

## Endangered Life

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### *Feminist Posthumanism in the Anthropocene?*

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In her provocative introduction to the interdisciplinary collection *Extinction*, Claire Colebrook diagnoses posthumanism as “delusional,” “symptomatic,” and “psychotic.” Now that we live in what geologists informally call the “anthropocene” – a new epoch in which a preponderance of the earth’s systems are irreversibly altered by human activity – she claims that it is dangerous, insane even, to imagine that the traditional, “Cartesian” idea of man as master of nature is invalid.<sup>1</sup> The declaration of the death of man betrays a willful denial of humanity’s destructive capacity. The dream that man is disappearing like a “face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea”<sup>2</sup> is a symptom of a psychosis that protects us from the truth of man’s irretrievable imprint: eroding coral reefs, melting glaciers, gaping ozone, thousands of extinct species, and so much more. Colebrook’s is not only an indictment of French post-structuralism. She issues no less a challenge to feminist posthumanisms, which have launched influential assaults against the Cartesian figure of the self-possessed subject (who, we must admit, has few defenders in Continental philosophy generally). Does the heralding of the anthropocene demand a critical revival of Cartesian humanism? Must we affirm that humans are exceptional after all? Must we acknowledge that even if the cosmos was not designed with man

at its centre, man has made himself, through his destructive activities, its centre? Is the masculinist model of man as lord and possessor of nature an ugly truth?

Colebrook's challenge appears untimely because developments in ethological and environmental sciences make posthumanism increasingly attractive to critical theorists today. Posthumanism is a complex family of discourses that shares a critical posture toward Enlightenment humanism, according to which humanity is a distinctive mode of being, uniquely capable of moral agency.<sup>3</sup> Humans alone can become "persons," because we are the only beings who can determine ourselves to act according to a (or "the") moral law and thereby to free ourselves from brute natural determination. Feminists, as well as anticolonial and antiracist thinkers, have long been suspicious of such humanism, since it is women, children, and non-Europeans who have historically functioned as the many exceptions that prove the rule of man's unique metaphysical privilege. The esteemed humanist canon is littered with testimony that women and non-Western peoples never free themselves from the brute determination appropriate to brutes. Today, critical discourse can draw also from ethological and brain sciences, which pose increasingly serious challenges to philosophical anthropologies that maintain human exceptionalism – nonhuman animals are much more intelligent than imagined, and the human mind appears to be much less autonomous than many theories of moral agency presuppose. Likewise, the threat of ecological catastrophe binds our fates palpably to nonhuman beings and powers, which puts increasing pressure on the human provincialism that has reigned for millennia in mainstream ethics and politics in the Western world.

Yet Colebrook claims that it is precisely anthropogenic climate change that exposes posthumanism as an escapist fantasy of human continuity with nature. Just as human agency becomes a geological force in its own right, posthumanists aspire to undermine the image of "sovereign man," calling attention to the role that nonhuman powers – such as impersonal social structures, technologies, nonhuman animals, and physical systems – play in enabling and constraining our capacities. As a feminist and posthumanist, I am provoked by Colebrook's polemical intervention. Could the ecological posthumanist subject serve as a mere alibi for ecological destruction? Is posthumanism a "reaction formation" obscuring our responsibility for the current horizon of mass extinction?

Although I think Colebrook identifies some worrisome features of posthumanist discourses, I do not find her claim that the anthropocene exposes the truth of Cartesianism to be persuasive. Indeed, in line with ecofeminists, I believe that climate change can better be understood as humanity's failure to master nature. Having unintentionally altered the earth's ecosystems so as to bring about the destruction of many species, including quite possibly our own, climate change reveals the self-undermining effects of treating other beings as instruments and resources for human use. Surely, human beings frequently act *as if* we are lords and masters of nature, but the effects of our actions both exceed and undermine our intentions. Anthropocentrism and humanism belong to the ideologies that contribute to the irreversible transformation of the earth's ecosystems and the reckless disregard for other intelligent and sensitive life, but such destruction is not done by a Cartesian subject endowed with a transparent will. Isn't the anthropocene better understood as exposing the manly project of mastery as a failure?

