

# Dreaming of a Decolonial Language? The Limits of Posthuman Critique in the Anthropocene

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## Abstract

Within posthuman critical theory, the advent of the Anthropocene has revived dreams of a critical and decolonial language, free of the exclusions of modernity. Through a deconstructive reading of Bruno Latour's texts on the Anthropocene and *Gaia* – which constitutes one of the most clear and influential examples of this hope – this article aims to deconstruct the dream of a decolonial language. What emerges from this deconstruction is that Latour's writings – far from being free of modernity – rather reproduces key facets of the modernity that he seeks to critique. By showcasing the intimate and paradoxical relationship between posthuman critique and the colonial power relations expressed in discourses of modernity, the article problematizes ideas of a critical language free and outside of power as well as the notion of a pure critical position that this idea presupposes. In this way, the article strives to contribute to an ongoing debate about the conditions for critical theory in a time of global climate change.

## Introduction

Few concepts are as debated as the concept of the Anthropocene: the idea that we have entered a new geological age characterized by humanity's impact on planetary climate and geology. According to political philosopher Bruno Latour, the concept of the Anthropocene questions the entirety of social organization, representing a transformation "as profound and radical as that of Galileo's time."<sup>1</sup> The human-centered world that the theories of political science were created to understand is increasingly claimed to no longer exist. Gone, it is argued, is the linear and predictable world presupposed by mod-

ernism, a world that could be studied from the outside, neutrally and objectively, and where human social relations were claimed to play out against the backdrop of a silent and static earth. Gone, it is claimed, is indeed the very possibility of distinguishing between man and nature, as no nature untouched by humans can be said to exist in the Anthropocene.<sup>2</sup> As such, it has been claimed that the Anthropocene disrupts modernity's founding act – the creation of a strict human sphere, separate and apart from nature.<sup>3</sup>

Contemporary critical theory has embraced the challenge that the Anthropocene – as a philosophical concept as well as a geological era – presents to us. Many are those who have met the

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<sup>1</sup> Bruno Latour, 2019. "Uppsala University, 'Hans Rausing Lecture 2019'", available at: <https://media.medfarm.uu.se/play/video/9878>, last accessed 2024-07-31.

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<sup>2</sup> Clive Hamilton, 2013. "Climate Change Signals the End of the Social Sciences", *The Conversation*. Available at: <http://theconversation.com/climate-change-signals-the-end-of-the-social-sciences-11722>. Last accessed 12 April 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Georg Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970[1817]), 283.

challenge of the Anthropocene with hope, and see in the concept of the Anthropocene an opportunity to subvert the racialized, gendered and (post)colonial relations of exclusion, domination and exploitation of both people and of natural resources through which modernity was constituted.<sup>4</sup> As part of this discussion, questions have been raised about the political possibility of creating a new language beyond modernism, formulating dreams of a “pluriversal”<sup>5</sup> language and imaginary that recognizes the value of non-human objects and subjects, a language that would be *as* changing and complex as the Earth itself is claimed to be. For instance, Kathryn Yusoff has argued that the Anthropocene “challenges us to invent a whole new language”<sup>6</sup> and Anthony Burke and others have urged us to invent “a political imagination that can rise from the ashes of our canonical texts.”<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Grosz’s dream of a social science that does not “write *for* and *of*

objects”, but “*with* them, or between them”<sup>8</sup> in order to open up humanity to “the non-human, the geological and the non-organic”<sup>9</sup> is another example of this dream, as is Charlotte Epstein’s appeal to embrace a “language of life.”<sup>10</sup> According to Latour, the language of the Anthropocene holds within it a capacity to forge a new posthuman subject and a new “common,”<sup>11</sup> “public”<sup>12</sup> and “atmospheric”<sup>13</sup> earth into presence. For Latour, the formulation of this language is now the main task of critical theory and political philosophy writ large: “The problem for all of us in philosophy, science or literature becomes: how do we tell such a story?”<sup>14</sup>

According to James W. Moore, the symbolism and power of this promise is great, if not entirely unproblematic: “The unfolding planetary crisis – which is also an epochal crisis of the capitalist world-ecology – cries out for ‘pluriversal’ imaginations of every kind. But what kind of pluriversalism, set against what kind of universalism, and for what kind of politics?”<sup>15</sup> This article attempts to respond to Moore’s request for a critical examination of the dream of a pluriversal, decolonial and posthuman language. It does so by problematizing and contextualizing this dream, and the critical position that the dream of a decolonial language is both equated with and assumed to enable. In that way, the article also responds to Latour’s brief self-criticism

<sup>4</sup> For instance, see Natasha Myers, “Becoming Sensor in Sentient Worlds: A More-than-natural History of a Black Oak Savannah,” in *Between Matter and Method: Encounters In Anthropology and Art*, eds. Gretchen Bakke and Marina Petersen (London: Routledge, 2017); Elizabeth Povinelli, *Between Gaia and Ground: Four Axioms of Existence and the Ancestral Catastrophe of Late Liberalism*, Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2021; Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018); Charlotte Epstein, “Seeing the ecosystem in the international: Ecological thinking as relational thinking,” *New Perspectives* 30, no. 2 (2022): 170–179.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Simpson, “The Anthropocene as Colonial Discourse,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 38, no. 1 (2020): 53–71, here 68; James W. Moore, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene & the Flight from World History: Dialectical Universalism & the Geographies of Class Power in the Capitalist World-Ecology, 1492-2022,” *Nordia Geographical Publications* 51, no. 2 (2022): 123–146, here 123.

