

Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser, eds. *A World of Many Worlds*. Duke University Press, 2018. 232 pp. ISBN: 9781478002956.

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The responsibility for environmental collapse cannot be uniformly distributed – it is glaringly obvious which geographical regions and social segments benefited historically from the processes it set in motion – its consequences will be much more so: ... [it] points to a shared catastrophe. (Viveiros de Castro and Danowski, 173)

The Anthropocene marks a new geological epoch in which the planet is predominantly shaped by “the detritus, movement, and actions of humans” (Davis and Todd 762). As the result of “extractivism,” “the accelerated extraction of natural resources to satisfy a global demand for minerals and energy to provide what national governments consider economic growth” (de la Cadena and Blaser 2), there is an impending “shared catastrophe.” It is marked by quickly increasing and converging ecological crises due to which the possibility of the destruction of life on Earth is looming. However, the admission of culpability that holds humanity responsible serves to mask more than it reveals (Kirby 2018).¹ In response, Heather Davis and Zoe Todd (Métis/otipemisiw) ask: “if the Anthropocene is already here, the question then becomes, what can we do with it as a conceptual apparatus that may serve to undermine the conditions that it names?” (Davis and Todd 763).

Where one might call this *the end of the world*, the essays comprising *A World of Many Worlds*, productively invite us to consider the Anthropocene as *the end of worlds*, or “worlds whose disappearance was assumed at the outset of the Anthropocene,” as editors Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser write (2). While a “shared catastrophe,” it is also one that is felt unevenly: the Anthropocene disproportionately threatens large swaths of the Global South, endangered animal and plant species, Indigenous peoples, and marginalized communities of colour (both urban and rural) in ways that affluent colonizing communities in the Global North have purposefully ignored. Rather than linger in the space of critique, however, *A World of Many Worlds* moves into a space of critical affirmation: how might we create a heterogenous world of many worlds that does not require the destruction of other worlds as its mode of operation?²

Centering a notion of *political ontology* based on “the presumption of divergent worldings constantly coming about through negotiations, enmeshments, crossings, and interruptions” (6), the book is organized around three differing yet co-constitutive

orientations. These orientations aim to work within, against, and beyond the ethico-onto-epistemic theory-practices of modernity. This is of double(d) significance as modernity is both deeply entangled with the ways in which this contemporary moment came about, as well as collusive in shaping the ways that responses to the crisis are articulated and practiced: “many practices allegedly intended to save the planet continue to destroy it” (3).

As a world of many worlds is *always already* happening, the first orientation reworks and re-opens an imaginary of politics such that the possibility of a world of many worlds might be thought. As Boaventura de Sousa Santos states in “Beyond Abyssal Thinking: From Global Lines to Ecologies of Knowledges,” “the critical task ahead cannot be limited to generating alternatives... it requires an alternative thinking about alternatives” (63). Towards these ends, in the first chapter of *A World of Many Worlds*, Marilyn Strathern opens up the question of knowledge in the anthropological tradition by asking if the concept of “knowledge” could be a means to knowledge through its doubling, duplication, and demarcation. Applying similar logics to relationality, she suggests that understandings of “relation” shape what relations are possible and possibly understood. Across encounters of difference (such as those that abound in the Anthropocene), incommensurable heterogeneities proliferate, and not-knowing becomes an important partial way-of-relating. Along similar lines, in the second chapter, Alberto Corsín Jiménez offers a consideration of the ways in which “modern knowledge is essentially a trap to itself” (56), caught in a relation of (fore)closure that prevents it from responding to (or even grasping) the particular challenges of our contemporary moment. Leaning into “trap” as a concept, Jiménez explores the ways in which art, architecture, and social movement organization can operate as traps that both host and hold hostage. These processes “capture, caution, and captivate” relations as they are designed in relation to their creators, their targets, and their desired futures-to-come (75).

The second orientation explores political ontology as a field of both study and intervention. Extending Jiménez’s notion of modern thinking as a “trap” in the third chapter, Isabelle Stengers enquires into Western modern science specifically and the ways in which science cannot be wholly separated from an imperialist project that maintains its hegemony in multiplicitous and pervasive ways. Importantly, she suggests that this is more than “only a question of the long entrenched life of colonial thought habits” (95). Instead, possibilities of science being otherwise and dialoguing across difference require that ontology be (allowed to be) more than the object of epistemology. The very possibility of ontological politics in this encounter requires that

scientists (and those who inherit their legacies; see Higgins and Tolbert) actively engage in a form of “slow science” which attends to the embodied sense of fright that comes with taking seriously other-than-human agency as well as the ways in which the modernist imperative “do not regress” (i.e., a teleology of progress) that we possess also possesses us (see also Stengers 2018). Digging deeper into the importance of epistemologically slowing down modernity in the fourth chapter, Helen Verran explores not only how modern subjects should treat their own ways-of-knowing but also how modern subjects could approach knowledge existing beyond their own. Particularly, she asks what encounters are possible between Western modernity and Indigenous ways-of-knowing-and-being by exploring what can be learned from the development and delivery of a Yolngu Aboriginal Australian mathematics curriculum. She analyses the politics and possibilities of working differing ways-of-knowing-and-being together while keeping them apart. Specifically, Verran suggests a double(d) practice of “bad faith” and “good faith.” Of the former, the knower remains hyper-vigilant of their own knowledge practices, “refusing to go along with what everyone knows” (114). Of the latter, there is a trust that we know what we know and how we know, and that those we encounter do as well. Verran ponders what might allow for the possibility of transformative coming-to-know in which the *there-then* of knowledge is simultaneously maintained and dissolved in pursuit of a practice of knowing together *here-now*.

