

# CHAPTER FIVE

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## The Anthropocene

PIETER VERMEULEN

Our planet is fuller than ever of human life. Whereas the global population stood at 1 billion in 1800, there are currently 7.7 billion humans alive (the projection is that there will be 11.2 billion in 2100). This expansion of the human is actively crowding out other species: humans and the animals they eat consume about 95 percent of what the biosphere produces, which leaves only 5 percent of global food for wild animals (Smil 2013). “Crowding out,” for many plants and animals, crosses the threshold to extinction: we are now living through the sixth major extinction event in the history of the planet (the previous one killed off the dinosaurs), and the first “unnatural” one, in that it is caused by human action (Kolbert 2014). Nonhuman species disappear as agricultural monocropping is eroding biodiversity and making the ecological make-up of the planet ever more homogenous. Nor is it only nonhuman *species* that are affected: the human is also an “infrastructure species” that increasingly mobilizes nonhuman *stuff* to the point that the material habitat humans have created—roads, cities, cropland—is now “some five orders of magnitude greater than the weight of the human beings that it sustains”; this amounts to 4,000 tons of transformed earth per human being (Purdy 2018). Our planet, then, is a thoroughly *humanized* one that is being remade as “an integrated piece of global infrastructure” (Purdy 2018). Human life is fundamentally interpenetrated with nonhuman forces, as there is hardly any sector of the planet left that is untouched by human action.

Since the beginning of the millennium, the recognition of human life’s geological agency has gone under the name of the “Anthropocene.” Literally, the term means “the new epoch of

humans.” Although the term still awaits official recognition by the International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS), the ICS’s interdisciplinary Anthropocene Working Group (AWG) has found robust evidence that human life has impacted the earth system in a way that makes it deviate from Holocene values. The Holocene is the relatively stable and warm geological epoch in which human life has flourished for 11,700 years, and that is now coming to an end. The notion of the Anthropocene was popularized by the Nobel Prize-winning Dutch atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen in 2000, who had picked up the term from the biologist Eugene Stoermer. Since then, the term has served as a catalyst for questions about environmental responsibility, the limitations of economic growth, the possibilities for global governance, and other fundamental questions that concern the nature and the future of human life. It has migrated from the domain of earth science to the humanities and the social sciences, but also to the art world and, more recently, general public debate. In the process, the term’s scientific significance has shifted to an ethical and political register: the notion recognizes human life as a geological *force* even while it interpellates it as a responsible ethical and political *agent*. In Dipesh Chakrabarty’s terms, Anthropocene discourses are marked by “code-switching between the physical category of force and the social-existential categories of ‘consciousness’ and ‘power’” (2018: 14).

The notion of the Anthropocene, then, is less prone to celebration than to weariness and concern about human agency. It focuses more on the “world of wounds” (Emmett and Nye 2017: 93) that human life is spreading, and on dimensions of loss, extinction, and collapse, than on the human capacity to design techno-fixes for environmental crisis (although, as we will see, so-called ecomodernists believe in a “a good, or even great, Anthropocene” through which we will engineer our way out of the crisis [Asafu-Asjaye et al. 2015: 6]). This gloom follows directly from the insight that all of the natural world has been affected by human action (which, as Andreas Malm has worked tirelessly to remind us, is not the same as saying that human life has *constructed* nature [2017: 37]): the entanglement of the human and the nonhuman implies that human life is not only the subject, but also the object of the Anthropocene. It finds itself on the receiving end of the destructive processes it has initiated, accelerated, or amplified. Anthropogenic climate change is exemplary here: the cumulative outcome of over two centuries of actions and decisions, climate change has now passed a threshold beyond which human ingenuity cannot contain, let alone reverse it. The rubric of the Anthropocene covers not only climate change, but also phenomena such as ocean acidification (which is tied to increasing carbon dioxide levels), global overpopulation, resource depletion, massive species extinction, and ecosystem simplification—phenomena that interlock in complex feedback loops that also threaten the survival of human life. The Anthropocene then also marks the fear that the ongoing sixth extinction event will extend to *Homo sapiens*, and that the planet will morph into an inhospitable place that cannot sustain the survival of the species that undid it.

