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14 NATURE

Mary-Jane Rubenstein

Nature Neglected

In her celebrated study of American "nature religions," Catherine Albanese writes that in the Western traditions, "religious reflection has been preoccupied with three great symbolic centers. . . . God, humanity, and nature" (1991, 7). Of these, Albanese suggests, the least considered tends to be "nature." Western philosophers, theologians, historians, anthropologists, psychologists, and homilists alike have spent far more energy decoding the nature of divinity and the nature of humanity than the nature of nature itself. Rather than the object—let alone the subject—of conceptual scrutiny, nature has traditionally served as the background, the backdrop, the stage and set against which God and God's people enact those mythic dramas of creation and law, idolatry and fidelity, estrangement and reconciliation. At once the creation of a powerful God and the passive "environment" of human history, nature in the Western religious imaginary is a *given*.

Considering this persistent inattention, one might hope to find the concept of nature more thoroughly expounded in *non*-Western traditions—especially in those Indigenous cosmologies the West has both demonized and fetishized as "nature worship" (Frazer 1926). Such hopes would be quickly dashed, however, by the realization that there is no conceptual analogue of "nature" in Indigenous traditions: no singular, impersonal, inanimate terrain standing in metaphysical opposition to culture, humanity, or divinity. As Walter Mignolo explains, the Quechuan and Aymaran *Pachamama* is at once human and more-than-human, created and divine, and natural and cultural (2011, 11–12). As Deborah Bird Rose has shown,

the Aboriginal *country* names not a passive backdrop but a co-creative network of animal, mineral, and vegetable kin (2015). And as Albanese admits of the first stewards of American "nature," Indigenous Americans theorize an intra-active, multispecies, sacred-secular landscape that is "at once . . . more plural and more personal" than "the abstract 'nature' of Europe" (1991, 120).

On the one hand, then, Western religious reflection neglects the concept of nature. On the other hand, Western religious reflection is the primary source of the concept of nature. It is almost as if, as a critical term at least, "nature" were *designed* to be overlooked—or worse, instrumentalized—in the service of humanity and its God.

Although it is a limited, sometimes misleading part of a more complicated story, such a conclusion would find energetic support in Lynn White Jr.'s field-defining essay, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." According to White, the West's unbridled exploitation of the natural world originated before the industrial revolution, before the birth of capitalism, and before the advent of New Science—in the late-antique and early medieval "victory of Christianity over paganism" that enabled each of these later, entangled developments (1967, 1205). How, exactly, did this Christian victory produce the exploitative ethos of techno-capitalism? By depopulating "nature." As White explains, in the pagan world of pre-Christian Europe, "every tree, every spring, every hill had its own *genius loci*, its guardian spirit. . . . Before one cut a tree, mined a mountain, or dammed a brook, it was important to placate the spirit in charge of that particular situation, and to keep it placated" (1967, 1205). In light of this terrestrial vitality, Carolyn Merchant claims that pre-modern miners offered sacrifices to the subterranean deities, "observed strict cleanliness, sexual abstinence, and fasting before violating the sacredness of the living earth," and perhaps most importantly, offered restitution to the soil they damaged and the waters they polluted (2020, 3–4).

Over against this animist metaphysic—both within Europe and beyond it—imperial Christian doctrine insisted there were no such deities and spirits: that rocks, rivers, and trees were merely inert matter, devoid of life or personhood. At the same time, this doctrine asserted humanity's exclusive claim to the "image of God" (*imago dei*) and its consequent "dominion," as Genesis promises, "over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Genesis 1:28). Armed with such an anthropocentric religion and anthropomorphic theology, White argues, imperial Christianity proceeded to dominate and

decimate the earth. "By destroying pagan animism," he concludes, "Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects" (White 1967, 1205).

As much of a caricature as this rendering of Christianity may be,[1] it does describe the attitude of a particularly imperial, profiteering branch of the Christian family tree—especially the one that went on to plunder the Americas. As recently as 2017, one American legislator defended Donald Trump's sudden withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accords by saying, "I worship Jesus, not Mother Earth." As Rep. Tim Walberg (R-MI) assured his constituents, Nature is the creation of an almighty God, so "if there is a real problem, he can take care of it" (Erickson 2017). However simplistic such theology might seem, its persistence in the political sphere is a function of its alignment with the interests of global empire and corporate capital. If "nature" were really a mother—or a sister, sacred temple, or network of ancestors—it would be hard to justify the violent extraction of "resources," pollution of seas and skies, and clear-cutting of forests that perpetuate what the climate activist Greta Thunberg calls our "fairy tales of eternal economic growth" (Barboza 2019). So a particularly well-funded and bellicose Christianity does, in fact, continue to provide mythic endorsement for the untrammeled industrial exploitation of an inert, passive "nature."

