BETWEEN GAIA AND GROUND

Elizabeth A. Povinelli

Four Axioms of Existence and the Ancestral Catastrophe of Late Liberalism


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AND

GAIA

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GROUND

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To my Karrabing family
Especially to my beloved Kaingmerrhe
My amazing first great-granddaughter

Run, run, run, run,
We run under the sun . . .

However entangled the petroleum's arteries may be,
however the layers may change their silent site
and move their sovereignty amid the earth's bowels,
when the fountain gushes its paraffin foliage,
Standard Oil arrived beforehand
with its checks and its guns,
with its governments and its prisoners.
—PABLO NERUDA, "Standard Oil Co.," 1940

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PREFACE

THE FINAL DRAFT OF THIS BOOK was completed during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and in the midst of the Black Lives Matter protests against the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and countless other Black Americans. Some prefatory remarks seem important in light of these events and for guiding readers through this work.

First, although the chapters were conceived and written prior to the pandemic, the different discourses about COVID-19 and the starkly different impact of the virus on Black, brown, and Indigenous communities haunted my final edits, as they no doubt haunt the following pages. I make a few explicit references to the devastating landscapes of COVID-19, but I chose not to overly knead this immediate crisis into the discussion. Unfortunately, I don't think this crisis changes the fundamental point of this book, that the axioms on which a segment of critical common sense is now built—especially claims that existence is entangled—have no political content in and of themselves but can only derive their politics from the ongoing effects of the ancestral catastrophe of colonialism and slavery. In other words, structural racism and colonialism and their devastating effects on the health of Black, brown, and Indigenous bodies and their environments existed long before COVID-19. The catastrophe of climate change, toxic exposure, and viral pandemics are not *à venir*—they are not on the horizon coming toward those staring at it. These are the ancestral catastrophes that began with the brutal dispossession of human and more-than-human worlds and a vicious extraction of human and more-than-human labor. These dispossessions and extractions gave birth to liberalism and capitalism, and alongside them, a massive machinery that disavowed their structural violence.

This book takes these historical violences as its starting point, arguing that every theory of existence—whether positing an ontological entanglement of existence or some form of ontological object (hyper-, hypo-, or micro-)—must begin with and have as its ultimate goal the dismantling of this rolling ancestral catastrophe. Any discussion that shifts attention from the uneven social and physical terrain of the ongoingness of this catastrophe or begins with a general theory of the human and nonhuman world contributes to the reinforcement of late liberal capitalism's disavowal of its toxic machinery. The title of this book, *Between Gaia and Ground*, means to pull critical analysis from the abstractions of the planetary and the human to the dynamic unfolding forms of late liberal violence—the ways the colonial catastrophe knotted and continues to knot together a multiplicity of worlds even as it concentrates wealth and well-being in some places and bodies and destitution and toxicity in others.

Second, when I am working on a new book, I imagine myself elaborating a point made in a previous work. This book was intended to provide a fuller account of a set of critical discourses coming into view as the presuppositional nature of geontopower cracked. ***Geontopower*** refers to the governance of human and more-than-human existence through the divisions and hierarchies of Life and Nonlife and the toxicity of existence this division has left in its wake. Since writing *Geontologies*, I had become particularly interested in a set of critical theoretical statements about the nature of existence and eventfulness emerging in the wake of geontopower. I began calling these the four axioms of existence, and I wanted to understand not just what they meant but what various approaches to them were doing. *Geontologies* also introduced a set of figures that I claimed were displacing the four figures of biopower. I asserted that critical theory had been so entranced by the image of power working through life that we'd failed to notice the emerging problems, figures, strategies, and concepts that together suggested another formation of late liberal power had been fundamental to but hidden by the concept of biopower. The three figures of geontopower are the desert, the animist, and the virus. Each figure was meant to be diagnostic and symptomatic signs of the ways geontopower has long been openly governing in settler colonialism and was now seen as a threat to those who had benefited from this governance.