<sup>6</sup> Kathryn Yusoff, “Geosocial Strata,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 34, nos. 2–3 (2017): 105–127, here 125.

<sup>7</sup> Anthony Burke, Stefanie Fichel, Audra Mitchell, Simon Dalby and Daniel J. Levine, “Planet Politics: A Manifesto from the End of IR,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 44, no. 3 (2016): 499–523, here 523.

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, Kathryn Yusoff and Nigel Clark, “An Interview with Elizabeth Grosz: Geopower, Inhumanism and the Biopolitical,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 34, no. 2–3 (2017): 129–146, here 144, emphasis added.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>10</sup> Epstein, “Seeing the ecosystem in the international,” 171.

<sup>11</sup> Latour, *Down to Earth*, 94.

<sup>12</sup> Latour, *Down to Earth*, 45.

<sup>13</sup> Latour, *Down to Earth*, 93.

<sup>14</sup> Bruno Latour, “Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene,” *New Literary History* 45, no. 1 (2014): 1–18, here 3.

<sup>15</sup> Moore, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene & the Flight from World History,” 123.

expressed in the endnote to his last book *After Lockdown: A Metamorphosis*, in which Latour admitted that his texts on the Anthropocene, “still looked at the situation ‘from above’”, i.e. from the vantage point of the modernity he sought to subvert.<sup>16</sup> In my eyes, Latour’s self-reflection expresses a call to critically reflect on the relationship between our critical language and the prevailing discourses we intend to criticize: Is there a form of critique that is not in some way related to or entangled in what it is trying to criticize? Is there a purely critical position, and in what way would such an imagination not reproduce ideas that the world can be viewed from the outside – *from above*?

In order to both make visible and scrutinize the dream of a decolonial language – what this dream presupposes, makes politically possible and ultimately risks hiding – a deconstructive reading of Latour’s late interventions on the Anthropocene is performed. In this analysis, I pay particular attention to Latour’s discussions of the limits of modernist language and epistemology<sup>17</sup> as well as the importance he grants to James Lovelock’s poetry,<sup>18</sup> as an example of a living and performative language beyond modernity. It is important to point out that the article’s object of study is not Latour’s oeuvre as a whole, which is of course both broad and varied, but rather to expose and problematize a posthuman form of critique of Modern language that Latour has strongly influenced.

My ambition with this reading is twofold: firstly to highlight the internal contradictions that make Latour’s position both possible and

impossible, and to illustrate the modernist history and contemporary context that underpins the dream and idea of a new language. To that end, I make use of Jacques Derrida’s deconstructive approach in order to read how the signifier of ‘language’ is articulated in Latour’s works – how different languages are defined, which definition(s) of politics and agency the signifier of language are associated with, as well as how language is used to give meaning to the Anthropocene and modernity alike. As an aid in my reading, I employ two of Derrida’s key terms: 1) *differance*, which emphasises both how discursive concepts are created through linguistic distinctions (to differ) and how these differences postpone the establishment of fixed meaning to an indeterminable future (to defer).<sup>19</sup> Secondly, I make use of Derrida’s concept 2) *bricolage*, which highlights the discursive and historical context that surrounds and gives meaning to each discursive articulation.<sup>20</sup>

Instead of treating modernity and the Anthropocene as ontologically distinct entities whose political meaning and effect are given in advance, I thus examine what the distinction between the two *does* – discursively and politically. Considered as discursive articulations, the concepts of modernity and the Anthropocene appear as political attempts to stabilize meaning to fundamentally contested and contingent concepts. As argued by Simon Dalby, rather than a fixed geological period, the concept of the Anthropocene has come to serve as “a lightning rod for political and philosophical arguments.”<sup>21</sup> In that way, the article builds on a series of critical

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<sup>16</sup> Bruno Latour, *After Lockdown: A Metamorphosis* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2021), 93.

<sup>17</sup> Bruno Latour, “Onus Orbis Terrarum: About a Possible Shift in the Definition of Sovereignty,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 44, no. 3 (2016): 305–320; Latour, *Down to Earth*.

<sup>18</sup> Latour, “Why Gaia.”