The Anthropocene imagination is obsessed with worlds that are not so much posthuman as radically *posthumous*. In film, literature, but also in philosophy and popular science, images proliferate of future *worlds without us*—of “disanthropic” worlds (Garrard 2012) in which the legacy of human life has been reduced to a lifeless archive, or to a mere fossil in the geological record. Think of a film like Pixar’s *WALL-E*, in which a robot trash compactor is

left to clean up an abandoned earth covered in garbage, or Alan Weisman's popular science best seller *The World without Us*, which imagines a world from which human life has suddenly disappeared. In his book of popular science, *The Earth after Us*, Jan Zalasiewicz imagines "extraterrestrial visitors from the galactic empire" (2009: 4) who, millions of years in the future, attempt to reconstruct the legacy of our "major, intelligent yet transient civilization" (2009: xiv)—a legacy from which many things we consider significant have disappeared. Such fictions are sustained exercises in coming to terms with the diminished prospects of human life on Earth—with the insight that the moment of the human's exaltation (as a considerable physical *force*) spells the moment of its existential endangerment (as a vulnerable and infinitely responsible *agent*). Like other post-catastrophe and post-apocalyptic fictions, such disanthropic imaginings tend to appeal to residual repositories of human action, and to call for a last-ditch effort to prevent the seemingly inevitable collapse of civilization. A lot of their affective appeal, we can suspect, derives from the tensions between the vast geological timescapes they open up and the ever-shortening window of time in which humanity's undoing can still be pre-empted. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) 2018 report, that window closes as early as 2030: absent decisive action to address planetary deterioration before that, all bets are off.

The Anthropocene's signature combination of power and doom generates complex emotions: Robert Emmett and David Nye mention "grief, fear, doubt, uncertainty, morbid curiosity, lethal rage" (2017: 108). These tonalities are captured by the phrase "peak humanity": like the cognate phrase "peak oil," it expresses a sense that we have reached a moment of maximum accumulation that inevitably precedes a trajectory of terminal decline. Any suggestion of species pride is undercut by an awareness of exhaustion and depletion. As an episode in the history of (post)humanism, then, the Anthropocene signals a moment of *species status anxiety*: on the one hand, the technological prowess of humankind has come to assert itself as a significant force; on the other, human life itself is caught in the processes of erosion and disintegration that human life has unleashed.

In the Anthropocene's posthumous imagination, it is often less human species life as such that is at stake, but rather a particularly *humanist* instance of it. In novels and films like *The Road*, *Cloud Atlas*, and *Mad Max: Fury Road*, the way of life that finds itself under erasure is almost consistently a comfortable and Western one; what such works feel nostalgic about is a technologically advanced and economically privileged form of life that has never been the preserve of more than a small minority of the world population. It is not so much the human species that is threatened, but the more provincial comforts associated with liberal affluent urbanity. The wastelands in which the survivors in these works find themselves are only a diminishment for independent and self-sufficient modern subjects—for people living in the global South, they are often already a reality. And have been for a long time: as Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros De Castro have argued, current metropolitan anxieties merely show that the erosion of the lifeworld has finally caught up with privileged audiences, while "for the native people of the Americas, the end of the world already happened—five centuries ago" (2016: 104). They write that "we are on the verge of a process in which the planet as a whole will become something like sixteenth-century America: a world invaded, wrecked, and razed by barbarian foreigners" (2016: 108). The anxieties that the

Anthropocene inspires, in other words, are often quite precisely *posthumanist*, rather than radically posthuman. Alternatively, they beg the question about who exactly the human in “the new epoch of humans” is.