Even when thinking of the virus as figure, I tried to forestall the celebration of it as a radical exit from geontopower. I argued that to be the virus was to be subject to intense abjection and attack and to live in the vicinity of the virus was to dwell in an existential crisis. With COVID-19, this becomes terrifyingly clear. Perhaps more controversially, I also argued that although

the rhetoric and practices of war accumulate around it, the virus is neither a friend nor an enemy; it is agnostic about what it is called.[1] The virus is an emergent or residual form of a previous human–more-than-human arrangement. It operates to create a new dwelling, along the way diagnosing the structures and contours of power. How terribly true this seems at the moment. COVID-19 emerged from extractive capitalism and was disseminated by transportation capitalism. It devastates the poor, Indigenous communities, and communities of color because these communities embody the long arm of the ancestral catastrophe of racism and colonialism. Rather than seeing COVID-19 as a horrifying analytic of power's embodiment, as a devastating critique of late liberal capitalism—rather than understanding late liberal capitalism as the source of this horror we are experiencing—we are told to view the virus as our enemy. In other words, COVID-19 now operates in the framework of what, in *Empire of Love*, I called ***ghoul health***. Certainly, COVID-19 is not our friend. But neither is it our enemy. It is a manifestation of the ancestral catastrophes of colonialism and slavery and of the continual destruction and dispossession of existence by the massive extraction and recombination machine of late liberal capitalism.

Third, this book, as with all my work, comes from the ways my thinking and acting in the world have been shaped by my long intimate life with the ancestors and current members of Karrabing. Karrabing is not a clan, language, or nation. It is an Emmiyangel word referring to the moment when the vast saltwater tides that define the coastal region of the northwest territories of what is now known as Australia reach their lowest point and are about to turn to shore. It is a group of mutually aiding kin, most of whose countries lie along the coastal region of Anson Bay, Northern Territory. It is a concept, aspiration, and endeavor to mobilize film, song, and art as a means of maintaining Indigenous worlds by blocking the extractive powers of late liberalism and its political, social, and economic dimensions and keeping open a space for an otherwise in the current configuration of settler power. The Karrabing is the model of my understanding of a ***social project***.

Fourth, this book sinks its feet into numerous debates and scholarly areas in which others have far more expertise. I do not pretend to know these debates as fully and with the nuance that they do. Instead, I try to point to these debates in the text and notes. I see my effort here primarily as lending energy and focus to a much broader field of anticolonial, decolonizing, and late liberal critique.

Finally, over the years, I have created a pile of somewhat specialized terms for describing late liberal processes and dynamics. I lean on many of these

terms in the following chapters. Rather than pause and define each as they arise, I present them in ***bold italics*** (as with the above use of *geontopower*, *ghoul health*, and *social project*) and provide a glossary at the end of the manuscript that includes other key concepts. There readers will find a definition of the term and a guide to how they fit within some of my previous writings. The idea is to map a deeper and more meaningful understanding of a concept's journey and authors who have provided the rich vocabularies within which these concepts make their way.

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Introduction

THIS BOOK EXAMINES FOUR AXIOMS of existence that have emerged in recent years across a significant section of critical theory. They are: the entanglement of existence, the unequal distribution of power to affect the local and transversal terrains of this entanglement, the multiplicity and collapse of the event as the sine qua non of political thought, and the racial and colonial history that informed liberal Western ontologies and epistemologies and the concept of the West. Beyond the axioms, I am interested in the broader anticolonial struggles from which these axioms emerged and a reactionary formation, late liberalism, that has attempted to remold, blunt, and redirect these struggles. Although I treat these axioms as distinct theoretical statements, they are part of a much broader discursive surface of political thought and action arising in the wake of ***geontopower***. Paying attention to how they operate is crucial if we are to avoid them being co-opted into late liberal and illiberal capitalism. The current rise of illiberal xenophobic liberalism, zero-interest capitalism, and ecofascism concurrent with the collapse of a unipolar US power may be signaling a new reorganization of liberalism.[1] If so, then the stakes of how or from where and when we construct concepts—with concepts understood as action in the world—in this wobbling of late liberal power are crucial.