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<sup>19</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* (Sussex, UK: The Harvester Press, 1982), 7–8.

<sup>20</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 2001), 360.

<sup>21</sup> Simon Dalby, “Framing the Anthropocene: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly,” *The Anthropocene Review* 13, no. 1 (2015): 33–51, here 34.

studies which in recent years have come to criticize the dichotomy between a singular modernity and a politically equally singular Anthropocene.<sup>22</sup>

The article begins with a close reading of Latour's late interventions on the Anthropocene and the political implications of these texts. In this reading, both the meaning given to the binary conceptual pair modernity/Anthropocene as well as to the signifier of language are analysed. Throughout this reading, conflicting meanings will be highlighted and contrasted. The article concludes by contextualizing the dream of a new decolonial language that Latour expresses, placing this dream in relation to the modernity that Latour aims to criticize and subvert.

### Latour and the Politics of Language in the Anthropocene

Latour is often regarded as one of the main critics of the ontopolitical role given to language in deconstructive approaches. In particular, Latour was critical of Derrida, who Latour argues reduced the world to a matter of human language.<sup>23</sup> Despite these criticisms, human language holds a central, if ambiguous and contradictory, role in Latour's writings on the Anthropocene. In these texts, Latour articulates, at

the same time, human language as 1) a violent means of world-making, articulated as the purest form of modern sovereignty, 2) an effect and expression of geological agency, 3) an arena in which geological agency is measured, given and acknowledged *by* humans and, lastly, 4) a performative call that, if we humans respond to it, holds a promise of a new posthuman form of life as well as a new Earth for all of life to inhabit. In other words, Latour defines, simultaneously, human language as both constituted by and as constituting the geological world – as that which enables geological agency, and as that which prevents geology from speaking. In this section I will review these conflicting meanings, and discuss how they activate an aporia that not only risks making modernity inseparable from the promise that Latour invests in the Anthropocene, but also risks rendering impossible his posthuman project.

Although different, all of Latour's four definitions are based on an underlying distinction between what Latour calls the modern *Globe* and the Anthropocene *Earth*. As per the first of Latour's definition of the politics of language – language as a violent means of word-making – Latour argues that the language of modernism, most notably the “perversity”<sup>24</sup> of the “technical and literal”<sup>25</sup> language of science, has replaced the complex *Earth* with an image of a controllable and static *Globe*. Through the language of science, the world has come to be seen as “a universal, unproblematic, and uncoded category that is supposed to mean the same thing for everybody.”<sup>26</sup> For Latour, the *Globe* has now become the place that Modern Man takes for grant-

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<sup>22</sup> See Clara Eroukhmanoff and Matt Harker, eds., *Reflections on the Posthuman in International Relations: The Anthropocene, Security and Ecology* (Bristol: E-International Relations Publications, 2017); David Chandler, *Ontopolitics in the Anthropocene: An Introduction to Mapping, Sensing and Hacking* (London: Routledge, 2018); Simpson, “The Anthropocene as Colonial Discourse”; David Chandler, Erika Cudworth and Stephen Hobden, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene and Liberal Cosmopolitan IR: A Response to Burke et al.’s ‘Planet Politics,’” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 46, no. 2 (2017): 190–208; Jack Amoureux and Varun Reddy, “Multiple Anthropocenes: Pluralizing Space – Time as a Response to ‘the Anthropocene,’” *Globalizations* 18, no. 6 (2021): 929–946.

<sup>23</sup> Bruno Latour, *We Have Never been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 90.

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<sup>24</sup> Latour, “Why Gaia,” 69.

<sup>25</sup> Latour, “Why Gaia,” 70.

<sup>26</sup> Latour, “Onus Orbis Terrarum,” 308.



ed, a construction created from the “outside,”<sup>27</sup> and, as phrased by Latour, from above.<sup>28</sup>

It is in within the limited epistemological framework of the *Globe* that current political issues find their logic, and that the actors which traditional theories of political science regard as the core of global politics – states, international organizations, civil societies, companies, individuals – can be taken for granted, and appear as natural. As such, Latour argues that the *Globe* is the world we all inhabit, living our lives in “ignorance”<sup>29</sup> and “denial,”<sup>30</sup> continuously “floating in dreamland.”<sup>31</sup> According to Latour, the *Globe* is:

“the undisputed, authoritative, universal, external frame inside which all geopolitical entities – be they empires, nation-states, lobbies, networks, international organisations, corporations, diasporas – are situated in a recognisable place, a province side by side with all the other provinces.”<sup>32</sup>