The third orientation of *A World of Many Worlds* sets out that political ontology is “a modality of analysis and critique that is permanently concerned with its own effects as a worlding practice” (6). In the fifth chapter, John Law and Marianne Lien rejoin Stengers in examining the ways in which science maintains hegemony through examining the multiplicity of ways that networked discourses about Norwegian fish farming and fly fishing converge and diverge. Importantly, in revealing how modernity renders itself singular(izing) in this context (e.g., how escaped farmed salmon caught by tourists trouble a “pristine” Nature/Culture divide), they challenge modernity as monolithic since there are resources for resistance that can be found within it. In chapter six, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Déborah Danowski take up the question of the Anthropocene more explicitly (e.g., addressing a whole page to the symptoms of our epoch). They suggest that we are facing—and must face—this destruction that is waged in the name of progress even if it is not often named as such. Further, after Stengers, the call to not regress is ever present. They suggest a bifurcated new worlding that accounts for and is accountable to the ways in which this epoch could never be relegated to the “anthropos.” There are those who are responsible for the Anthropocene (i.e., “the humans” [181], having denied both the Earth and their belonging to it) and those who must live with its effects (i.e., “the Terrans” [181], other-

than-humans and humans Othered by Western humanism). As this new dualism becomes the terms of refusal, Viveiros de Castro and Danowski urge those identifying and identifiable as “humans” (i.e., subjects of modernity and Western humanism) to learn from “Terrans”: particularly from Indigenous imaginations that have “already started to think the reduction or slowing down of their Anthropocene” (190).³

As a whole, the collection is important in numerous ways. Perhaps most significantly is how it responds to one of the central ironies of the ontological turn – manifestations of responsibility to the other-than-human are often not always able to respond to those othered by Western humanism. The first decade of the ontological turn is marked by calls and efforts to reconsider the primacy of the Nature/Culture divide, which is deeply entangled with the (re)production of the Anthropocene. However, it bears remembering Todd’s (2016) critique that the ontological turn might be but another expression and enactment of (neo-)colonialism should we not attend to the ways in which Western theories, including more progressive ones at this turn (e.g., post-humanism, new materialisms, science and technology studies, or STS), run the risk of subsuming, sublating, or suturing over Indigenous ways-of-knowing-in-being (see also Watts 2013). In outlining the purpose of *A World of Many Worlds*, the editors expand:

To open up the possibility of a world where many worlds fit, it is not enough for the Anthropocene to disrupt the nature and culture divide that makes the world one. Rather, the practices that render the Anthropocene visible – as well as proposals for survival – must also disrupt such a divide (15).

Stated otherwise, the ontological turn reproduces (albeit differently) logics and practices of power if those doing the work cannot learn to listen to those who have been most affected by said systems (e.g., Indigenous peoples). Particularly, the Anthropocene is becoming an incomprehensible nightmare for those who have been doling out dread and destruction for years through practices that are at the intersections of colonialism and capitalism, as well as those affected who are now denouncing louder than ever these means of destruction. An inherent paradox is present therein: “could the moment of the Anthropocene bring to the fore the possibility of the pluriverse?” (de la Cadena and Blaser 17). The Anthropocene is a reckoning without a road map: we must learn to respond differently to the deeply situated and contingent project of refusing the one world which caused this destruction and slowly, yet urgently (re)open the possibility of a world of many worlds.

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Notes

¹ Relevant here are conversations about *when* the Anthropocene began. General consensus is that that Anthropocene began in the 1950s with geological markers such as rising “carbon dioxide levels, mass extinctions, and the widespread use of petrochemicals, ... and radioactivity left from the detonation of atomic bombs” (Davis and Todd 762-63). However, others invite consideration of the multiplicitous moments in which Indigenous ecologies (i.e., humans, other-than-humans, and more-than-humans) were at risk of extinction from “Man” with planetary consequences (e.g., the “Orbis spike” of 1610 [Lewis and Maslin 2015] in which atmospheric CO₂ levels drastically dropped as a result of the genocide of Indigenous peoples) (see also Yussof 2018). What distinguishes the contemporary moment is that “the colonizers are threatened[,] as the worlds they displaced and destroyed when they took over what they called *terra nullius*” are at risk (de la Cadena and Blaser 3).

² There is much to be critical of, namely the way(s) in which *all* humans are held equally responsible under the signifier that is “anthropos,” which gestures towards a universalizing image of “Man.” Response is then framed outside of or beyond the capitalist and (neo-)colonial relations of power through which the Anthropocene came about, such that “Man” is off the hook for the material and cultural erasure of difference (Davis and Todd 2016; Whyte 2018).

³ Importantly, this is not to make the essentializing suggestion that there are no Indigenous humanities (e.g., Battiste et al. 2005) or that Indigenous peoples cannot (problematically or strategically) occupy the position of subject of modernity. Rather, the “world-forming, world destroying aliens, the Europeans” (Viveiros de Castro and Danowski 190-91) are more often than not the usual suspects of the Anthropocene, or those who are not *with* the “Terrans” and Gaia (i.e., the Earth) but rather against them. The point made is that there is a distinct need to learn from Indigenous philosophies and practices, whose present holds futurities in which the extractivist project of settler colonialism is no longer a primary force that shapes what possibilities are possible.

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