At the center of this book is an inquiry into the ***social tense*** of these axioms—a discussion about how the order and arrangement of these axioms create different imaginaries of social time and eventfulness and, thus, different

accounts of social and environmental justice. On the one hand, I am interested in a syntagmatic tendency in some quarters of critical theory—mimicked in how I just introduced the axioms—to begin (and sometimes end) with an ontological claim and then (sometimes) to scale up or slide over to the social, political, and historical ramifications of the claim. This book demonstrates how a seemingly casual syntactic arrangement of these axioms effects our ability to break the stranglehold of what Sylvia Wynter has called the overrepresentation of a specific history of Man.[2] It asks what thoughts and actions become visible when we begin with the colonial history of the Western entanglement of the world and with the differential powers unleashed on various regions and modes of existence—on the human and the more-than-human world—rather than with questions about first conditions. Put another way, what kinds of questions become unavoidable when we begin within the force of history rather than with a claim about ontology?

The answer *Between Gaia and Ground* proposes does not merely reverse the order of the four axioms; it attempts something stronger, namely, to show that the first axiom has no political relevance in and of itself, indeed, that it may well function as an antipolitical diversion if we begin our approach to social power with it. I will argue that the political relevance of any claim about existence emerges from the ways colonial power entangled existence, spawning capitalism and its long-standing governmental partner, liberalism, and in the process leaving the earth potted by the materially differentiated force of their toxic activities. In short, the first condition is a racial and colonial condition, not an ontological one.

One of the first things we see when we pay attention to how we order these axioms is the effect they have on our understanding of contemporary climatic, environmental, and social collapse—whether we understand them to be a coming catastrophe (*l'catastrophe à venir*) or an ancestral one (*l'catastrophe ancestral/histoire*). When figured as coming or arriving, climatic and environmental catastrophe is often read as specific sort of event, a future event that will constitute a new and dramatic beginning, a radical death and a radical rebirth. They are represented as the potential end of one kind of human and natural history. In geontopower, this imaginary of the event is a key feature of the ***carbon imaginary***—a propositional hinge that joins the natural and critical sciences and creates the differences between them by laminating the concepts of birth, growth and reproduction, and death onto the concepts of event, conatus/affectus, and finitude. The coming climatic catastrophe builds on, intensifies, and collapses into these concepts of birth and death, event, and finitude. The ancestral catastrophe does not.

The ancestral catastrophe is not the same kind of thing-event as the coming catastrophe, nor does it operate with the same temporality. When we begin with the catastrophe of colonialism and enslavement, the location of contemporary climatic, environmental, and social collapse rotates and mutates into something else entirely. Ancestral catastrophes are past and present; they keep arriving out of the ground of colonialism and racism rather than emerging over the horizon of liberal progress. Ancestral catastrophes ground environmental damage in the colonial sphere rather than in the biosphere; in the not-conquered earth rather than in the whole earth; in errancies rather than in ends; in waywardness rather than in war; in maneuvers, ***endurance***, and stubbornness rather than in domination or resistance, despair, or hope.

A second thing we see when we pay attention to how we order these axioms is a very different approach to truth, power, and history. I think we catch a glimpse of this when we place the US pragmatists Charles Sanders Peirce and William James in conversation with the French philosopher and psychiatrist Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari and Martinique poet, philosopher, and critic Édouard Glissant.

In three foundational essays, "A New List of Categories," "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," and "The Fixation of Belief," Peirce argued that truth was not derivable from formal abstractions or general states of affairs but was a habit of thought situated within, stretched between, and responsive to the dynamics of changes in habits of mind and habits of existence. The strangeness of this way of thinking about truth should not be underestimated. A pragmatic approach to truth does not locate its source in the mind or in a finished world, or in the relay between the conditions of mind and the conditions of a stable world. But neither is truth considered to be relative in a culturalist or multiperspectival sense. Neither relative nor universally given, truth is, instead, a habit that regions of existence (human and otherwise) get into. Somewhere gravity got to be a habit of object relations. This habit spread until it seemed to be a universal law.