At the same time, it would be difficult to find a single Christian theologian who actually defends such ecocidal dominion. In the decades since White published his (in)famous essay—which concludes with a redemptive appeal to Franciscan spirituality (White 1967, 1207)—a torrent of "eco-theologies" have responded by redefining "dominion," reconceiving the *imago dei*, disaggregating "humanity" from men and rich white folks, and finding kinship with the more-than-human world.[2] No less an authority than Pope Francis (who chose his name in honor of the sainted friend to animals and steward of creation) insists that the "unbridled exploitation of nature," along with its attendant oppression of "the poor," stems from an "[in]correct interpretation of the Bible as understood by the Church" (Francis I 2015, paragraph 67). And although Francis concedes that

1. For counter-readings of early Christian sources, see Hobgood-Oster 2008; Burrus 2018; Wallace 2019.

2. The most influential of these include: Cobb 1988; Ruether 1992; McFague 1993; Adams 1993; Baker-Fletcher 1998; Gebara 1999; Crist 2004; Kearns and Keller 2007; Bauman 2009; Boff 2015; Harris 2017; Keller 2018; Jennings 2019; Carvalhaes 2021.

"Judaeo-Christian thought demythologized nature" by insisting it was not "divine," he maintains that this anti-animist, anti-pantheist metaphysic actually "emphasizes all the more our human responsibility for nature" (2015, paragraph 78). No, he insists; nature is not God. But it is a gift of God, the site of God's "continuing revelation," and the created essence of a humanity made from the "dust of the earth" (2015, paragraphs 85, 2).

Francis is hardly alone. In addition to the above-mentioned half century of eco-theological outpourings, one might cite any number of major denominational statements on the sacred mandate to care for the natural world; the exuberant liturgies for Earth Day and the Feast of St. Francis; or the 2021 "Joint Statement" of the leaders of the Orthodox, Anglican, and Roman Catholic churches that condemns the wanton misuse of "the bounty of nature" (Bartholomew, Francis, and Cantuar 2021). Of course, there are severe limitations to this nearly unanimous theo-ecclesiastical cascade, like the kinder, gentler dominionism of these institutional productions (along with their relegation of the more-than-human world to a "bounty"). But such infelicities shrink to insignificance before the larger problem that, American Christian nationalism notwithstanding, the churches wield far less influence in the contemporary world than they did during the medieval and early modern periods. In other words, the churches have much less power to fix our ecological crisis than they did to produce it. The problem is that the very doctrines the churches now condemn as bad readings of Scripture (the supremacy of humanity, the exploitation of the earth, the soullessness of animals, the inanimacy of the land) have already installed themselves at the heart of imperial politics, capitalist economics, and secular science. What began as religious teachings (tailored to support capitalist and imperial expansion) have become so commonplace that they masquerade today as secular, universal, and therefore unchangeable principles—all of which compose the seemingly neutral, seemingly self-evident concept of "nature."

Nature Denatured

The first difficulty one tends to encounter with the critical term at hand is that, to cite Bruno Latour, "nature is very big. It covers everything from the big bang to microbes. Conceptually, that makes it a complete mess" (Watts 2020). The mess multiplies as we realize that even Latour's definition of nature—that "very big" compendium of the physical world's productions—is just one of many definitions, which all edge into one another but never quite line up.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the understanding of nature as the summative "features and products of the earth" stands in opposition to "humans and human creations" (Nature, IV.11.a). Plants, animals, solar flares, rivers, and rocks compose the realm of "nature," whereas "humans and human creations" compose the realms of culture (including religion), technology, and art. Separated as it is from these anthropogenic processes of invention and change, "nature" connotes a certain inexorability, and therefore also refers to the "inherent or essential quality or constitution of a thing" (its "nature," which is often opposed to the cultural term "nurture") (III.8.a). In this particular sense, the term in question *does* include humans, whose "nature" is variously said to be self-interested, altruistic, peaceful, violent, intelligent, or idiotic. Humans also occupy the center of most of the *OED*'s "rare," "obsolete," and "euphemistic" definitions of nature, which include "excrement," "semen," "menstrual discharge," "the female genitals," "the sexual urge," and "the need of the human body to urinate and defecate" (1.2.a, I.2.b, 1.2.c, 1.3, II.4.b, II.4.d). When it does refer to humanity, then, "nature" tends to name its most bodily, nonnegotiable, embarrassing elements.

