

book review

Grusin, Richard (ed.). **After Extinction**. University of Minnesota Press, 2018

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Coined by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen in 2000, the term Anthropocene suggests the advent of a new era in which humans are the main geological force. Acknowledging this shift in constitutive forces on Earth turns our attention to the fast-approaching ecological catastrophe brought on by human activity and thus, to the likely extinction of all life on the planet. Following *The Nonhuman Turn* (2015) and *Anthropocene Feminism* (2017), also published through Minnesota University Press, which dealt with issues of ontology and feminist and queer approaches of the Anthropocene, *After Extinction* is the third volume edited by Professor of English Richard Grusin, grappling with this increasingly fashionable concept in academia. Subsequent to the 2015 Center for 21st Century Studies conference of the same name, the book provides an interdisciplinary approach to the question: What comes after extinction?

The collection starts with political theorist William E. Connolly's call for an "entangled humanism," underlining the limits of 20th century philosophical theories of cultural internalism and human exceptionalism in the face of the coming sixth extinction. To counter the nihilisms that these philosophical premises would inevitably convey, Connolly suggests rethinking humanism, transfigured into "new modes of care" (Connolly 2018, 16), in the form of entanglement. Acknowledging the limited human ability to feel, entangled huma-

nists should attempt to enlarge human affect and understandings of life to include an Other who might be found in everything. Following Connolly, Jussi Parikka underlines the necessity of multiple temporalities to think this turn to the nonhuman. In his contribution "Planetary Memories: After Extinction, the Imagined Future," Parikka proposes rethinking concepts of time and approaching extinction and the future as a mediated now. The Finnish theorist looks at narratives and representations of the post-planetary in different literary and artistic examples, to question the issue of temporality in relation to extinction. Through "politics of chronoscapes," we might understand the present as entangled geological timelines and the future as "an archaeological existence of projected spaces or potentiality" (Parikka 2018, 43).

Connolly's and Parikka's chapters lay the theoretical ground for the more specific focuses that follow. Joanna Zylinska interrogates the regimes of visibility around extinction, developing an issue central to the common reflection presented in this collection: how can we theorize and represent extinction against the human cognitive inability to fathom annihilation? Zylinska presents photography as a form of fossil, as both are obtained through a similar process wherein the "real" is imprinted on the material using light. Zylinska goes on to posit that photography can thus be attributed life-giving, rather than life-conserving, properties.

This is because photography provides material to simultaneously reflect on the issues of temporality and the possibilities offered by solar energy. Joseph Masco's chapter furthers these interrogations of visibility and representation by underlining the paradox between the Freudian human denial of one's death and the fascination - if not eroticism - brought on by images of annihilation. Commenting on Hamza Walker's 2013 exhibition *Suicide Narcissus*, Masco finds entryways to resisting the spectacle of extinction and fostering investment in a collective future, aware of the complex impact of human activities on the environment. In a last example of the ways arts and sciences may work together in thinking subjectivity beyond extinction, Cary Wolfe explores a scientific and artistic project on the extinction of the Californian Condor. Replacing extinction as both the most natural phenomenon and one that can never be natural, for it goes against the "stabilizing apparatus" of theorized biodiversity, Wolfe discusses Heidegger's "thesis of essence" and Derrida's response on the human-animal distinction.

Nicholas Mirzoeff's chapter marks a much-needed rupture in the collection by clearly addressing the blind spots of the non-human turn, only slightly hinted at in previous articles. Mirzoeff asks who is the "anthropos" of the Anthropocene. Going against the universalist tendencies of the materialist turn, he recalls the historical definition of the nonhuman as the non-white man. As he reviews theories of race, from Cuvier to Audubon, Mirzoeff reminds us of the central role of race played and still plays in defining whose life matters. Mirzoeff gives a color and a chronology to extinction, arguing for a geological color line and drawing links between the Anthropocene and Christianity, slavery, and capitalism. Uncovering the "white supremacy scene" also allows him to unearth practical modes of resistance and more precisely "new" actors of these resistances: those designated not human within the regime of white supremacy. Further analyzing the concept of "man" in the Anthropocene, Claire Colebrook looks at the rational discourses surrounding the definition of humanity, in particular regarding disabilities. She highlights that as our planet's resources continue decreasing, a utilitarian discourse will have to take place to define which lives are worth living. Building on Bernard Stiegler's thesis that every human is dependent on unequally distributed networks of

technology (Stiegler 1988), Colebrook challenges the idea of the sixth extinction by demonstrating that not only is extinction a natural phenomenon, it is in fact a logic at the very heart of humanity.

These chapters make a vital intervention to contest the universalizing tendency of the nonhuman turn, as approached in theory and arts so far in this book. These concerns, raised by postcolonial studies most notably, are all the more significant when thinking about the Anthropocene, for it presents the risk of a return of Enlightenment conceptions of the human as bearer of rights, overlooking distinctions of gender, class, race, and ability (Chakrabarty 2012).

Ashley Dawson revives the debate over the very naming of the Anthropocene, in opposition to the Capitalocene. If Dawson's chapter restates an established discussion in environmental humanities, it remains an unavoidable debate to have in this volume, one that reorients the discussion towards institutions, issues of responsibility and the inexorability of extinction. In the introductory chapter, Connolly had dismissed this term by Jason W. Moore, for it fails to include the nonhuman processes also at stake in the race to extinction and to account for variables outside of capitalism. Instead Dawson engages in a compelling study of de-extinction rhetorics to explore the ways in which the Anthropocene not only is a consequence of capitalism but also fuels it. He explains, "the extinction crisis offers an opportunity to capital for a new round of accumulation" (Dawson 2018, 176) through the rush for new biotechnologies and the increasing commodification of nature. Taking the example of the Amazon, Dawson shows how this "catastrophe biocapitalism," supported by the fallacious belief in unending capacity for growth, is a threat to not only the environment but the local population it displaces.

The volume's closing chapter offers a reflection on the epistemology of extinction, looking at native peoples' histories and the very meaning of 'extinction'—word which often does not translate in native languages. Daryl Baldwin and his collaborators explain that extinction "is not only a foreign concept but an invasive one" (Baldwin 2018, 210). Like Dawson criticized the social impacts of so called "technofixes" to extinction, the authors look at strategies of linguistic survivals and the misguided efforts to conserve and archive them rather than revive them.

In his opening words, editor Richard Grusin introduces the collection as an effort to think of extinction as generative. The multiplicity of interventions made in *After Extinction* come together to complicate the now widespread focus on the nonhuman and to bring forth issues of race, ability, and capitalism in matters of extinction. In so doing, the writers propose practical answers and make calls for action. Therefore, extinction appears here not only as generative but also re-generative of the ecological debate and, as Grusin points out, of processes of creating knowledge in the humanities today. As such the book embodies the struggles of the humanities to theorize the human not only as a subject in Enlightenment perspectives – which postcolonial studies challenged but nonetheless built on – but collectively as a geological force.

References

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- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2012. “Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change.” *New Literary History* 43 (1): 1-18.

Endnotes

- 1 As Jane Bennett’s work *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010) developed in its reflection over object-oriented ontology.
- 2 Zylinska refers here to the argument articulated by Ilkka Hanski (2008).
- 3 Connolly remarks that Capitalist Germany has managed to drastically reduce its greenhouse gas emissions and that Soviet Russia was a massive polluter.
- 4 Technologies claiming to fix the negative externalities of human activity while preserving the potential for economic growth. Tools of green-washing practices are mostly fixes to feelings of guilt.