For human minds, truth inhabits us through dynamic loops of belief and doubt. Belief is a current habit of mind built out of a series of encounters with regions of existence, while doubt is the embodied register of the difference between this history of belief and ongoing encounters with the world, itself undergoing change due to our habituated treatment of it and its own modes of responsiveness. Doubt is a kind of grit that registers the difference between the part of the world that has constituted my habits of belief and other regions of the world within my world but invisible to me.[3] Doubt is a pesky sense that something just isn't correct between my habits of mind and

the given or changing existence of the world. Together, doubt and belief are the embodied mental surfaces of the intentional and chance variations in a region of existence; they are the differential between calm (belief) and irritation (doubt), which registers the difference between a given arrangement of truth and the existence in which that truth operates including the subject herself. Thus, truth is not a thing but an evolution of habitations moving from within itself but outside any law that determines it. As Brian Massumi has written, the radical empiricism of Peircean pragmatism "will have to generate its world from a coming-to-be behind which there is nothing determinate—*but emphatically not nothing*."[4] Massumi continues: "If there is nothing 'behind,' no being, no what, no a priori, then the presentness of immediate consciousness is not in the mind any more than it is in the classically empirical world of already-given material substance. It is not 'in' anything. It is outside. Outside, coming in. Suddenly, and in the event, unrecognizably."[5]

It was Peirce's colleague William James, more than Peirce himself, who made the social implications of this approach to truth explicit. Like Peirce, James insisted that truth—and pragmatism as a method/concept—was irreducibly immanent to one's location in these entangled regions of existence and thus irreducibly informed by the forces and powers that kept it in place or could be mobilized to displace it. For James, however, a theory of force and power was crucial to understanding why, if the relationships among truth, belief, and doubt were open and dynamic, certain beliefs were experienced as hardened truth, able to keep doubt at bay. Why, for instance, have US patients struggling to breathe from a diagnosed COVID-19 infection insisted that they must have lung cancer since COVID-19 is not dangerous?[6] Or why did it take the murder of George Floyd to convince some white Americans that Black Americans have been subject to violent treatment in ways white Americans have not been, despite centuries of news coverage demonstrating racist vigilante and police violence? How can white American habits of truth statements survive, let alone dominate institutions of power? What James sought to show was how the powers of belief and doubt are determined by the complex energetics of social fields and relations. Indeed, for James, power as such can be measured by the ability of one region to seize hold of habituated practices across regions, forestalling other possibilities that are in existence from taking hold and extending themselves.

In an attempt to find a passage between Humean empiricism and the Kantian a priori, in *The Principles of Psychology* James critiques those for whom "the higher faculties of the mind are pure products of 'experience;' and experience is supposed to be of something simply given." Instead, "experience is what I

agree" to or am forced "to attend to."[7] To discern is not, however, a transitive power operating over a world of preexisting subjects and objects. The effort of attention produces an arrangement, and these arrangements become true "in so far as they help us get into a satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience."[8] Because concept formation, like other mental practices, demands an effort, those who are constantly exhausted by the extractive machinery of capital are given a double task. On the one hand, they must carve effort from their world even as others are sucking as much energy from it as they can to enrich themselves. On the other hand, they must focus their effort on social analysis. It is a Herculean task because the power to form counterconcepts is in the same power attempting to drain the affective force of those who live and feel these countertruths.

Even as James argued that there is no place that doesn't feel the effect of other places, he insisted that the open resonating world always sits within and outside of the determining world.[9] Those bourgeois philosophers sitting in their chairs of contemplation are not simply engaged in a reflection but are actively cramping the energy of the poor; still, the poor "who live and feel" the regions of existence sucked dry of value "know truth" as an actuality. They are always, even if immanently, opposing the dominant (if ultimately sterile) ideas of bourgeois philosophers and statesmen. For James, radical empiricism meant to create a "fully armed and militant" philosophy whose purpose was to work to create "power-bringing" words (concepts) "as a program for more work" on the "superabundance" of existence, not to discover the underlying unity of existence nor even (per Peirce) develop a consistent logic of existence.[10]