Feminists have advocated posthumanism not merely to deny the validity of the description of man as lord and master of nature but also to challenge its normative force. Posthumanism does not merely name an ontological project or a deconstructive exercise. It expresses the desire for an alternative to society organized by the ideas of human exceptionalism, anthropocentrism, and the masculinist models of man they entail. Even if there may not be any humans to witness the epoch after the anthropocene, ecological catastrophe will soon require that we find new ways to live. Feminist posthumanism has a role to play in imagining how to live amidst the destruction wrought by masculinist humanism. I briefly develop each of these points in what follows.

## Descartes in the Anthropocene?

The anthropocene is an informal term for a new geological epoch marked, first and foremost, by anthropogenic environmental change. Reputable earth scientists largely agree that, since the Industrial Revolution, human activity has had a sufficient impact on the earth's systems to justify a formal shift in how we study, name, and understand those systems.<sup>4</sup> To underscore how monumental the introduction of a new geohistorical

boundary is, consider that the Holocene epoch dates 10,000 years before the Common Era calendar used in the study of human history, and the Pleistocene epoch prior to that lasted more than 2.5 million years. Human beings have left “a global stratigraphic signature distinct from that of the Holocene or of previous Pleistocene interglacial phases, encompassing novel biotic, sedimentary, and geochemical change,”<sup>5</sup> in a *very* short period of time, geologically speaking.<sup>6</sup> Anthropogenic changes are so potent that 300 years of industrialization may be all it takes for our children and grandchildren to find themselves by 2100 CE “on a ‘different planet’ than the one on which human civilization has evolved.”<sup>7</sup> Now that the collective effects of human activity are thought to be the dominant agent of geological transformation, critics must reckon with the fact that “the wall between human and natural history has been breached,”<sup>8</sup> if it ever existed.

In light of this reality, Colebrook finds that the generalized disrepute of Cartesianism across disciplines and subfields is not only misplaced but also indicative of a “reaction formation.” In her words: “Cartesian man (the subject detached from the world who pictures and masters a world of dead matter) is diagnosed as the error of modernity from which life now saves us ... On the other hand, and at the same time, there is widespread evidence of the truth of Cartesianism, a truth that is intoned everywhere and yet never heard, witnessed but not recognized.”<sup>9</sup> She elaborates on the truth of Cartesianism in her recent obituary for the “posthuman”: “Can we say that the Cartesian figure of disembodied life is really a mistake, or is it not a more accurate picture of ‘man’ in the anthropocene era? This, I think, suggests that we need to consider the future that this non-organic, non-relational, rigidly disembodied life has allowed to occur.”<sup>10</sup> Posthumanist critics announce the error of the dualist portrait of man, while humanity persistently and ruthlessly subordinates anything nonhuman to its own ends. Rather than appreciating our fragile community with other beings, the cumulative effects of human activity<sup>11</sup> since the industrial era threaten to destroy it.<sup>12</sup> Even if we might not represent any and all nonhuman phenomena as “dead,” encoded in our law and reflected in our behaviour is the view that we need only consider the independent purposes of current and potential “persons.” As Descartes might have hoped, there is nothing illegitimate, juridically speaking, in our ambition to become “lords and masters of nature.”<sup>13</sup>

Although diverse forces have collaborated in the institution of the anthropocene, Cartesian subjectivity aptly describes an orientation to the world that has contributed to climate change. We – or at least those born into national, racial, socioeconomic, and/or gender privilege – have been able to treat nonhuman nature as a mere resource for human projects. The near limitless exploitation and instrumentalization of nonhuman nature is supported by the metaphysical portrait of ourselves as uniquely minded, distinctively sensitive, and fundamentally different in kind from all other beings in nature.<sup>14</sup> We have, either consciously or unconsciously, individually or collectively, acted as though we are the centre of the cosmos and as though the fulfillment of human ambition justifies just about anything.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the humanist tradition, for which Descartes has come to stand, considers the mastery of nature to be not only justifiable but also imperative. When Descartes announces the ambition to “make ourselves, as it were, lords and masters of nature,” he identifies its virtues as follows: “This is desirable not only for the invention of innumerable devices which would facilitate our enjoyment of the fruits of the earth and all of the goods we find there, but also, and most importantly, for the maintenance of health, which is undoubtedly the chief good and the foundation of all the other goods in this life.”<sup>16</sup> Thus Descartes presents mastery of nature, especially the internal frontier of the human body, as necessary for the acquisition of that chief temporal good: human survival. Indeed, the subordination of everything to the human will to survive is precisely the orientation toward the biosphere that has ushered in the anthropocene. While history shows that this subordination of everything to “humanity” is highly selective and includes primarily those human owners of the means of production,<sup>17</sup> there is no denying that the Cartesian outlook has been efficacious and describes a mode of experience that can now be understood not only as a cultural but also as a geological force.