In *War of the Worlds*, Latour describes modernity as engaged in a “reality war” with the *Earth*, aimed towards constructing the *Earth* in the image of the *Globe* – to divide the *Earth* into distinct parts and levels, governed by distinct actors.<sup>33</sup> The modern history of division, referred to by Latour as the “principle of localisation,” defines for Latour modern sovereignty in its purest form.<sup>34</sup> Its basic function is, Latour holds, to define “any entity – human or non-human [...] as distinct from any other and as occupying a certain chunk of space,” building on “the idea that

entities are impenetrable to one another, and are, for that reason, delineated by precise boundaries that define their identity”.<sup>35</sup> The principle and practice of localization, Latour posits, has transformed the *Earth* into a machine, whose parts come together to create a controllable order. It is thus through the practice of localization that sovereign power is both constituted and practiced: the power to create order, the power to separate, and the power to exploit – to govern parts instrumentally for the benefit of human ends and economic growth. Like the machine’s need for an operator, the modernist *Globe* presupposes an idea of an actor standing outside of itself: “a constructor, a planner, or some antecedent overbearing figure; some instance that plays the role of assembling the parts in advance.”<sup>36</sup> As Latour notes, this external position has historically been filled by Modern Man, primarily by Europe – a clear example of the colonial logic he equates with modernism and of the decolonial context in which he automatically places the Anthropocene.

The *Earth* – equally referred to by Latour as *Gaia* – is in many ways described as the polar opposite of the *Globe*. While the *Globe* is seen as a colonial construction, a result of “the imperial dominion of the European tradition” imposed from above, Latour presents the *Earth* as that which transcends all attempts at control, that resists all attempts at categorization and order.<sup>37</sup> The parts that modernity both presupposes and creates do not exist on *Earth*, according to Latour. The *Earth* thus comes to signify our planet both before and after the *Globe*<sup>38</sup> – it is described as a “hyperactive,” “loud”<sup>39</sup> (Ibid.) and “alive”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Latour, “Why Gaia,” 62.

<sup>28</sup> Latour, *After Lockdown*, 93.

<sup>29</sup> Latour, *Down to Earth*, 24.

<sup>30</sup> Latour, *Down to Earth*, 36.

<sup>31</sup> Latour, *Down to Earth*, 7.

<sup>32</sup> Latour, “Onus Orbis Terrarum,” 307.

<sup>33</sup> Bruno Latour, *War of the Worlds: What about Peace?* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2002), 16.

<sup>34</sup> Latour, “Onus Orbis Terrarum,” 314.

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<sup>35</sup> Latour, “Onus Orbis Terrarum,” 311.

<sup>36</sup> Latour, “Onus Orbis Terrarum,” 312.

<sup>37</sup> Latour, “Onus Orbis Terrarum,” 308.

<sup>38</sup> Latour, “Why Gaia,” 61.

<sup>39</sup> Latour, “Why Gaia,” 62.

<sup>40</sup> Latour, “Why Gaia,” 64.

home to “thousand-fold” forms of life,<sup>41</sup> impossible to stabilize.<sup>42</sup> In other words, Latour holds the *Earth* to be characterized by complexity, by relationships and by non-linear processes, processes that the modernist *Globe* seek to deactivate.<sup>43</sup>

It is in light of the distinction between the *Globe* and the *Earth*, that Latour discusses the ongoing climate crisis, which leads us to the *second* of the four distinct meanings that he gives to human language: language as an effect of geological agency. For Latour, the climate crisis is first and foremost an expression of *Earthly* voice, and as such it is by definition understood as a political event – a “revolt of [...] colonial *objects*.”<sup>44</sup> In the Anthropocene, and through climate change, it is as if the *Earth*, which for so long has been rendered passive, is no longer silent. In Latour’s terminology, the *Earth* speaks through climate change: “Another ground, another earth, another soil has begun to stir, to quake, to be moved [...] nothing will be as it was before: you are going to have to pay dearly for the return of the *Earth*.”<sup>45</sup>

According to Latour, the decolonial voice of the Anthropocene thus cannot be avoided. Everywhere we move, not least in our public discourse, the voice takes presence. “No matter which political persuasion you come from” Latour writes, *Gaia* has “modifie[d] what it is for human actors to present themselves on the stage [of public discourse].”<sup>46</sup> Indeed, for Latour, “abstaining from using the disputed term [Gaia] is no longer an option.”<sup>47</sup> Changes in discourse, in human language, are in other words perceived as an effect of geological change. As argued by

Latour, the *Earth’s* voice, its agency, is defined by its capacity to “*make a difference* in our thinking.”<sup>48</sup> So defined, language is no longer seen as the prerogative of human life. In the Anthropocene, the *Earth* speaks through humans, through our language. Indeed, virtually all contemporary political developments – from climate activism, the resurgence of nationalism, global inequality, to a global information campaign designed by a global elite to spread climate denial – are all seen by Latour as an effect of a changing ecology, as an expression of *Earthly* voice.<sup>49</sup>