The implication of this reorientation of philosophy to militant action was certainly a characteristic that drew Deleuze and Guattari to James's work. David Lapoujade, in particular, has pointed to what is gained when James is read from the perspective of Deleuze and Guattari and vice versa. He, Brian Massumi, and Isabelle Stengers have effectively wrenched the thought of Peirce and James away from Richard Rorty's and Jürgen Habermas's liberal neutralization of pragmatism and redeemed it from the simplistic denunciations of Max Horkheimer who, as Lapoujade notes, saw US pragmatism "as a sort of capitalist ready-made."[11] Perhaps the clearest example of the richness of the exchange and divergence of focus between James and Deleuze and Guattari can be seen in the text *What Is Philosophy?*

In *What Is Philosophy?* Deleuze and Guattari situate their reflections on the concept, the concept of the concept, in a language of proper domains—what philosophy, the sciences and logic, and the arts produce as proper to their

mode of practice; namely, philosophy produces concepts, science and logic produce propositions, and art percepts and affects. To be sure, a political vision subtends this disciplinary work. Deleuze and Guattari believe that philosophical work is more or less dangerously deranged when liberal capitalism, democratic communicative reason, and the commercial arts lay claim to the task of concept formation. They write, "The more philosophy comes up against shameless and inane rivals and encounters them at its very core, the more it feels driven to fulfill the task of creating concepts that are aerolites rather than commercial products."[12] The resonances between James and Deleuze and Guattari are apparent—for Deleuze and Guattari, concepts do not come out of the mental interior of philosophical subjects any more than they did for James; nor do concepts refer to states of affairs in the world. Concepts emerge from and create new neighborhoods in and across an existence that is always in motion—including the concepts of subject and object and their possible interiorities, relations, and modalities. Concepts knot and create habits in the fields of immanence, they have ramifications in these fields, and they are strained by other regions. Thus, no concept explains the world. And no concept is *the* concept that everyone everywhere needs or wants.

A paradox emerges—which Deleuze and Guattari point to in *A Thousand Plateaus*—around the conceptual status of transcendental empiricism. This form of radical immanence is meant to dislodge the problem of essence to make way for eventfulness. Then again, transcendental empiricism could be seen as a new claim about the essence of existence. Consider James's point that the question is not what is true in a metaphysical sense but what is true in a political sense. "What difference would it practically make to anyone if this notion rather than that notion were true?"[13] The point is not to produce an idea that meets the criteria of absolute intensive consistency but to produce an idea that matters to some part of the world—that helps that part of the world matter forth. The ethical question is to which part of the world does one wish to lend their efforts of attention?

In *What Is Philosophy?* what needs to be understood—and thus what matters—is the distinct "vicinities" and "neighborhoods" among philosophy, science, and the arts. What does Glissant think needs to be asked for something to be done? In other words, what happens when we place conceptual work in the texts of Glissant, say, in the difference between how Deleuze and Guattari begin *What Is Philosophy?* and how Glissant begins *Poetics of Relation*? Glissant does not open *Poetics of Relations* with a disciplinary question. He opens in a boat in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean in the midst of the radical exploitation and dispossession of the West African men, women, and children "who

lived through the experience of deportation to the Americas."[14] Three abysses unfurl on this turbulent sea: the abyss of the belly of the boat, the abyss of the depths of the sea, and the abyss of all that has been severed and left behind. From these gaping abysses, Glissant sees new concepts emerging: relation; écho-monde, tout-monde, and chaos-monde; arrowlike and circular nomadism. The stakes of what existence is—essence or event—shrink to a vanishing point relative to, on the one hand, how the world became entangled in these sadistic practices and, on the other, how the relation that opened in this specific scene continues to entangle existence. By anchoring his concept building in the horror of the slave boat, Glissant does not merely seek, like "every great philosopher," to "lay out a new plane of immanence, introduce a new substance of being and draw up a new image of thought."[15] Nor does he seek only to initiate and provide a new course for old affects and discourses. He does these things, yes; but he also does something else, something slightly errant to the obsession of Deleuze and Guattari—he asks whether any concept matters outside the world from which it comes and toward which it intends to do work. What do we ultimately care about: the ontological status of existence, or the modes of being and substance that a specific commercial engorgement of humans and lands produced and continues to produce? Glissant makes this question impossible not to ask. Do Deleuze and Guattari?