Finally, "nature" denotes not just the physical world itself, but a perceived force or source within it. In this sense, the word refers to "the creative and regulative power . . . conceived of as operating in the material world and as the immediate cause of its phenomena" (Nature, IV.10.a). This power, the *OED* continues, is usually capitalized and often "personified as a female being. Frequently as *Dame Nature* or *Mother Nature*" (IV.10.b). This gendering of "nature" courses through the European languages that regularly feminize "her," including Latin (*natura, -ae*), Greek (*physis*), German (*die Natur*), French (*la nature*), Italian (*la natura*), and Spanish (*la natura*). All told, then, "nature" in the Western imagination is singular, innate, feminine, and either opposed to (superior) humans and their productions or associated with the "lowest" parts of them.

If such a description resorts to hierarchical language, it is because, conceptually at least, "nature" *is* hierarchical (Latour 2004, 25). Precisely in its effort to gather all of existence into a single unit, the concept of "nature" arranges all beings qualitatively, in order of their reputed godliness (in one register) or complexity (in another). And whether religious or secular, nature's "Great Chain of Being" is remarkably uniform (Lovejoy 1976),

beginning with allegedly inanimate things like rocks and progressing "up" the natural hierarchy to particles, microbes, fungi, plants, fish, birds, mammals, and finally human beings, who crown the "nature" they both consummate and transcend.

Given the tendency of "nature" to totalize, along with its conceptual incoherence, its preference for some beings over others, and above all its stubborn inexorability (its seeming *naturalness*), Latour insists that we have to do without it. Such conceptual renunciation is especially crucial, he says, for those of us who think we love "nature" and who seek with increasing desperation some political paradigm, spiritual discipline, or scientific practice that might clean the oceans, plant more trees, stop the fracking, slow the rising temperatures, save the bees, and do justice to the displaced. These are all *social* efforts, Latour insists, whose contingency, multiplicity, and multispecies crossings of matter and technology are not only obscured but impeded by the static hierarchy and incontestability of "nature." "*If 'nature' is what makes it possible to recapitulate the hierarchy of beings in a single ordered series*," he declares, "*political ecology is always manifested, in practice, by the destruction of the idea of nature*" (Latour 2004, 25, italics in original).

With and against Latour (and before and after him), a host of other theorists have exposed the ideological violence that "nature" both enacts and conceals—whether by policing an outdoorsy hetero-masculinity, displacing the Indigenous caretakers of the land in question, condemning queer sex and trans bodies, defending the "natural" whiteness of a family or nation, displacing toxins onto low-income neighborhoods, condoning the slaughter of animals, or opposing "unnatural" technologies like the wind turbines and solar panels that threaten to wreck a vacationer's view.[3] In the place of nature, Donna Haraway suggests we try the nonbinary and carefully pluralized "naturecultures"; Latour proposes "critical zones"; and Timothy Morton offers a "mesh of interconnectedness" (Haraway 2007; Watts 2020; Morton 2010, 38). All of these are provisional conceptual mechanisms for recalling the social constitution of the natural, the symbiotic agency of the more-than-human world, and the counter-hierarchical functioning of life itself (whose creators, sustainers, and destroyers, Lynn Margulis reminds us, are the bacteria at the bottom of the Chain [Margulis 1998, 20]).