## THE ANTHROPOS OF THE ANTHROPOCENE

One common critique of the notion of the Anthropocene holds that, in declaring our epoch to be marked by the impact of humanity *as a whole*, it fails to differentiate between the various constituencies that make up humanity. In that way, the notion fails to register that diagnosing both the causes and the effects of planetary change calls for *more differentiation*: if Western constituencies are disproportionately responsible for triggering dramatic changes to the earth system, it is people in the global South who will be—and, by now, have become—most vulnerable to its fall-out, as the habitable part of the planet is shrinking fast. What compounds the complexity of this picture is that today, it is no longer an increasingly provincialized Europe and the United States that aggravate planetary pollution, but previously poor nations like India and (especially) China that have become vast engines of industrial growth. Facing up to this complexity shows that the imagining of a collective humanity capable of concerted action to address planetary change—often going under the name of *ecocosmopolitanism*—is wishful thinking; it foregrounds the need to reckon with questions of environmental justice in recalibrating global relations.

Nor, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued, is the human who caused planetary destabilization the same one who is called on to address it. Chakrabarty’s early influential interventions in the theorization of the Anthropocene had already warned that “we humans never experience ourselves as a species” (2009: 220), only ever as participants of smaller communities. Whatever sense of universality there is “arises from a shared sense of a catastrophe” (220); it is less a shared global identity, but only a negative identity, “a placeholder for an emergent, new universal history of humans that flashes up in the moment of the danger that is climate change” (219). When read closely, it becomes clear that Chakrabarty’s assertion of the negativity of this proleptic humanity is a way of disentangling the knotty issue of concerted human action from the complicated legacies of inequality and injustice that complicate the assertion of a universal humanity. More recently, Chakrabarty has introduced a pragmatic distinction between *Homo* and *Anthropos*. *Anthropos*, for Chakrabarty, names the human who occasioned the Anthropocene—“[i]t is a causal term that does not signify any moral culpability” (2015: 157). *Homo*, in contrast, refers to the “one-but-divided humanity” that is capable of reflecting on “values, ethics, suffering, and attachments” (159); it is the subject who is currently being interpellated to come up with a response to environmental destruction. Chakrabarty’s distinction is useful for preventing a focus on the past *causes* of planetary exhaustion from overwhelming the effort of managing its ongoing and emerging *effects*; at the same time, it underestimates the persistence of histories of inequality and injustice, and is then arguably too neat to capture the complex feedback loops and temporal upheavals that the Anthropocene inaugurates.

The stories we tell about the Anthropocene matter to the way we connect past responsibilities to future prospects. Such narratives do not really concern the geologists in

charge of assessing the stratigraphic actuality of the Anthropocene: their concern is with establishing evidence in the geological record to consider “the Anthropocene to be stratigraphically real,” that is, with finding sufficiently clear signals in sediments and ice that show the earth system moving away from Holocene values (Zalasiewicz et al. 2017: 55). What geologists want is a so-called “golden spike,” a geological marker that unambiguously points to datable and discrete changes in the earth system. In the case of the Anthropocene, the clearest such marker seems to be the layer of radiocarbon left in the rock strata after the first nuclear bomb test on July 16, 1945—a trace that serves as “[t]he most widespread and globally synchronous anthropogenic signal” (qtd. in Menely and Taylor 2017: 6). When this observation is entangled with the stories we tell about the emergence of the Anthropocene, it becomes clear that there are different competing cutting-off points, and that these stories each imply different accounts of the particular *anthropos* names by the Anthropocene. If the Anthropocene constitutes a new grand narrative that displaces the triumphalist account of a science- and technology-driven modernity codified in traditional humanism, it is worth disentangling these different accounts. I will present four competing accounts, which revolve around four proposed starting points: the onset of intense farming activities by our early agrarian ancestors (c. 6000 BC), the start of Western colonization (c. 1610), the Industrial Revolution (c. 1784), and the so-called Great Acceleration after the Second World War (c. 1945). Each proposes a different *Anthropos*; they imagine the human as a farmer, a colonizer, an entrepreneur, and/or a profligate consumer.