As George Revill has highlighted, the concept of voice holds a central role in Latour’s broader political project.<sup>50</sup> Latour defines voice – and agency – not as an expression of individual will, the expressed intention of a rational and unified subject, but rather with practice: with the effect that something causes in a given object, subject or language. A voice is thus not a capacity that a given agent has or does not have, but something that comes to life in its imprint: if and when something “brings into presence an issue or matter of concern as a proposition that would otherwise not be articulated and brought into the public realm.”<sup>51</sup> Many have read this redefined concept of voice as an expression of Latour’s deconstruction of human exceptionalism. But as Revill convincingly demonstrates, Latour’s concept of voice risks reproducing modernism’s privileging of human language as the central arena of politics. Ultimately, it is in human public discourse that agency (human as well as non-human) can be measured, valued and recognized. It is in this context that Latour’s

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<sup>41</sup> Latour, “Why Gaia,” 61.

<sup>42</sup> Latour, “Why Gaia,” 62.

<sup>43</sup> Latour, “Why Gaia,” 64.

<sup>44</sup> Latour, “Onus Orbis Terrarum,” 310, original emphasis.

<sup>45</sup> Latour, *Down to Earth*, 17, italics in original.

<sup>46</sup> Latour, “Why Gaia,” 62.

<sup>47</sup> Latour, “Why Gaia,” 63.

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<sup>48</sup> Lisa Disch, “Representation as ‘spokespersonship’: Bruno Latour’s political theory,” *Parallax* 14, no. 3 (2008): 88–100, here 92, original emphasis.

<sup>49</sup> Latour, *Down to Earth*, 1.

<sup>50</sup> George Revill, “Voicing the environment: Latour, Peirce and an expanded politics,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 39, no. 1 (2021): 121–138.

<sup>51</sup> Revill, “Voicing the environment,” 127.

third definition of the politics of language is actualized: language as an arena in which geological agency is measured, given and acknowledged *by* humans.

Latour's own use of language is a clear example of this paradox, argues Revill. Language usage such as "'giving voice to', 'searching for', and 'finding voice'" all give precedence to human, rather than *Earthly*, agency, assigning to humans the task of performing, representing and making heard the voice of *Gaia*.<sup>52</sup> As Revill notes, the definition of human language as a mediator for *Gaia's* voice also presupposes the notion that human's hold the capacity to determine who or what has a voice. Latour's description of his grander political project in *Politics of Nature* makes this point explicit, formulated as an attempt "to *add* a series of new voices to our discussion, voices that have been inaudible up to now...the voices of non-humans."<sup>53</sup> In Latour's writings on the Anthropocene, the giving of voice to the *Earth* is explicitly formulated as a task for humanity in general, and Europe in particular – a responsibility for humans to "recall"<sup>54</sup> the modernist *Globe*, both in terms of finding a "successor to the notion of the *Globe*"<sup>55</sup> as a term, and to find a language that allows us "remember"<sup>56</sup> our place on the original *Earth*.<sup>57</sup> Such language indicates that, for Latour, the voice or agency of *Gaia* is not simply external to human language, but appear rather as formed *through* and made possible *by* human language – thus destabilizing the ontological distinction between the *Globe* and the *Earth*.

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<sup>52</sup> Revill, "Voicing the environment," 122, emphasis added.

<sup>53</sup> Bruno Latour, *The Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 69, emphasis added.

<sup>54</sup> Latour, "Onus Orbis Terrarum," 310.

<sup>55</sup> Latour, "Onus Orbis Terrarum," 307.

<sup>56</sup> Latour, "Onus Orbis Terrarum," 310.

<sup>57</sup> Latour, "Why Gaia," 61.

In *Down to Earth*, Latour describes the aim of this new language as a possibility to come down to or land on *Earth*. According to Latour, how we use our language determines where we are, which world we see and inhabit: the modern *Globe* or the Anthropocene *Earth*. Language, so defined, contains within it the promise of the Anthropocene, a means to create and "live in an alternative worlds[to] share the same culture, face up to the same stakes, [and to] perceive a landscape that can be explored in concert."<sup>58</sup>

Formulations like these actualize Latour's fourth articulation of human language: Language as a performative calling. Latour's observation – that it is no longer possible to abstain "from using the disputed term"<sup>59</sup> of *Gaia* – thus appears less as a demand issued to us from the *Earth*, than a normative call issued from within the *Globe*, an appeal to abandon the *Globe's* scientific and supposedly objective language<sup>60</sup> in favor of a new decolonial language, with the capacity to make the *Earth* come "alive,"<sup>61</sup> to give the *Earth* the voice that, according to Latour, the *Earth* should have had by default.

For readers of Latour, it is no secret that it is in James Lovelock's writings on *Gaia* that Latour finds the tools to unlock this decolonial and performative language. In sharp contrast to the scientific language of modernity, Latour describes Lovelock's "prose" as an open and living language: open to its own limitations, to its own changeability, and to the adaptability of language.<sup>62</sup> He describes Lovelock's language as "a fully reflexive attempt at including the difficulty of writing in the writing itself."<sup>63</sup> With reference to the world of biology – spe-

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<sup>58</sup> Latour, *Down to Earth*, 25.