I do not pretend that the inversion and reordering of the four axioms that I am suggesting are inconsequential or uncontroversial from a philosophical point of view. Indeed, they might appear as incoherent claims from such a perspective. I could be read as asserting, for instance, that before these histories of colonization existence was not entangled. Or I could be called out for opposing ontological claims even as this book seeks to lend energy to various Indigenous and subaltern claims about non-Western ontologies. I address this latter point in most detail in chapter 4. For now, let me simply note, in relation to both worries, that both criticisms are correct even as they miss the point. If I were interested in existence as such or ontology as such then a massive incoherence would subtend this exercise. But I am not interested in either of these *as such*, that is, as if they could be abstracted out and said to exist outside of existence. Where is existence other than in existence? Where is being other than in being? More crucially who can believe without the slightest irritation of doubt that the figuring of existence as some sort of abstract something somehow neutralizes the specific historical contours of Black and Indigenous lives? Who can act as if this should be the first and final concern?

To show what is at stake in how one reads the relationship between the various axioms, the following chapters examine a set of alternative theoreti-

cal and activist perspectives on several atomic and environmental events. Examples stretch from the launch of Sputnik during the height of the nuclear Cold War in the 1950s to various ecological concepts emerging in the 1960s and 1970s to the concept of anthropocentric climate collapse in the 1990s and to the contemporary COVID-19 pandemic. Each example is used as a setting for putting a variety of political concepts in dialogue—the concept of the whole earth with those struggling against a conquered earth, the concept of the biosphere with those struggling against the colonial sphere, the liberal affects of empathy and hope against Indigenous affects of survivance and obdurate refusal.

I begin in the 1950s for a specific reason. I want to track a parallel relationship between tendencies and tensions in critical thought and the emergence of ***late liberalism***. The glossary at the end of the book provides readers with more detail, but let me briefly summarize what I mean by *late liberalism* so as to suggest the correlational (if not causal) dynamics between critical thought and social power. As I have written elsewhere, late liberalism refers to a period stretching from the 1950s into the loosely defined present during which liberal nationalisms and their publics reacted to a set of extraordinarily powerful anticolonial, anticapitalist, and new social movements by superficially acknowledging the racist and paternalist foundations of its colonial and imperial practices and instituting explicit or implicit policies of liberal multicultural recognition.[16] The ***cunning of late liberal recognition*** was to treat radical critiques of liberal colonial capitalism as if they were a desire by the dominated to be recognized by the dominant state and its normative publics—as if what was being sought was inclusion into the liberal polis of the worthy.

Kyoto Prize recipient Charles Taylor exemplifies how this political sleight of hand was mirrored in critical thought in his much-cited essay "The Politics of Recognition." Taylor begins his essay by anchoring an understanding of Indigenous and ethnic minority struggles in classical philosophical approaches to recognition. From there, he argues that anticolonial and minority struggles should be understood as a demand for cultural recognition (that "different cultures" be recognized as having equal value and worth) in which "we not only let them survive, but acknowledge their worth."[17] In other words, what the oppressed want more than survival is the recognition of the oppressor because their sociocultural survival is dependent on the oppressor's recognition of their worth. Taylor thanks Frantz Fanon for this insight into the desire of the colonized for acceptance by the master! But to align his political program with Fanon's, Taylor must first strip from Fanon one of his most essential points, that liberation from colonialism demands a form of violence

that matches "the original violence of the alien imposition."[18] It is not only Fanon's critical theory of violence that must be neutered. Taylor argues that any thought that centers the dynamics of recognition in the history of power must be rejected, especially "half-baked . . . neo-Nietzschean theories" drawing "frequently from Foucault or Derrida" that "claim all judgments of worth are based on standard[s] that are ultimately imposed by and further entrench structures of power."[19]

