haunting gave us an important framing for modernity’s inability to contend with the ineffable,¹⁰ tracking the ghosts of the Anthropocene becomes a way to approximate its environmental wreckage. As such, ghosts offer a way to catalogue the non-human disappearances that represent the casualties of the sixth extinction. Monsters, the authors suggest, have a double meaning. The co-editors argue that ghosts “help us pay attention to ancient chimeric entanglements” and “they point us toward the monstrosities of modern Man. Monsters ask us to consider the wonders and terrors of symbiotic entanglement in the

⁹ *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

¹⁰ See *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

Anthropocene”.¹¹ With both ghosts and monsters, the Greek term for human *Anthropos* is unsettled to instead highlight “the webs of histories and bodies from which all life, including human life, emerges”.¹²

In the Introduction to the section “Ghosts”, the authors use multiple voices demarcated by differently bolded and italicized passages. They say, “we must wander through landscapes, where assemblages of the dead gather together with the living. In their juxtapositions, we see livability anew”.¹³ These juxtapositions include attention to lost animals and plants, and also attention to the invisibility of peoples living within these territories. The opening essay to this section by Leslie Stern is called “A Garden or a Grave? The Canyonic Landscape of the Tijuana-San Diego Region”. Though Stern does not go deeply into the colonial history of the border region, the essay uses thick description and a local case study of the border region to show how natural features cross borders that cannot be contained by the nation-state.¹⁴ Put another way, the river and estuary exceed containment by the border fence and wall, an ecology that is sustained instead by different sensibilities, even as it is ruined by trans-border deregulation. Land management is a different way to arrange border space than the reductive logic of securitization.

What is refreshing about this essay is that it makes no pretense towards objectivity, or to the disciplining language of the academy. Instead, we follow the author through the disappearing estuaries of the US/Mexico border alongside Tijuana and within a small region of the remaining

¹¹ Heather Swanson, Anna Tsing, Nils Bubandt and Elaine Gan, “Bodies Tumbled into Bodies” in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (p. M2).

¹² “Bodies Tumbled into Bodies” (p.M3).

¹³ Elaine Gan, Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson and Nils Bubandt, “Haunted Landscapes of the Anthropocene” in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (p.G5).

¹⁴ On the issue of frontier colonialism, see Gloria Anzaldúa’s classic book, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987) and Sayek Valencia’s *Gore Capitalism* (Semiotext[e], 2018). For a long discussion of border coloniality, also see Chapter 4 of my book *Beyond the Pink Tide: Art and Political Undercurrents in the Americas* (University of California Press, 2018).

wetlands of Southern California, essential for Pacific coast bird migrations. Stern describes the water use on each side of the border: “Mexican farmers tend to use water as it flows—a system that is less productive but also more economic in terms of water use. On the US side, water is engineered and diverted into the All-American Canal. When water usage is averaged out, each person in the United States uses 225 gallons of water per day; in Mexico, 25”.¹⁵ Stern conducts this study by describing the canyons that cross the border, the ecological spaces that cannot be separated by any wall, despite huge capital investments by the US racial state. This permeable border of natural features was made clear to me on a visit to Tijuana where the border fence literally melted into the Pacific Ocean, even as the air space was also patrolled. Stern’s focus on shared geographical features and the ability to upcycle the material waste becomes an important way to show modes of living that extend beyond the xenophobic rhetoric of fortification, and beyond First/Third World divides.

What *Arts of a Living on a Damaged Planet* is able to accomplish is to break down the division between creative practice, theory making and scholarship. And, it reveals how this already damaged planet does not need the Anthropos to generate other and new life forms. In the last essay of the “Monsters” section,¹⁶ professor of ecology and evolutionary biology Ingrid M. Parker argues for urgency and that we must contend very directly with the web of life and death and our collective amnesia and will to ignore the extent of damage already present. Ghosts and monsters, of course, were important tropes of 19th century literature as the threat of Nature and the “supernatural” other. Yet in our anthropogenic worlds, these threats are very much at the heart of our fabricated and accelerating predicament. What then is to be done?

¹⁵ Leslie Stern, “A Garden or a Grave? The Canyonic Landscape of the Tijuana-San Diego Region” in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (p.G19).

¹⁶ Ingrid M. Parker, “Remembering in Our Amnesia, Seeing in Our Blindness” in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (p.M155-M167).

Kathryn Yusoff's recent book *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* most directly contends with the intersections of critical race studies, the colonial project, and anthropogenic geological change.¹⁷ She also suggests that "the geophysics of being has been neglected in accounts of colonial violence".¹⁸ Yusoff develops how geology and geological discourse itself is an anti-black regime of knowledge, and points the reader to its universalizing episteme that covers over the colonial dynamics of racial difference. Though she is not the first to note it, her point that "[t]o be included in the 'we' of the Anthropocene is to be silenced by a claim to universalism that fails to notice its subjugations" continues to be relevant.¹⁹

Yusoff follows Sylvia Wynter to discuss how scientific humanism has already conditioned the very terms by which the other is defined. As she says, "[i]t might be easier to contend that race is not a 'problem' of geology but a problem of humanism and its exclusions; blame the master, not the tools. But geology is more than a tool; it is a technology of matter...".²⁰ The terminology of *A Billion Black Anthropocenes* offers an explosion of the singular and names the racial logic that underpins planetary crises. Using the term colonial Anthropocene achieves something similar, namely to destabilize how knowledge about ecological crisis is temporalized, spatialized, and already locked within a regime of what Anibal Quijano first termed the coloniality of power. We could also note how the original project of enslavement and accumulation produced what Saidiya Hartman refers to as natal alienation to describe the violent cutting off from territories of origin and the capitalist valuation of Black bodies as disconnected from the "motherland".²¹ Bringing forward the continental rupture in this way allows for a historically grounded and embodied understanding of geological transformation.