If our unparalleled destructive power is legible in ice cores, is the rejection of Cartesianism mere wish fulfillment? The aspects of Cartesianism that have come under attack by posthumanists include, broadly speaking, dualism and atomism, but I fail to see how climate change confirms either of these metaphysical presuppositions. If mastering nature involves the subordination of other beings to human projects, climate change is evidence that such a disregard for the complex web of relationships by virtue of which we exist, rather than guaranteeing our survival in the long term,

is fatal. Acting as though the laws of nature do not apply to us is what enables us to deplete the biosphere's resources, poisoning and annihilating many living beings and eventually undermining the habitability of the planet for humanity. The fantasy that human ingenuity can figure its way out of any problem – colonize space! – reflects the Cartesian optimism that planetary systems are fully knowable and manipulable. The anthropocene is precisely what reveals that these systems have a logic of their own and that, once sufficiently altered, they are not susceptible to any interventions that would guarantee our survival. Moreover, if we want to do anything more than diagnose the pathologies of the anthropocene, we need to fight the human exceptionalism it presupposes.

Indeed, it is only because we are part of nature that terms like “environment” become senseless. We are not surrounded by other kinds of reality. We are actors within a single, albeit infinitely complex, forcefield of powers *and* counterpowers. It is our ineluctable involvement with other beings that unites our fates and redirects our aims well beyond our intentions. It is because we are connected that we are both dangerous and endangered. Thus Colebrook is right to be wary of the romantic strain in some posthumanisms that underappreciates the importance of counterpowers, the antagonisms among various parts of nature, and replicates, albeit in a cosmological mode, humanism's failure to attend to differences among our kind. But to fight this we do not need Colebrook's polemic; we need *feminist* posthumanism.

## Feminist Posthumanism in the Anthropocene

Posthumanism is more than antihumanism. It includes the antihumanist critique of the Cartesian man as the spontaneous centre of volition, thoughts, and feelings, but it insists also on turning our theoretical and political attention to nonhuman powers – animal, vegetable, mineral, electric, structural, atmospheric, and so on. Posthumanism insists on what is sometimes called an “ecological” analysis, which must take into account relations of dependence, community, material, and even spiritual involvement among members of the biosphere. In contrast to several of the posthumanist thinkers Colebrook targets in her critique, the feminist tradition entails attention to inequalities, power relations, and the different capacities and vulnerabilities proper to differently situated subjects.

But, with the exceptions of ecofeminism (including those who focus on the suffering of nonhuman animals) and (some) recent new materialist feminisms, feminist criticism is not especially attentive to either our domination of or our dependence on nonhuman nature. In the age of the anthropocene, a position that is equally posthumanist and feminist alerts us to how the “human activity” that has reconfigured the earth’s systems in devastating ways has never been human activity *simpliciter*. It has been suggested that the anthropocene is more aptly called the “Eurocene” because the preponderance of industrial activity and carbon emissions since the industrial revolution has come from the region that we now call Europe.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, the “Capitalocene” has been proposed to emphasize the economically driven development of agriculture, migration patterns, and trade relations without focusing narrowly on industrial pollution.<sup>19</sup> We might also call it the “Androcene,” to emphasize the extent to which the epoch of climate change has been patriarchal. Considering these modifications together, we point to the reality that the agents and beneficiaries of resource colonization and extraction have been and remain overwhelmingly male owners of the means of production in the developed world. A full, critical diagnosis of the anthropocene entails attention to Europe as a patriarchal and colonial power. Colonialism under industrial capitalism has been motivated, in significant part, by the appropriation of natural resources and the exploitation, trade, and trophy killing of nonhuman animals. Feminist posthumanism needs to draw upon a multiplicity of critical resources to discern how capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism, among other systemic forces, have driven anthropogenic transformation, while striving for a new appreciation of scale, temporality, and impact on nonhuman beings and ecosystems.