While Taylor was developing his theory of liberal recognition, settler colonial jurisprudence was likewise stripping anticolonial struggles of their power to transform the foundations of settler law. For example, consider the 1992 Australian High Court's judgment in *Mabo v. the State of Queensland*, which overturned the justification of Australian settlement in the concept of terra nullius.[20] Even as the justices acknowledged the racist underpinnings of terra nullius, they reaffirmed the supreme power of the settler state to determine the just and the good. Recognizing native title did not and would never touch "the skeleton of principle which gives the body of our law its shape and internal consistency."[21] This is because late liberal recognition was never intended to alter the substance or hierarchy of colonial power nor to provide substantive self-determination to Indigenous and First Nation peoples. Late liberal recognition was just the latest mode in a long history of pressure on all forms of existence to be amenable to capitalist extraction. Indeed, as Benedict Scambary, Glen Coulthard, and others have shown, late liberal recognition has facilitated extractive capitalism in settler societies like Australia and Canada.[22]

Between Gaia and Ground presents a critical genealogy of how a number of critical theoretical approaches to environmental catastrophe have absorbed and decentered anticolonial struggles. As I said, I begin in the 1950s and move forward across a series of critical debates culminating in current discussions about entangled existence. I juxtapose the notion of the whole earth to that of the conquered earth; the biosphere to the colonial sphere; liberal empathy and hope and Indigenous survivance and refusal. I use specific critical and political thinkers to create a discourse space for exploring the alternative worlds of action each of these concepts implies. For instance, even as they acknowledge the centrality of colonial and imperial history, how do theorists such as Hannah Arendt, Aimé Césaire, Gregory Bateson, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Édouard Glissant, and Sylvia Wynter differently position the practice of critical thought in colonial and racial history? What kinds of political imaginaries and practices emerge when we begin with questions of ontology and existence rather than in the middle ocean of racial and colonial history?

The following chapters attempt to unpack the ***social tense*** of critical thought. They are split into two broad sections. The first section examines the social tense of the four axioms of existence in light of ancestral and coming catastrophes. It is primarily a conceptual discussion. The first chapter presses readers to consider the political stakes of starting from an ontological claim (existence is entangled) or a historical claim (Western ontologies and epistemologies and the West were crucially recalibrated during the history of colonialism). The chapter ends with a reflection on how political instincts and statements around hydraulic citizenship, to use a phrase of Nikhil Anand, would look if we examined it from a historical perspective rather than an ontological one.[23]

With this discussion in mind, chapter 2 turns to the meaning of toxic liberalism and late liberalism if we consider climatic and environmental collapse as a coming or ancestral catastrophe. It begins with a discussion of the meaning of toxicity when applied to climate and turns to the question of what describing late liberalism as toxic might do. That is, is this a metaphorical claim, a claim that implicates the nature of late liberalism as such, or is it a claim about the deadly conjunction between liberalism and capitalism? To unpack these options, the chapter examines the function of the frontier and the horizon in exempting and indemnifying liberalism from the violence it inflicts on others, including climate collapse.

Section II presents three case studies that demonstrate the difference between conceptual struggles seeking to maintain a form of existence in the context of the ancestral and ongoing onslaught of colonialism and conceptual innovations that arise from Western theorists looking to the horizon of a coming catastrophe. Chapters draw on the conceptual arguments outlined in section I but animate them in more concrete discussions of scholars and their historical contexts. Chapter 3 is situated in the mid- to late 1950s and early 1960s. It pivots between Hannah Arendt's use of the threat of atomic annihilation to frame the necessity of returning to the classical Greek understandings of plural agonistic politics and Aimé Césaire and other Black Atlantic theorists' use of colonialism as a frame for proposing a new form of transhumanism. The work of Kathryn Gines and Fred Moten is important here and crucial to understanding Arendt's atomic warning in the context of nuclear testing in Australian Indigenous lands. As opposed to how we might read Arendt today, the chapter situates her discussion of a coming atomic catastrophe next to the actual nuclear harms being done to Wongi, Pitjantjatjara, Anangu, and Ngaanyatarra peoples in the 1950s.