¹⁷ *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

¹⁸ *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (p.11).

¹⁹ *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (p.12).

²⁰ *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (p.14).

²¹ See *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008).

In a direct proposal for how to contend with the coloniality of the Anthropocene, Yusoff points us to the global inscription of geology as a racial discourse. The “economy of flesh” is not subsidiary to the changes wrought by trans-Atlantic slavery, but describes a “geophysics of flesh that is Black and Brown”.²² Yusoff’s line of argumentation here is compelling and uses a citational practice that forcefully engages, rather than renders invisible, the centrality of the Black Radical Tradition to expose racial thinking. Yet, I was left wondering what was left out of the story by also not contending with the insights from critical Indigenous Studies and theory.²³ For instance, the organization of matter Yusoff describes was also accomplished through a series of spatial and temporal nodes such as the *mita* labor system and the subsequent European organization of global finance based upon primitive accumulation.²⁴ Studying the history of Earth Sciences, especially by focusing upon its extractive imagination over Indigenous bodies and territories, reveals how scientific knowledge enabled the colonial Anthropocene.

I have been to enough conferences on climate change to know that geological experts champion their research and themselves as the new heroes of “our dying planet”, often ignoring the profound colonial structures of continuous violence. Research on climate change depends on shifting its universalizing terms. Dipesh Chakrabarty has compellingly written that “[c]limate

²² *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (p.62).

²³ The list of works that could be cited here is long, but Jodi A. Byrd, Alyosha Goldstein, Jodi Melamed and Chandan Reddy’s “Predatory Value: Economies of Dispossession and Disturbed Relationalities” (*Social Text* 36[2]:1-18, 2018) is an important essay that brings forward the potential of Indigenous relationality. On emotional and intellectual labor in relation to Indigenous critique, see Joanne Barker’s “Decolonizing the Mind” (*Rethinking Marxism* 30[2]:208-231, 2018). On Indigenous resurgence, see Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017). On Indigenous lands, see J. Kēhaulani Kauanui’s *Paradoxes of Hawaiian Sovereignty: Land, Sex, and the Colonial Politics of State Nationalism* (Duke University Press, 2018).

²⁴ For a longer discussion of this, see Chapter 5 of *The Extractive Zone* that addresses how mining and its labor system of production in Potosí, Bolivia contributed to the organization of racial capitalism.

change is an unintended consequence of human actions”, and one that “shows...the effects of our actions as a species. Species may indeed be the name of a placeholder for an emergent, new universal history of humans that flashes up in the moment of the danger that is climate change”.²⁵ For those of us working on histories of race, colonialism, and dispossession and in relation to the environmental humanities we might ask how does placing Indigeneity and Blackness at the center of our analysis both ground its consequences and remake how we understand past, present, and impending catastrophe? How do we study *human* impact and remap its violent trace by writing in coloniality? What kinds of conceptual mappings support an imaginary of our planetary predicament that imagines beyond it? Indeed, many artists, scholars, communities, activists, and makers proliferate alternatives to scientific humanism. There are a variety of strategies such as geopoetics, geochoreographies, inverted visualities, direct action, earth performances, and creating structures for political, activist, and artistic affinities, as I have written about, and all refute racial and extractive capitalism.

The books I review attend to the “colonial Anthropocene”, asking us to contend more centrally with the long-term effects of coloniality as central to our writing practice, theoretical commitments, and engagement with social texture. This work does not ignore the deep imprint of coloniality, but it also does not dwell in the wound. Such scholarship moves towards a remapping of land, and even towards the idea of resurgent resources that begin from local environs and concentrically connect destruction to renewal. Our urgent task is to connect the universal nomenclature of the Anthropocene to the specific time-space coordinates of extractive and racial capitalism. We must continue to document and work against and beyond the colonial and industrial ruins. The exigent questions are: How can we live otherwise? How do we move to a praxis of social living not already ensconced in the colonial Anthropocene?

New work in environmental studies that centers Black and Indigenous Studies can shift the terms of engagement towards the localized and profound violent effects of the colonial

²⁵Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses” (*Critical Inquiry* 35[2]:197-222, 2009, p.221).

Anthropocene. Much of our work needs to better track fields of power as well as lifting submerged perspectives, pointing to the possibility of resurgent resources. In the Yasuní national park in Ecuador, for instance, the imagined pristine territories of biodiversity have in fact been carefully cultivated and managed by Indigenous peoples against the naturalized encroachment of state and corporate logics. Similarly, in the Zapatista autonomous communities of Chiapas, Mexico, forest management and small-scale farming of native corn varieties reshapes the narrative of transnational corporations and their brutal extractive practices of capital and resource accumulation. Rather than merely orient towards the death and commodified value of extraction, we might unearth how resurgent resources give primacy to social ecological living, a strategy to proliferate rather than reproduce life, with a sensibility towards planetary renewal.

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