The so-called “early Anthropocene thesis” propounded by William Ruddiman sees humanity’s geological force assert itself as early as 8,000 years ago, when intense farming and deforestation increased atmospheric greenhouse gas concentrations to the point that they delayed a (retrospectively predictable) ice-age. On this (widely contested) account, the whole of human civilization is on trial; the human is essentially an agriculturalist whose concern for its own survival is enough to affect the earth system. A second account more usefully foregrounds the role of violence and differentiated responsibilities in anthropogenic changes to the Earth. Geographers Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin propose to locate the start of the Anthropocene epoch in 1610, with the European conquest of the Americas and the onset of global trade. This version underlines the role of colonialism and imperialism in altering the ecological make-up of the planet: the ecological mixing of the Americas with Afro-Eurasia not only led to mass death because of smallpox and influenza among the native inhabitants of the Americas, but this mass death in its turn informed a large-scale reforestation of the Americas and cleared the way for, among other things, the imposition of monocrop agribusiness and the spread of plantations in the colonies—with the ecological upsets, the forced migration, and the soil exhaustion that this kind of biomanagement entails.

The entanglement of global migration, ecological mixing, and capitalist dynamics has led to a number of suggested alternatives for the rubric of the Anthropocene. The notion of the *Homogenocene* underlines the decrease in biodiversity and the increasing similarity between ecosystems around the world because of the success of invasive species—whether these travel by accident along newly globalized routes, or whether they are introduced deliberately (think of cotton, soy, or cattle), more often than not goaded by capitalist dynamics. As Steve Mentz has noted, the notion of the Homogenocene usefully displaces the human from its

central place in the dominant Anthropocene narrative, as it foregrounds the roles of “mosquitos, tobacco, viruses, plant and animal species such as potatoes, tomatoes ... and other things” (Mentz 2013). It participates in a recent shift in critical theory to a consideration of *nonhuman* agents, as part of an effort to decenter the human and factor in the agency of animals, plants, things, and even so-called hyperobjects in the making of the world. Donna Haraway has coined the notion of the *Chthulucene*, a term that echoes not only H. P. Lovecraft’s cosmic monster Cthulhu but also the Greek *khthonios*, which means “of the earth” (2016: 173–74n4). Haraway calls for “compositionist practices” in which humans “entangle with the ongoing, snaky, unheroic, tentacular, dreadful ones, the ones which/who craft material-semiotic netbags” (43). She advocates an “earthly worlding that is thoroughly terran, muddled, and mortal” (55) and in which human life embraces its implication in multispecies assemblages.

Foregrounding nonhuman agents may enrich descriptions of the Anthropocene alteration of the globe; it also risks letting powerful groups with a disproportionate responsibility for those changes off the hook. Haraway has also helped promote the notion of the *Plantationocene* (launched tongue-in-cheek during a 2014 roundtable) to nominate the plantation as the exemplary historical site where capitalism wreaks its destructive work. Situated at the intersection of forcibly displaced labor, long-distance financial investment, and cultivation of the soil, the plantation is an agro-industrial system (a “synthesis of field and factory,” as Sidney Mintz [1986: 47] called it) that constitutes a major upheaval in the relations between humans, animals, plants, and other organisms. The slave plantation system, in Donna Haraway’s words, “was the model and motor for the carbon-greedy machine-based factory system,” and it is “continuous with ever greater ferocity in globalized factory meat production, monocrop agribusiness, and immense substitutions of crops like palm oil for multispecies forests and their products” (2016: 206n5). And plantations keep going strong: in the past ten years, 75 million acres of land have been sold or leased for large scale rubber, palm oil, and other concessions (Moore et al. 2019). The *Plantationocene* locks hands with the notion of the *Capitalocene* to highlight the disproportionately destructive role of capitalism in the reorganization of global ecosystems and the threat to the viability of the earth system as a whole. Ever since its emergence in the fifteenth century, proponents of this notion hold, capitalism has revolutionized the landscape and has been an environment-making force.