A feminist stance helps us remain alert to the unavoidable risks of theorizing in a geohistorical mode. As we strive to think in terms of geological time, the interconnections of ecosystems, geopolitics, and the myriad effects of economies over time in different regions – the differences upon which feminist theory insists – may become more imperceptible than ever. But we know that those who have contributed least to climate change are those who are most vulnerable to its effects – future generations, of course, but also other species and the world’s poor (the overwhelming majority of whom are women and children). The regions likely to be most affected in

the short term, the far north and the Global South, are the least responsible for warming the planet.<sup>20</sup> If Colebrook, for example, is concerned to reckon with human extinction, we should appreciate the fact that, if indeed this is our horizon, we will not go extinct all at once. Devastation will first – and perhaps very soon – be felt by those in poor, highly populated coastal communities below the equator and the mostly indigenous communities in and near the Arctic. These communities bear very little responsibility for the changes that may soon devastate their land and food sources. So, how do we begin to reckon with species domination in a way that genuinely appreciates the differences within our species?

The anthropocene reveals the historical emergence of what we might call, prompted by Dipesh Chakrabarty's analysis, "the species effect."<sup>21</sup> Chakrabarty argues that the concept of the anthropocene urges us to reckon with our historical emergence as a species. With the dawn of industrialization, we became the kinds of beings that could impose "a signature" upon the entire biosphere. The industrial infrastructure developed in Europe in the eighteenth century intensified colonialism and myriad forms of human industry, rapidly transforming social and natural life on a global scale. As Marx and Engels memorably put it: "The need for a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connexions everywhere."<sup>22</sup> Industrialization was fuelled by capitalist social organization, in which the quest for profit sharpens the instruments of our species signature. We developed the ability to act as a species, as a collective author of legible effects on the biosphere, only at a certain point in history and only by virtue of structures that exceed our intention and control.

To identify capitalism as a primary force driving anthropogenic change, however, is not to minimize differences among human beings. Capitalism correlates with an ideology that negates fixed, natural differences,<sup>23</sup> but, at the same time, requires a stable and capacious gap between propertied capitalists and propertyless workers.<sup>24</sup> As Marxist feminists have long pointed out, although humanity may appear to be "more and more splitting up into two hostile camps,"<sup>25</sup> this appearance conceals those who labour to feed, clothe, and reproduce the proletariat.<sup>26</sup> It conceals both the unwaged reserve army of domestic labour as well as the differences among the working proletariat, marked by race, gender, religion, and



ethnicity, the vastly different working conditions in different nations and industries, as well as the persistence of slave labour within the capitalist mode of production.<sup>27</sup>

The ecological emphasis upon our ineluctable involvement with non-human nature, allied with critical race feminism's appreciation of structural domination among human beings, joined to anticolonial Marxism: these must all be among the crucial resources for reckoning with the anthropocene. The species effect is a historical phenomenon, driven by capitalism, industrialization, colonial expansion, and expropriation. These structures continue to be major features of our social organization. The drive for profit maximization, for example, compels oil and gas companies to settle the far reaches of the Arctic, threatening to displace indigenous communities and wreaking havoc on particularly fragile ecosystems.<sup>28</sup> The more we warm the climate, the more quickly and deeply the wealthiest and most militarily endowed countries and corporations will be able to inscribe the "human" signature, erasing those of other beings and peoples.<sup>29</sup>

