

Thinking through the Earth: surviving and thriving at a planetary threshold

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We are very grateful to our four interlocuters for the generosity and creativity of their commentaries – not least because it means we do not have to use up too much space in this response defending or explaining the position we took in *Planetary Social Thought* (2021). As we worked on the book it was always our intention to write something that was sufficiently conceptually tight to be of use to readers, but at the same time had a looseness and openness in its intellectual architecture that would make it easier for others to pick up on the questions that animated us and, as it were, play variations on our themes. This is one reason why we are very taken with Cecilia Åsberg's notion of 'portmanteau planetarity': like our own concept of 'planetary multiplicity', Åsberg invites us to see the Earth and other planets not as singular, unified things. The concept as she presents it has both the sense of invasive threat that Alfred Crosby evoked when he spoke of European 'portmanteau biota' in *Ecological Imperialism* (1986: 89-90), but also hints at the possibility of at least partially generative feral ecologies – where any being, entity or idea unleashed in a new context is impacted by and also impacts upon its new environment.

We are also happy that Åsberg sees our book as demonstrating the diminishing significance of boundaries between environmental social science and the environmental humanities. At a time when we do not know what the Earth is turning into, and desperately need new ideas about how to inhabit a planet in transition to a new and unfamiliar operating state, hard disciplinary boundaries are the last thing we need. But we would add that we also need to reconsider the division of labour between the environmental social sciences and humanities as a whole and the natural sciences. In particular, the social sciences and humanities need to find ways of engaging with the natural sciences that are less reactive and embattled: not so much attempting to reclaim disciplinary territory that we feel we have lost, but instead trying to move to a situation where both 'sides' are playing off each other's most generative insights.

However, such thoughts do not diminish the importance of critical thought – of engagement with the predicament of other human and non-human beings. László Cseke's account of the fate of the chicken subjected to extreme agricultural intensification is a frighteningly good example of how a single object – a living being in this case – can hinge together a whole range of planetary forces and processes. It is a horrifying idea that factory-farmed broilers are now so globally prevalent that they will leave an effectively permanent marker in the geological stratum now being deposited globally.

One of the inspirations rumbling away in our version of planetary multiplicity is Deleuze and Guattari's notion of a 'nonorganic life', a creativity, a potentiality to become otherwise, that is proper to non-living matter (1987: 411). A related idea shines through in Lynn Margulis and Dorian Sagan's wonderful riff on the work

of Vernadsky: ‘we are walking, talking minerals’ (1995: 45). But Cseke’s factoryfarmed chickens – with their increasingly reduced mobility, senses and behaviour – also remind us that these developments can be pushed in the other direction, to the extent that the chicken assemblage begins to undo some of the significant achievements of the Phanerozoic Eon. If we think of living beings as a kind of elaboration of the Earth’s capacity to know itself, then one way to look at the whole global regime of factory farming is to see it as a rolling-back or contraction of this self-sensing, self-investigating capability. Along with being a breeding ground of zoonotic viruses, we might consider the proliferation of farmed poultry at the expense of other birds and other wildlife (Barnosky, 2008) as an irrecoverable loss of the potentiality of the planetary life to become otherwise. Compared to the way that avian dinosaurs flourished, proliferated and transformed after the catastrophic events at the end of the Cretaceous Period, for example, the global chicken factory seems a sad, reduced reservoir of what life might yet become.

More hope, then, might reside in contemporary vegetal life – even though domesticated crops reveal a similar contraction of potential. Ginn is right to remind us of the key role of ‘vegetality’ as a vector along which Earth forces flow, one which has played a key role in major moments in the Earth’s selftransformation (Croizat, 1962: 46). He further suggests that plants too can constitute an ‘earthly multitude’ – a concept we use to refer to human collectives engaged in coaxing planetary processes across thresholds. This reminds us of our discussions when writing the book as to whether earthly multitudes can only be human, or whether other organisms and self-organizing entities also tap into and elaborate upon the forces of the Earth. It felt to us as though humans were not privileged in this sense, but rather a particular variation on this theme. In the book, however, we decided to keep the focus on humans – but as Ginn reminds us, plants hardly do this any less well than we do!

Ginn also invokes the idea of a non-earthbound vegetality to make a connection between planetary multiplicity and an extra-terrestrial multiplanetarity. What is especially appealing in his framing of this prospect is the way that it goes far beyond the emphasis on catastrophe insurance and species survival that Elon Musk and others have used, rather seeing unboundedness from Earth as a kind of creative unhinging or unleashing of potentiality. The prospect of ‘plants without a planet’ raises really interesting questions about what earthly botanical life might become on very differently composed planets, and what variations on the theme of vegetality might unfold elsewhere in the cosmos. It also prompts questions about the future relationship between vegetality and fire, for in the process of establishing extraterrestrial plant-life we also open up new possibilities for extraterrestrial fire. But we may be getting ahead of ourselves here! For as Simon Dalby’s recent work suggests (2018), there is still much to be done to properly thematize the political questions raised by the deployment of fire on our own planet.