In her *Political Theology of the Earth*, Catherine Keller concedes that "we must all choose which of the contaminated words in our troubled secular-religious vocabularies we will stay with" (2018, 90). As we have seen, many contemporary eco-theorists consider "nature" far too contaminated—or more precisely, not contaminated enough—to ground a constructive politics, philosophy, or theology. That having been said, this term's historical burdens and strategic limitations hardly relieve us of the critical responsibility to understand it. Conceptual incoherence and ethical undesirability notwithstanding, "nature" continues to structure the discourse of the very global-capitalized order that keeps ransacking the biosphere. The question, then, is not whether or not we should use the word, but how on earth we can account for it. How did "nature" become the object par excellence of Western neglect and longing, disavowal and ownership, invention and forgetfulness, deployment and abuse?

Nature Natured

Following the lead of Merchant, it is common to charge Western modernity with bringing about the "death" or "end" of nature (Merchant 2020).[4] Merchant begins her account just before the dawn of the scientific revolution in Europe, sketching a quasi-Edenic "Renaissance cosmology of animate spirits and ensouled beings in which everything was alive" (2020, xvii). According to this "organic" worldview, she explains, each part of nature was alive and interdependent with every other part. Nature "herself" was said to be a "nurturing mother: a kindly, beneficent female who provided for the needs of mankind" (2). As such, there were limits to what—and how—one could take from her. "One does not readily slay a mother," writes Merchant, "[or] dig into her entrails for gold or mutilate her body. . . . As long as the earth was considered to be alive and sensitive, it could be considered a breach of human ethical behavior to carry out such destructive acts against it" (3). As commercial mining loomed on the horizon, Renaissance authors cited Ovid, Seneca, and Pliny as ancient sanctions against the violent ingratitude of "penetrating" nature's "entrails" to extract her treasures (30). They warned of certain retribution in the form of earthquakes and poisoned water, and prophesied the escalation of greed, warfare, and cruelty.

Despite their impassioned delivery, such strictures could not withstand

3. See Cronon 1996; Gaard 1997; Butler 1999, 29–30; Stryker 2006; Cone 2000; Morton 2007, 5–6; Morton 2010, 9; Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 2010.

4. See also McKibben 1989; Plumwood 1993; Worthy, Allison, and Bauman 2018.

the pressure of technological development and capitalist acceleration during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Greater profits demanded increased production, which required heavier machinery, which necessitated industrial mining. Perhaps as uneasy as their ancestors with the prospect of stripping and ransacking a loving, living mother, early modernist thinkers developed a "new mercantilist philosophy" that changed the metaphor, transforming nature from organism to machine (2020, 32). Over the course of a few generations, the vibrant, generative world-mother of Renaissance philosophy gave way to the inert, passive universal-mechanism of the scientific revolution. It is this ideological overhaul, with all its materially devastating causes and effects, that Merchant calls "the death of nature" (193).

Strikingly, however, the rigorous de-animation of nature did nothing to de-gender "her." Even as Francis Bacon, Johannes Kepler, René Descartes, Robert Boyle, Isaac Newton, and a slew of other early modernists insisted that nature was a great clock, engine, or automaton, they continued to feminize it/her, likening the natural world not to a mother or goddess but to a "disorderly woman": wild, unfaithful, and in need of masculine discipline (2020, 127). Thus we find Francis Bacon calling nature a "common harlot," from whose shadowy "womb" the natural philosopher was obliged to rip out every secret (171, 169). Taking both the metaphor and the strategy from the witch trials of King James's England, Bacon called for a systemic "inquisition of nature" and assured his monarch that, just as royal interrogators should show no mercy or regret in torturing witches, "neither ought a man to make scruple of entering and penetrating into [nature's] holes and corners, when the inquisition of truth is his whole object" (cited on 168). Once these truths were finally extracted and brought into the light, nature would be tame, falling under the total control and possession of the male investigator. The point, as Bacon explained it, was to "bind [nature] to your service and make her your slave," along with "all her children" (cited on 170). In short, not only did this newly mechanized nature remain female; it became unruly, chaotic, and *dark*.