The decisive role of capitalist dynamics is obliterated in a third proposal for an Anthropocene starting date (after the cases for 6000 BC and 1610 I considered before): this story, which comes close to being the official one, if only because it was long endorsed by Paul Crutzen himself, sees the late eighteenth century as the starting point of the Anthropocene. On this account, James Watt’s invention of the double action steam engine in 1784 kick-started the transition to coal fuel that characterized the British Industrial Revolution and began the relentless rise of atmospheric carbon dioxide levels. This account seems to reinstall a great man theory of history, in which the visionary interventions of entrepreneurs reshape not only human life but also the planet that sustains it. At the same time, it reflects a form of technological determinism, which holds that technological innovation irresistibly alters the course of history. Many critics have pointed out that that is

simply not how history works, and that far-reaching ecological changes emerge as a result of capitalist dynamics and not just of technological innovation. Fossil fuel is not magically more efficient, abundant, or reliable than, for instance, hydraulic power, but it is decidedly easier to monetize: it can easily be relocated to sites where labor is cheap, and it allows for competition (rather than require collaboration, as hydropower does) between entrepreneurs (Malm 2016). Later on, the shift from coal to oil is less inspired by technological necessity and efficiency than by the disempowerment of labor and the militarization of the globe that slick pipelines make possible (Mitchell 2011). Nor is the quasi-official Anthropocene narrative only phallogocentric and technocentric: it also privileges the role of the British Industrial Revolution, and disregards that the latter was only possible in the context of preexisting transatlantic trade networks in slave labor and cotton (Malm and Hornborg 2014: 63–4; Bonneuil and Fressoz 2016: 232–3).

There are not only stratigraphic reasons, then, to follow the AWG and privilege 1945 as the official start date of the new epoch of humans. The detonation of the first atomic bomb also coincides with the so-called Great Acceleration—an exponential boost in earth system trends (think of increases in ocean acidification, tropical forest loss, marine fish capture, and atmospheric carbon dioxide levels) as well as in socioeconomic trends (think of demographic growth and the steep rise of international tourism, paper production, and foreign direct investment) that dwarfs the increase since the eighteenth century. These interlocking developments show the escalating impact of economic globalization and the expansion of consumer capitalism. The *scale* of these changes provides overwhelming evidence for the complex causal interactions between socioeconomic and earth system changes, even if that influence is not linear: because of the very *size* of human impact, the earth system has now passed irreversible tipping points beyond which processes of thawing, heating, and devastation become self-reinforcing. The Great Acceleration finds human action overextending itself to the point where it becomes the object of nonhuman processes that were yet triggered by human actions, but that can in no way be neutralized by simply discontinuing these actions. The question as to what is left for humans to do, then, is a fraught one.

## WHOSE ANTHROPOCENE?

The Anthropocene has not only inspired species anxiety (which I explored in the first section) or sober analytical assessment (section two), but also a somewhat contrived optimism. The belief that human ingenuity will allow us to engineer our way out of the mess we created often goes under the name of *ecomodernism*. Ecomodernists assume that the immense cost that technological progress has exacted from the planet need not diminish our faith in further technological solutions. Technology, on this account, is a vast prosthesis that extends human power rather than a force that also limits it. For Crutzen, for instance, the notion of the Anthropocene highlights “the immense power of our intellect and our creativity, and the opportunities they offer for shaping the future” (Crutzen and Schwägerl 2011). In this way of thinking, the market will foster a green economy that will generate and promote sustainable solutions. In the so-called “Ecomodernist Manifesto,” a group of eighteen

scientists cheerfully look forward to “decoupl[ing] human well-being from environmental destruction” through “a sustained commitment to technological progress” (Asafu-Asjaye et al. 2015: 31, 29). Through technological developments, human action can transcend its environmental limitations and enter “a good, or even great, Anthropocene” (6). Limitation is unnecessary, as accelerated technological developments make it possible to let natural territories “re-wild and re-green” (14).