<sup>59</sup> Latour, "Why Gaia," 63.

<sup>60</sup> Latour, "Why Gaia," 69.

<sup>61</sup> Latour, "Why Gaia," 73.

<sup>62</sup> Latour, "Why Gaia," 71.

<sup>63</sup> Latour, "Why Gaia," 71.

cifically with how plants move in relation to external stimulation, Latour describes Lovelock's prose as characterized by "tropism," i.e. as equally changeable as the *Earth* itself.<sup>64</sup> Latour notes, for example, how "ceaselessly" Lovelock "modifies [his] metaphor," and how often he "change[s] his position."<sup>65</sup> Lovelock's language is further held to exemplify and make visible an "extended pluralism."<sup>66</sup>

Through a precise step-by-step method, consisting of eight points that he extracts from Lovelock, Latour here articulates the politics of Lovelock's language: to break up modernity's distinctions and parts, between "the inside and the outside of any given entity" thus making visible the context and relations, which, according to Latour, condition and give meaning to each object.<sup>67</sup> It is in this method that the real promise of Lovelock's poetry becomes visible: not only a new – more correct – language, in tune with the *Earth* rather than the *Globe*, but more importantly, a method, a toolbox through which the *Globe* can be transformed into the *Earth*. According to Latour, "Lovelock describes a planet that is alive because his prose is alive."<sup>68</sup> In previous texts, Latour has granted similar performative capacity to language, urging us to establish a "common geostory"<sup>69</sup> with the aim of creating and enabling a "shareable"<sup>70</sup> and "atmospheric" *Earth*.<sup>71</sup> Articulations like these blur the sharp distinction that Latour both presupposes and establishes between the *Earth* and the *Globe*, rendering the Anthropocene in effect dependent on human will and agency: "There is a chance", urges Latour, "for everyone to wake up, or so

we can hope. The wall of indifference and indulgence that the climate threat alone has not managed to breach may be brought down."<sup>72</sup>

As I have noticed elsewhere,<sup>73</sup> human language is, for Latour, central to this awakening – and to Latour's definition of politics as a whole. Not only is it through human language that the *Earth* has become colonized, "empt[ied] of any meaning"<sup>74</sup>, it is also through human language that the *Earth* can eventually be granted the capacity to speak, that its voice can be recognized and that the Anthropocene ultimately can come into being. Through Latour's four definitions of language, a paradox or aporia thus appears in the posthuman framework. At the same time that the *Earth* is seen as eternal, holding a voice independent of Modern Man – a representation that allows Latour to imbue the concept with normative and decolonial promise – the *Earth* is simultaneously portrayed as a distinctly human project, constructed through and by the performative and deconstructive power of human language. Given this aporia – the impossibility of separating oneself from human language through the use of human language – we should thus not be surprised by the brief self-criticism Latour expressed in his final book, *After Lockdown*, in which he admitted that "*Down to Earth* looked at the situation 'from above.'"<sup>75</sup>

### Critique "from above"? Possibilities and limitations

Read as part of the "above" – as part of the modernism Latour so intensely tries to recall – we can identify a series of similarities between Latour's

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<sup>64</sup> Latour, "Why Gaia," 69.

<sup>65</sup> Latour, "Why Gaia," 70.

<sup>66</sup> Latour, "Why Gaia," 71.

<sup>67</sup> Latour, "Why Gaia," 72.

<sup>68</sup> Latour, "Why Gaia," 73.

<sup>69</sup> Latour, "Agency at the Time," 3.

<sup>70</sup> Latour, *Down to Earth*, 98.

<sup>71</sup> Latour, *Down to Earth*, 93.

<sup>72</sup> Latour, *Down to Earth*, 38.

<sup>73</sup> Claes Tångh Wrangel and Amar Causevic, "Critiquing Latour's Explanation of Climate Change Denial: Moving Beyond the Anthropocene/Modernity Binary," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 50, no. 1 (2021): 199–223.

<sup>74</sup> Latour, "Why Gaia," 69.