Mignolo argues that, as the industrial revolution took hold, the mechanized, feminized, racialized "nature" of early modernity morphed into "natural resources" (2011, 12). Filled as it was with lumber, minerals, oils and gases, waters, meats, and animal skins, nature became a "repository" of exploitable materials for the advancement of wealthy European men, their nations, and their families—both at home and in the burgeoning colonies overseas. Meanwhile, the people traditionally associated with such

"nature"—that is, Indigenous, Black, and female-identified people—were subject to analogous regulation, exploitation, violation, and ownership in the interests of techno-imperial Europe and its light-skinned American cousins. Just as the land in the Americas was clear-cut and overfarmed, Delores Williams explains, "female slaves were beaten, overworked, and made to experience excessive childbearing in order to provide income, comfort, and leisure for slave-owning families. . . . Just as strip-mining exhausts the earth's body," she continues, "so did the practice of breeding female slaves exhaust Black women's bodies" (1993, 24–25). In this manner, "nature" and the human beings purportedly "close" to it were positioned in a circular justification of horrific abuse: just as witches could be tortured and burned, nature could be "hounded" and enslaved, and just as nature could be hounded and enslaved, so could enslaved Black bodies be tortured, bred, and burned.

Especially as Merchant tells it, this story of the death of nature leaves the reader longing for a different metaphoric register. In the face of a mechanical inertness that condones the systematic torture of animals, women, Black and Indigenous people, and the earth itself, one might find oneself longing for the organic Mother Nature of the Renaissance, or for those enspirited forests of pre-Christian Europe. As Merchant shows without always saying it, however, these ecologically gentler eras still contained the associations and hierarchies that industrialism would later go on to exploit. The nurturing mother of Renaissance "nature" could also turn demonic, causing hurricanes, droughts, and floods. In that sense, she would have to be dominated (perhaps like the ancient Babylonian goddess Tiamat, whom the warrior Marduk murders and dismembers to construct an ordered natural world [Epic of Creation 2008]). Meanwhile, in their workshops, the Renaissance alchemical magi and healers who saw themselves as "servants of nature" were still *using* nature for human improvement—and presupposing a neoplatonic Great Chain of Being in order to do so (Merchant 2020, 120). So although we might look to the Renaissance to provide what Sean McGrath calls a hermetic "alter-modernity" (McGrath 2014, 216), we should also concede with Merchant that our dominant modernity has easily assimilated this "alter"—and even found a home within it.

After all, the mechanistic model didn't last long. Less than two centuries after Robert Boyle encoded nature as a cosmic automaton of "subordinate engines," Alexander von Humboldt reframed it as a "great living organism where everything [is] connected" (Wulf 2015, 2). Meanwhile, a young

Ralph Waldo Emerson sought to recall "man" into a holistic relationship with a dynamic, enspirited "Nature," which gained further animacy and intimacy in the later works of Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and Walt Whitman and finds reinvigoration in the "religious naturalism" of Thomas Berry, Wendell Berry, Ursula Goodenough, and Loyal Rue (Emerson 2000; Thoreau 1971; Wolfe 1979; Whitman 2005; Berry 2009; Berry 2018; Goodenough 2023; Rue 2011). Even at the height of the seventeenth century, as Isaac Newton was wrangling the natural world into the deterministic, absolute background of mechanical science, Gottfried Leibniz insisted on the vitality and relational constitution of bodies, space, and time—a counter-vision notoriously vindicated in the early twentieth century by Albert Einstein's theories of special and general relativity (Newton [1692–1693] 1756; Leibniz and Clarke 2000; Einstein 1989; Einstein 1986). And at the end of the twentieth century, James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis reimagined the planetary ecosystem as "Gaia," a symbiotic co-production of interconstituted organisms (Lovelock 1979; Margulis 1998). ("Traditional Indians are quite amused," writes Vine Deloria Jr., "to see this revival of the debate over whether the planet is alive"—Deloria 1999, 49).

In short, there is no precise moment in Western intellectual history when an originally organic conception of nature gives way to a mechanical one—or vice versa. Rather, these two strands are wound double-helix-like around one another, with periodic bonds and crossings. The mechanical strand finds its roots in biblical dominionism, Near Eastern mythic matricide, Epicurean atomism, and the Aristotelian theory of passive, feminine matter. It winds its way through the medieval Peripatetics (with Thomas Aquinas half-stretching across to the rival strand), and then on to Mersenne, Gassendi, Descartes, Bacon, Boyle, and Newton before reaching us in the form of "reductive" materialists like Richard Dawkins and Pascal Boyer. Meanwhile, the organic strand emerges from pre-Socratic naturalism, Stoic pantheism, and Neoplatonism (with Plato himself forming another horizontal rung) making its way through St. Francis, Paracelsus, Baruch Spinoza, Giordano Bruno, Leibniz, and generations of murdered witches before finally gaining respectability in the Cambridge Platonists, Vitalists, Romantics, and Transcendentalists. This organic strand now courses through our ecologies, ecopoetics, ecotheologies, pantheisms, pantheologies, religious naturalisms, ecofeminisms, animal studies, new animisms, and earth systems theories. Even in the West, then, the model of nature as animate and organic has been around all along. It has arguably even "won." Yet the ecological crisis escalates nonetheless, especially for

those dark-skinned, poor, and female-gendered people persistently lauded and denigrated as "close to nature."