Although I have barely pointed out the resources necessary, it is imperative to gather our tools to diagnose and combat the forces of anthropogenic climate change. Even if climate change is irreversible, it might be slowed down and we might direct our resources to the most vulnerable populations. Our struggle is to assess, concomitantly, the effects of centuries of unintended collective action while acknowledging the diverse and fractured character of this collective. The anthropocene signals the simultaneous triumph and decline of industrial man. Colebrook is right to reject, in the moment of climate change and on the horizon of extinction, posthumanist celebrations of universal connection and continuity between humans and nature. Nevertheless, Cartesianism fails to grasp how human vulnerability to extinction is an expression of our mutual dependency. Likewise, it does not begin to apprehend the unequal distribution of vulnerabilities and harms, human and nonhuman. Surviving in the anthropocene, even if we do not live to see the next epoch, calls for thought about which humans, practices, and institutions most urgently require transformation. As Colebrook emphasizes, our extinction, however grim the prospect, would not be the end of life itself. However, this does not mean that we should ignore the question of how the actions and institutions that define the twilight of our species might affect the evolution of the life that will persist beyond us.<sup>30</sup> Rather than come to grips with

humanity's "mastery of nature," we ought to mobilize against anthropogenic destruction to whatever extent we are able. Our critical tools will help us in our striving to understand the forces most necessary to combat, the alternatives we might institute, and the webs of life that most urgently need mending.

## NOTES

- 1 Colebrook, "Introduction," 18.
- 2 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 387.
- 3 For a comprehensive overview of feminist posthumanism, see Braidotti, *The Posthuman*.
- 4 Zalasiewicz et al., "Are We Now Living in the Anthropocene?"
- 5 *Ibid.*, 4.
- 6 Dahr Jamail, "We're Looking at the End of Humanity – And It Might Happen Sooner Than You Think," notes that a report in *Science* in August 2013 "revealed that in the near-term Earth's climate will change ten times faster than at any other moment in the last 65 million years."
- 7 Gardiner, *The Perfect Moral Storm*, 229. According to Jamail's reporting cited above, a number of serious scientists believe that catastrophic changes will occur well before 2100 and as early as 2035.
- 8 Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History," 221.
- 9 Colebrook, "Introduction," 19.
- 10 Colebrook, *Death of the Posthuman*, 95.
- 11 "Human activity," of course, is a very blunt phrase that fails to identify that in fact a relatively small proportion of humanity is responsible for the greatest destruction. I will say more on this below.
- 12 There is a great deal of fascinating debate about the dating of the Anthropocene. See Luciano, "The Inhuman Anthropocene."
- 13 Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch, *Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 1, 142–3.
- 14 See Francione for a humanist objection to excluding the personhood of animals from our legal system, *Animals as Persons*.
- 15 This ambition is ostensibly limited by the harm principle, which bars us from harming other "persons" but leaves it open to the law to determine to what extent various biological humans count as persons. The imperative not to harm persons has proven to be highly flexible and does not exclude the ruthless exploitation of human labour, among other kinds of damage.

- 16 Cottingham et al., *Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 1, 142–3.
- 17 Just as many people live in abject poverty so that a few people can live a life of opulence, the rich are already planning to safeguard themselves from the ill effects of climate change. See Lukacs, “New, Privatized African City Heralds Climate Apartheid.”
- 18 Caluya, “Fragments for a Postcolonial Critique of the Anthropocene,” 35.
- 19 Moore, “The Capitalocene, part 1.”
- 20 See Cook, “Those Who Contribute the Least to Greenhouse Gases Will Be Most Impacted by Climate Change.”
- 21 This term came to me upon reading the following: “Climate change is an unintended consequence of human actions and shows, only through scientific analysis, 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.” Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History,” 221.
- 22 Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 65.
- 23 Although feminists still have to work very hard to demonstrate how power and status differences among men and women continue to be naturalized, capitalism, with its rapid transformations and continual revolutionizing of the means of production, tends to destabilize fixed differences. Likewise, technology, the exchange of cultural products, and the domination of multinational companies bring more and more peoples into contact and communication.
- 24 See Marx, part 7 of *Capital*, vol. 1.
- 25 Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 62.
- 26 See, for example, Dallacosta and James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*.
- 27 See, for example, James, *Sex, Race, and Class*.
- 28 Klare, *The Race for What’s Left*, chapters 1 to 3.
- 29 *Ibid.*, chapter 8.
- 30 This is how Elizabeth Kolbert explains the ambition of her book. Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction*, 268–9.