<sup>75</sup> Latour, *After Lockdown*, 63.



view of language and his definition of the matrix of modernism. If modernism is defined by the practice of localization, of crafting and constructing specific parts – “impenetrable to one another, and are, for that reason, delineated by precise boundaries that define their identity”<sup>76</sup> – from a complex, relational and changing network, then Latour’s ontological distinction between the *Earth* and the *Globe* (always referred to by Latour in the singular) appears as a repetition of this logic: an articulation of two separate worlds, separate from and impenetrable to each other. And if this practice has made modernity blind, capable of seeing only itself, then Latour’s unintentional repetition of modernism’s practice also appears blind, incapable of recognizing the diversity and complex relationships that have, and continues to, characterize human and non-human life, including the various ways in which humanity has responded to ongoing climate change.<sup>77</sup> As Audra Mitchell has argued, “between the two extremes [...] – a radical, eliminative posthumanism and a relapse into unreflective humanism – there exists a wide space of relations.”<sup>78</sup>

A growing body of critical literature has increasingly emphasizes this variation, employing concepts such as “biocultural diversity” to capture the heterogeneity through which human life interacts with ‘nature’ in different contexts.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Latour, “Onus Orbis Terrarum,” 311, emphasis in original.

<sup>77</sup> For a critical examination of Latour’s definition of denial, in respect to climate change, see Tångh Wrangel and Causevic, “Critiquing Latour’s Explanation of Climate Change Denial.”

<sup>78</sup> Audra Mitchell, “Posthuman Security: Reflections from an Open-ended Conversation,” in *Reflections on the Posthuman in International Relations: The Anthropocene, Security and Ecology*, eds. Clara Eroukhmanoff and Matt Harker (Bristol: E-International Relations Publications, 2017), 12, emphasis added.

<sup>79</sup> Sanna Stålhammar and Ebba Brink, “‘Urban Biocultural Diversity’ as a Framework for Human–Nature Interactions: Reflections from a Brazilian Favela,” *Urban Ecosystems* 24 (2020): 601–619.

According to Jack Amoureux and Varun Reddy, there is not *one* Anthropocene but several, a diversity of *Anthropocenes*,<sup>80</sup> co-produced by a series of related, but different dominant Anthropocene discourses.<sup>81</sup> As such Bronislaw Szerszynski has argued that in the time of change we are now experiencing, nothing is given: “Earth’s new epoch will probably be noisy,” riven by new and old power relations alike.<sup>82</sup>

Given this noise, Latour’s image of a homogenous *Globe* emerges less as an ontological state, than as a discursive articulation, a constitutive outside that makes the idea of the *Earth* simultaneously possible and impossible. As Delf Rothe has observed, the idea of a homogeneous modernity has enabled the concept of the Anthropocene to be filled with “a single set of normative implications,”<sup>83</sup> a normativity that could explain why Latour’s dream of a new decolonial language has received such a response.<sup>84</sup> Considered as discursive constructions, the *Earth* and the *Globe* do not appear as ontological opposites, but as mutually dependent on each other.

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<sup>80</sup> Amoureux and Reddy, “Multiple Anthropocenes.”

<sup>81</sup> See Delf Rothe, “Governing the End Times? Planet Politics and the Secular Eschatology of the Anthropocene,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 48, no. 2 (2020): 143–64; Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013); Joel Wainwright and Geoff Mann, “Climate Leviathan,” *Antipode* 45, no. 1 (2013): 1–22.

<sup>82</sup> Bronislaw Szerszynski, “Gods of the Anthropocene: Geo-Spiritual Formations in the Earth’s New Epoch,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 34, nos. 2–3 (2017): 253–275, here 254.

<sup>83</sup> Delf Rothe, “Global Security in a Posthuman Age? IR and the Anthropocene Challenge,” in *Reflections on the Posthuman in International Relations: The Anthropocene, Security and Ecology*, eds. Clara Eroukhmanoff and Matt Harker (Bristol: E-International Relations Publications, 2017), 87.

<sup>84</sup> Eva Lövbrand et al., “Who Speaks for the Future of Earth? How Critical Social Science Can Extend the Conversation of the Anthropocene,” *Global Environmental Change* 32 (2015): 211–18; Moore, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene & the Flight from World History”; Rothe, “Global Security in a Posthuman Age?”

er, a binary pair that both gives and postpones meaning, what Derrida would refer to as difference – to differ and to defer.<sup>85</sup> Paradoxically, it is only through Latour's reference to the *Globe* that the *Earth* becomes possible – as fantasy, concept and political utopia, if not as reality. The *Earth* is thus postponed, it remains to-come, deferred to an indeterminate future, incapable of freeing itself from its constitutive relation to the *Globe*. To paraphrase Derrida: *the conditions of possibility of the Earth is also its condition of impossibility*.<sup>86</sup>