Ecomodernists and geoengineering advocates respond to the diagnosis of peak humanity with a declaration of faith in an ever higher peak that will somehow *not* be followed by a steep decline. This amounts to a fantasy of transcendence that sidesteps physical limitations and earthly attachments in ways that echo the grandiose ambitions of transhumanism rather than the earthly commitments of a critical posthumanism. Ecomodernism not only goes against the downbeat tonality of more critical Anthropocene discourses, its anthropoboosterism also denies the other crucial features of that discourse I identified: the fundamental entanglement of human and nonhuman trajectories, and the vulnerabilities that come with it. Post-catastrophe fiction abounds with examples of failed geoengineering experiments. In Erik Conway and Naomi Oreskes’s *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future*, a scientifically informed account of the ongoing and coming planetary derangement, a fictional mid-twenty-first-century International Aerosol Injection Climate Engineering Project (IAICEP) is supposed to save the day, but unwittingly shuts down the Indian monsoon, which triggers crop failures and famine and, fatally, political support by India. Having sucked away resources from renewable energy conversion programs, the only upshot of the IAICEP is pushing the greenhouse effect beyond a tipping point (2014: 27–8).

*The Collapse* offers a compelling argument that science and technology alone will not articulate a viable response to the Anthropocene. If the success of geoengineering projects depends on political developments in India, one at the very least needs to have political scientists and IR scholars on board. Conway and Oreskes earlier wrote *Merchants of Doubt*, a book that laid out how particular scientific and political factions have for decades obscured the truth about issues like climate change, acid rain, or the ozone hole. As long as power players have a stake in obscuring the truth, the mere affirmation of scientific insight will have little purchase on real-world change. The interdisciplinary field of the environmental humanities has increasingly begun to bring together insights from the sciences with knowledge from such fields as cultural geography, environmental history, ecophilosophy, and cultural and literary studies in order to come to grips with the complex dynamics that affect responses to environmental disaster. Such a reckoning with the viability of available technofixes must also reckon with the fact that some factions are deeply invested in muddying the water as far as climate change is concerned in order to forestall decisive action.

This is one of the points of Bruno Latour’s startling *Down to Earth*. Latour brings together three phenomena that have marked the last couple of decades: the deregulation of finance, the exponential rise of inequality, and the aggressive effort to distort our knowledge about climate change. Taking these three developments together, Latour notes, “it is as though a significant segment of the ruling classes (known today rather too loosely as ‘the elites’) had concluded that the Earth no longer had room enough for them and for everyone else” (2018: 1). The result is that “[f]rom the 1980s on, the ruling classes stopped purporting to lead and

began instead to shelter themselves from the world” (1–2). The organized refusal to confront the challenge of the Anthropocene, then, is the ruling classes’ response to peak humanity: peak humanity then names a moment of crisis in which the elites can rid themselves of the surplus population—the 99 percent who cannot join the likes of Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk on their excursions to Mars, but are irredeemably earthbound. When Musk notes that his much-hyped ambition to colonize Mars is an attempt to “safeguard the existence of humanity” (Assis 2015), the vaguely humanitarian rhetoric of humanity obscures the fact that at best, planetary relocation can accommodate an infinitesimally small segment of the human population while it has to abandon billions to the Earth. In the face of the facile claim that in the Anthropocene, there are no lifeboats, Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg have underlined that “[f]or the foreseeable future ... there *will* be lifeboats for the rich and privileged” (2014: 66)—but emphatically not for us.

## THE ANTHROPOCENE IMAGINATION

The threat of species extinction may be a problem for most people, but for some it is a *solution* to the problem of surplus life. For the environmental humanities, it seems crucial not to overinvest in the specter of a diminished post-catastrophe or post-apocalyptic future, but to understand that, first, the Anthropocene’s vast reorganization of human life is already ongoing and, second, that there is no universal human subject of the Anthropocene—no *anthropos*, no *homo*, but different constituencies with different interests. Ursula Heise has remarked that the power of the notion of the Anthropocene lies less “in its scientific definition as a geological epoch, but in its capacity to cast the present as a future that has already arrived” (2016: 203). This, she adds, is “one of the quintessential functions of contemporary science fiction” (203). This is why the environmental humanities have also enlisted art projects and literary endeavors to forge an interdisciplinary alliance that can meaningfully intervene in the eroding present.