In his commentary on our book, Dalby wonders why planetary governance seems to be conspicuous by its absence. He is perhaps being generous in interpreting this as reflecting more about the limitations of the governance literature than those of our own scholarship. The still relatively new field of climate and Earth system governance – in which Dalby himself plays a key role (see for example Dalby, 2020)– has done vital work in opening up the political issues that hinge around the newly-understood capacity of some human activities to collectively destabilize the Earth processes many of us depend upon. Taking up the prompt to consider this more explicitly, then, we might situate our

own project in Planetary Social Thought as producing a kind of prequel or prolegomenon to the work being done by Dalby and others. Our emphasis on the generative aspects of planetary multiplicity – drawing on Elizabeth’s Grosz’s (2017) notion of ‘geopower’ – points to the way that all human collective agency is ultimately subtended and conditioned by the forces of the Earth and cosmos. Because this geopower greatly exceeds the realm of human action, however, it also serves to remind us that there are physical limits to political power. Which is to say that politics, sooner or later, runs up against its own exteriority, or what Claire Colebrook (2011: 11) refers to as the ‘monstrously impolitic’. But it can be difficult to probe the limits of politics without being misconstrued – especially when the charge of ‘depoliticization’ or siding with the ‘post-political’ is so frequently invoked in the context of environmental struggles (see Swyngedouw, 2010).

We are also keen to stress that there are many aspects of engaging with the changeability of the Earth that are not immediately political, or at least not political in the militant and antagonistic sense – however important the latter might be at certain ‘critical’ moments. This resonates with the questions that Dalby raises in *Anthropocene Geopolitics* about the imagery of militarism, struggle and survival that pervades so much climate activism (Dalby, 2020: 432). It also brings us to Åsberg’s point about ‘learning to not just survive but thrive’, and her closely related observation about what our planetary social thought shares with ‘its multi-creative queer sister, feminist posthumanities’. Her observation that in the book we tend to let feminist theorists do more of the fraught, ethico-political work while male theorists get to do more of the affirmative and systematic thinking is an interesting one. We weren’t aware of this! But it may be worth stressing just how much of our reading of Deleuze, Derrida and other ‘canonical’ latter 20th Century philosophers has already been framed by the work of feminist-queer theorists such as Elizabeth Grosz, Claire Colebrook, and Vicki Kirby – each of whom has drawn upon and intensified existing concerns with more-than-human generativity in strands of poststructural thought.

In relation to the issue of a politics that exceeds conflict and survival, it’s worth recalling a point Grosz makes in *Chaos, Territory, Art* (2008), which both inherits and elaborates upon Deleuzo-Guattarian territorial thought. Setting out from the excessiveness of the Earth and the way living creatures play their own variations on this excess, she suggests, can help change the way we conceive of radical politics. In her words: ‘[t]erritory is artistic, the consequences of love not war, of seduction not defense, of sexual selection not natural selection’ (Grosz, 2008: 69). Work or production looks different too, when we set out from the way that female artisans have creatively and imaginatively tapped into the dynamism of the natural world, a point we touched upon in Chapter 3 of the book, inspired by Sadie Plant’s now somewhat neglected feminist classic *Zeros + Ones* (1997).

Each of Ginn, Åsberg, Dalby and Cseke’s generous commentaries, in their own way, have helped remind us of what we set out to do in the book, which was to offer something other than directives for human survival, and something more than affirmations that the Earth would carry on regardless should we fail to secure our future. In making connections between the Earth’s ongoing self-differentiation and the many different ways that human beings have responded to the dynamism and multiplicity of their home planet, what we were hoping to do above all was to foster a sense of possibility. While there is much to fear from passing over thresholds into strange and unfamiliar worlds, we were attempting to say, there is also a great deal we humans have learnt about negotiating a

volatile and variable planet over the last few million years.

The project of Planetary Social Thought was also propelled by our respective experiences of tertiary teaching on environmental issues, and the more general question of the huge burden that has been loaded onto younger generations. But it is one thing to try and reimagine inhabiting a fast-changing Earth as a creative, explorative, and experimental venture. It is quite another thing to make sure that those opportunities are available, evenly shared, and properly supported.

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