Given this im/possibility, we should hence not assume that this normative dream automatically is free from the (post)colonial modernity it seeks to criticize.<sup>87</sup> On the contrary, as several studies have shown, the decolonial dream of the Anthropocene emerged in a largely colonial and racialized context, within an “undoubtedly white intellectual European/Western academic environment.”<sup>88</sup> For example, Angela Last has demonstrated the dominance of white voices within “the intellectual prehistory of the Anthropocene” and in current normative versions of what she calls the “Anthropocene discourse.”<sup>89</sup> Michael Simpson's genealogy of the concept of the Anthropocene further demonstrates the colonial context in which early formulations of man as a geological force emerged – such as Antonio Stoppani's idea of an Anthropozoic era and Edouard Le Roy and Vladimir Vernadsky's

concept of the noösphere – and how these ideas were used to legitimize colonial occupation, administration and violence.<sup>90</sup> Today, a series of critical studies have shown how ideas about a changing and relational world continue to regulate and reproduce power relations between the global South and the global North, in part by influencing discourses on global security policy and poverty reduction. According to Brad Evans and Julian Reid, the appropriation of geological concepts such as resilience, relational coexistence and complexity by discourses of global governance have functioned to naturalize vulnerability, presenting structural human-made inequalities as inescapable facets of adaptable and relational life.<sup>91</sup> There is, as several authors argue, a striking similarity between the ecological view of these discourses and how posthumanist critique, including Latour, defines life on *Earth*.<sup>92</sup>

It is this complex and heterogeneous network of statements that Latour's dream of a new decolonial language is embedded in. Drawing on Claude Levi-Strauss's *The Savage Mind* (1962), Derrida calls such a network *bricolage*.<sup>93</sup> For Derrida, every discourse, every language –

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<sup>85</sup> Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 7–8.

<sup>86</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: the State of Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (London: Routledge, 1994), 82.

<sup>87</sup> Simpson, “The Anthropocene as Colonial Discourse.”

<sup>88</sup> Zoe Todd, “Indigenizing the Anthropocene,” in *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters among Aesthetics, Politics, Environment and Epistemology*, eds. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 246–247.

<sup>89</sup> Angela Last, “We Are the World? Anthropocene Cultural Production between Geopoetics and Geopolitics,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 34, nos. 2–3 (2017): 147–68, here 149.

<sup>90</sup> Simpson, “The Anthropocene as Colonial Discourse.”

<sup>91</sup> Brad Evans and Julian Reid, *Resilient Life: The Art of Living Dangerously* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014); see also David Chandler, *Resilience: The Governance of Complexity* (London: Routledge, 2014); Jacqueline Best, “Redefining poverty as risk and vulnerability: Shifting strategies of liberal economic governance,” *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (2013): 109–129.

<sup>92</sup> Rothe, “Governing the End Times?” 154; Thomas Lemke, *The Government of Things: Foucault and the New Materialisms* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 171; Claes Tångh Wrangel, “Securing the Hopeful Subject? The Militarisation of Complexity Science and the Limits of Decolonial Critique,” in Valerie Waldow, Pol Bargués, and David Chandler (eds), *Hope in the Anthropocene: Agency, Governance and Negation* (Edinburgh University Press, 2024).

<sup>93</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 360, original emphasis; Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1962).

modern and Anthropocene alike – is in essence a *bricolage*: a network of statements and ideas that “borrow[s] one’s concepts from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined.”<sup>94</sup> In other words, for Derrida, every discourse is a rearticulation of the language that preceded it – including the dream of a language free from its history, a language, like Lovelock’s prose, that is claimed to have “br[oken] free with all forms of *bricolage*.”<sup>95</sup> What is also repeated, but rendered invisible, by Latour’s dream of a new language is that this dream paradoxically repeats the modern fascination with what Latour would call a constructor, and what Derrida and Levi Strauss name an engineer: “a subject who supposedly would be the absolute origin of his own discourse and supposedly would construct it out of nothing, ‘out of whole cloth.’”<sup>96</sup> According to Derrida, the idea of the engineer, or the constructor, is nothing more than a “myth, produced by the *bricoleur*.”<sup>97</sup>

Given this *bricolage*, this fractured imperfect heritage, Latour’s brief, half-hidden, self-reflection that recognises that his texts are written “from above” appears both true and important. It is a reminder not only that modernity is more elastic and heterogeneous than Latour’s one-sided description of the *Globe* suggests, it is also a reminder that modernism has an ability to absorb concepts, practices and criticisms directed at it. According to Evans and Reid, modernism’s current neoliberal form is not “a homogeneous doctrine, nor are its particular forms of dogmatism homeostatic. Its powers of persuasion and its discursive prosperity depend on its own resilient capacities to adapt to the hazards of critique.”<sup>98</sup> With this in mind, Latour’s brief self-

reflection can be read as a call: a call to scrutinize, instead of taking for granted, the relationship between critique and hegemony, between humanism and posthumanism, between the decolonial and the modern. In this short article, I have tried to respond to this call by deconstructing, problematizing and contextualizing the posthuman dream of a free and pure critical language. My hope is that this discussion has contributed to an increasingly important discussion about what critique might mean in the Anthropocene – given that we all, more or less, whether we like it or not, write *from above*.

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<sup>94</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 360.

<sup>95</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 360.

<sup>96</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 360.

<sup>97</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 360.

<sup>98</sup> Evans and Reid, *Resilient Life*, 71.

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