As an example of a work that recalibrates the relations between ongoing processes of destitution and the coming collapse, consider a science fiction novel like William Gibson’s *The Peripheral*. The world of the novel consists of two futures: a near future situated in the impoverished United States and populated by drug “builders,” gamers, and cyborg veterans, and a post-2100 future situated in London and populated by a tiny elite living transhuman lives. The two futures are separated by an Anthropocene-like event the novel calls “the Jackpot”: a multicausal, slow, drawn-out collapse of civilization initiated by climate change, which also results in political destabilization, mass extinction (of, among others, 80 percent of the world population), and finally the end of democracy. Yet unlike what the term “Jackpot” suggests, the outcome of the Jackpot is not entirely arbitrary, as the crisis allows the already powerful to turn “constant crisis” into “constant opportunity.” The 80 percent, for them, are merely collateral damage for a shiny new world “lit increasingly by the new” (2015: 321).

The novel underlines the power differences between the people inhabiting the two futures through the science fictional conceit that information can travel back in time while physical matter cannot. This means that the hi-tech future can freely intervene in the near future, and

that the games the people in the near future are paid to play provide actual labor in the later future. The novel underlines that this is enabled by superior technology, especially data-processing technology: “Information from there affects things here ... Their stuff’s all seventy years faster than ours” (192). This exploitation, moreover, occurs without fear of retribution or upheaval: once the future world connects with and interferes in the past, that past stops being their past and becomes an alternative timeline, “a stub” (38). Gibson describes this as a process of third-worlding: the same impudence with which colonial powers extracted labor and natural resources from a global South deemed safely removed from the Western metropolis is now unleashed against the American population through data processing, in a way that immunizes the powerful from the masses.

*The Peripheral*’s two futures compose an allegory for the diminishment of contemporary life, while highlighting the role of environmental devastation in reinforcing inequalities and intergroup aggression. They present a scenario that Claire Colebrook has described as a prime science-fictional trope for the engagement with peak humanity: a process of “species-bifurcation, with some humans commandeering and squandering the few remaining resources while enslaving the majority of barely living humans” (2018: 151). Peter Frase has linked the threat of mass extinction to ongoing technological developments to imagine a scenario he dubs “exterminism” (2016: 120). Thanks to technological developments, the lives of the happy few are rigorously independent from those of the rest of the population, who are barely needed. Environmental crisis, then, provides a welcome occasion for decimating surplus populations. If inequality was traditionally kept in check by the mutual dependence between capitalists and workers, in this scenario “an impoverished, economically superfluous rabble poses a great threat to the ruling class,” without being of any potential use (2016: 123). In *The Peripheral*, the transhumanist elite has not bothered to save excess populations, as they can count on the free disposability of labor reserves in a past that will never dry up. Only because these past lives are cheaper than technology and because they do not constitute a threat to privilege do they remain alive at all. If the novel’s title refers to a kind of drone body that people can inhabit from a distant location, it also underlines the status of most lives in this new dispensation: marginal, of secondary or only superficial importance.

*The Peripheral* gives a particular spin to Anthropocene posthumanism. It presents it as a combination of transhumanist fantasy and cynical misanthropy. At the same time, it shows how literature and the arts can enrich the environmental humanities project of articulating different human constituencies to planetary emergencies. It does so, crucially, by showing how the Great Acceleration overlaps with the Great Divergence (Nixon 2014)—how planetary deterioration is non-trivially connected to the rise of inequality under neoliberalism in the last decade. *The Peripheral* offers no solutions: the novel’s corny ending offers domestic bliss for the protagonists, but such a local windfall means little as the storm continues to rage outside. It suggests that the Anthropocene is less a problem to be solved than a new reality to be inhabited.

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