In this light, it might not seem to matter *how* one talks about nature, since the vitalist-organic models have not reversed or even tempered the strip-mining, industrial farming, or consumer capitalism endorsed by the seemingly moribund mechanical model. We might at this point be tempted to side with Latour, who insists that in its romantic constructions most of all, "nature" is constitutively contaminated by dominion, totality, and hierarchy. And yet as the tides rise higher and the fires burn longer and the hurricanes spin in unexpected directions, even Latour has decided to talk about Gaia—so long as he can keep "her" from becoming "a god," which is to say a transcendent, singular abstraction like "nature" (Latour 2014). So maybe models do matter, but as a product of our interactions with the world rather than a prefabricated determinant of them. If a particularly animate, counter-hierarchical, multiply agential cosmos keeps emerging in our ecologies and ecopoetics, maybe it's because "nature" is refusing to stay where "man" keeps trying to put her.

Nature Cultured

"Who can forget those moments," Amitav Ghosh writes, "when something that seems inanimate turns out to be vitally, even dangerously alive?" (Ghosh 2016, 3). Those moments when the stick becomes a snake, the dead bug jumps into your face, or—to use Ghosh's example—when the lifeless asteroid in *Star Wars* turns out to be a giant, sleeping space monster. The so-called Anthropocene is one such extended moment, as a purportedly inanimate earth asserts its dangerous vitality. In its multiplying and increasingly unpredictable storms, fires, disastrous extinctions, and floods, the natural world is not only acting, but *responding*. Far from being a lifeless backdrop to human activity, or even a counter-agent positioned against it, it turns out that the living, heaving concatenation in which we live, move, and have our being is the ongoing product of both human and more-than-human agencies.

So there goes nature—not only in Merchant's sense, but also in Latour's. The physical "death of nature" that began in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe has brought about the conceptual death of "nature" in late capitalist globalism. Far from a passive, mechanical hierarchy, our Anthropocenic lifeworld announces itself as a vigorous, dynamic multiplicity of interconstituted beings, the "least" of whom are often the

most influential (think not just bacteria, but bees, bats, and viruses). In its furious self-assertion—what Isabelle Stengers has called "the intrusion of Gaia" (Stengers 2015, 43)—the natural world is telling us that it is not "nature" and that "we" are not not-nature. In short, if the seventeenth-century birth of "nature" gave rise to the "death of nature," then the death of nature has provoked an uncanny rebirth. Both more and less than "nature," the biosphere now interrupting every human pretense is a natural-cultural monstrosity of which humans are a particularly dangerous product, source, and part.

Insofar as it might help to alert policy-makers to the geological gravity of our self-imposed disaster, the term "Anthropocene" can be useful for any given climate summit or cap-and-trade debate. As feminist, Black, and decolonial theorists have insisted, however, the culprits of ecological destruction are not all human beings (the *anthropos*), but rather the wealthy inhabitants of overdeveloped nations who have built their techno-industrial worlds by ravaging the worlds of others (Yussof 2019). Many scholars have therefore opted for the term "Capitalocene," which places the blame on the cultural order that bears the most responsibility for trashing the earth (Moore 2016). The problem with *this* designation is that it risks reaffirming the primarily white, wealthy agents of climate change as genuine masters of the universe, exclusively—even divinely—capable of making a whole world, however polluted and monocultural. Moreover, like the term "Anthropocene," "Capitalocene" also risks resigning the earth-lovers among us to despair. By granting this disaster the seemingly inexorable status of a geological epoch, both terms seem to announce there is nothing to be done—no way to live otherwise.

It is in pursuit of such an "otherwise" that Haraway offers her anti-defeatist, barely pronounceable "Chthulucene." If the Greek word *chthonios* means in or of the Earth, then Chthulucene names the ongoing project of irreducibly terrestrial species, trying to make different kinds of worlds together (Haraway 2016, 53). Unlike the agents of the Anthropocene or Capitalocene, Haraway's "chthonic ones" are not human—at least not in any straightforward way. After all, "humanity" is yet another conceptual mess, singling out as it does the most "rational," pale, and male among us to master and exploit that raving, dark, and feminine "nature" (Wynter 1989; Wynter 1994). "Most African-Americans owe *nothing* to the status of the human," writes Kodwo Eshun; "there's this sense of the human as being a really pointless and treacherous category" (1999, 175, 193). Moreover, as

Haraway loves to remind us, the genome of *Homo sapiens* is 90 percent "bacteria, fungi, protists, and such" (Haraway 2007, 3). So Haraway's multiracial, omni-gendered, interspecies "chthonic ones" cannot be called human in any sense other than the etymological one (they are *humus*: of the earth).

Nor are Haraway's chthonic worldmakers "sky gods," she insists—"not a foundation for the Olympiad" (2016, 53). After all, "divinity" is as instrumentalized as "nature" and as instrumentalizing as "man," hovering as it does in some otherworldly world until an otherwise self-reliant philosophy, theology, myth, or science needs it to come save the day. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer feverishly explained from his cell in a Gestapo prison, the modern West has made "God" into a *deus ex machina*, flying him on the scene to patch all the holes in our theories and answer our unanswered questions (Bonhoeffer 1997, 181–82). The culprits Bonhoeffer has in mind include Bacon, Boyle, and above all Newton, whose theory of universal gravitation needed "God" just to get the cosmic clockwork going and keep it from collapsing or exploding. If these names sound familiar, it is because the very tradition that codified "nature" by killing it off did the same thing to "God" (Rubenstein 2018). And just a few decades after Bonhoeffer, "man" would be exposed as an equally dangerous conceptual fiction (Foucault [1966] 1994; Taylor 1984, 34–51; Wynter 1989).

So much, then, for the "three great symbolic centers" of Western religion. God, humanity, and nature: all killed off in the very effort to control the things they're trying to name. But rather than trying to resurrect, reinvent, or even mourn these old characters, Haraway opts for composting. "Collect[ing] up the trash of the Anthropocene, the exterminism of the Capitalocene, and chipping and shredding like a mad gardener," Haraway's chthonic ones "make a much hotter compost pile for still possible pasts, presents, and futures" (2016, 57). Led by bacterial, vegetable, mushroomy, wormish, and even mammalian earth-others, such companion-agents are not humans, not gods, and not nature, but chimeric assemblages emerging out of their decomposition. Chthonic ones are post-apocalyptic hybrids: composting critical terms, living lives, and worlding worlds, even after the death of nature.

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15 POWER

Amy Hollywood

> The exploitation of the marble and the exploitation of the men hired to extract it and place it in the hands of whoever had declared himself owner of the land—and how this guy managed to make the others believe that he owned the rock, this rock produced by the actions of time, to the point of making them climb rickety ladders to whack the cliff with picks, I still don't know. [. . .]
>
> Jonas takes Paula's face in his hands and asks her to imagine a time when they would be no more than myths, legends, specters in the stories of creatures that now walked the earth—who can believe in humans anymore, Paula?
>
> MAYLIS DE KERANGAL, *Painting Time*

Maylis de Kerangal's novel, *Painting Time*, is about, among other things, learning to paint exact, utterly convincing replicas of material objects—of cloth, wood, marble, and, by the end of the novel, not just the cave paintings at Lascaux, but the stone walls of the caves themselves. The novel asks, in lucid and detailed ekphrastic prose, what it means to be beholden to a tradition: does freedom come through one's immersion in technique, craft, and repetition; does it demand the refusal of these imitations; or is posing the question in this form already to misunderstand the complexity and limitations of human life, creativity, and power? De Kerangal aptly introduces my discussion of power because her questions mirror those so often encountered in the study of religion: is religion a source of constraint, suppression, and oppression from which we seek to be freed; is it the site through which liberation is achieved; or is the very dichotomy between oppression and liberation inadequate to the pulsing life of power that runs throughout human existence—and beyond it?