Chapter 4 is set in the 1960s and 1970s under the shadow of *Earthrise*, the 1968 photograph astronaut William Anders snapped of the blue-green earth rising above the horizon of the moon, and *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson's environmental blockbuster. Once again, we find discourses of a coming and ancestral catastrophe, this time environmental, playing out at the same time. Using various theories of a more-than-human mind as a pivot, the chapter begins with First Nation Dene resisting the creation of the Mackenzie Valley oil and gas pipelines across their lands. It then discusses the difference between Australian Indigenous understandings of their relations to each other and land and state-based land rights legislation that emerged from the 1971 Aboriginal Land Rights Commission, established after the failed attempt of the Yolngu people to stop the Nabalco bauxite mine from digging in their lands. Understood from the perspective of the historical and ongoing nature of settler attempts to dispossess Native and Indigenous analytics of existence, these refusals are compared to Gregory Bateson's claim that only a biospheric understanding of mind and nature would forestall an environmental collapse. This chapter is loosely situated in the late 1960s and first part of the 1970s when late liberalism was emerging as a new strategy of governing difference and markets.

Chapter 5 is situated in the more recent present. I begin with a set of political concepts (precarity, solidarity, grievability, and autonomy) in order to juxtapose them to another set (tailings, embankments, and strainings). The idea is not to substitute one set for the other but to suggest the kind of odd ideas that might be necessary if we take seriously the four axioms of existence, the coming and ancestral catastrophe, and the shaking of ***geontopower***. I use contemporary arguments for the recognition of ecological formations—rivers, mountains, nature—as legal persons to flesh out the juridical innovations of capitalism and the state in the face of threat.

The postscript reflects on the question raised in chapter 1: how we might think of the relationship between toxicity and late liberalism, liberalism, and capitalism. I use a postscript rather than a conclusion to signal my ongoing rhetorical and theoretical refusal to conclude. Thoughts—and books as entextualized forms of thought—do not conclude for me. They ram into a problematic and set the stage for other potential movements and possible directions.

NOTES

PREFACE

1 Musu, "War Metaphors Used for COVID-19 Useful but Also Dangerous."

INTRODUCTION

1 For instance, see Das and Fassin, *Words and Worlds*; and Callison and Manfredi, *Mutant Neoliberalism*.
2 Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality."
3 Although Peirce's early writings may suggest some actual something to which mental habits seek to align themselves, by his later *Monist* essays, existence is a multiplicity of regions of mind in and out of habit with itself due to the function of absolute chance and an original and ongoing diversification and specification taking place across an irregularly formed world. Peirce, "The Doctrine of Necessity."
4 Massumi, "Such as It Is," 117.
5 Massumi, "Such as It Is," 117.
6 Kenton, "South Dakota Nurse Says."
7 James, *Principles of Psychology*, 402.
8 James, *Pragmatism*, 32.
9 "There can BE no difference any-where that doesn't MAKE a difference elsewhere—no difference in abstract truth that doesn't express itself in concrete fact and no conduct consequent upon that fact, imposed on somebody, somehow, somewhere and somewhen." James, *Pragmatism*, 27.
10 James, *Pragmatism*, 28.
11 Lapoujade, *William James*, 1.
12 Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 11.
13 James, *Pragmatism*, 25.

14 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 5. See also Glissant, *Treatise on the Whole-World*; and Diawara, *Édouard Glissant*.
15 Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 51.
16 Sylvia Wynter also sees this moment as a crucial turning point. She notes that "the multiple challenges" during roughly the same period and "at the global level by anticolonial activists and by activists in Europe, and then in the United States by Blacks and a range of other non-white groups, together with feminists and Gay Liberationists" sought to dislodge the overrepresentation of the human by European humanism. Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality," 72.
17 Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," 64.
18 Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," 65.
19 "The proponents of neo-Nietzschean theories hope to escape this whole nexus of hypocrisy by turning the entire issue into one of power and counterpower. Then the question is no more one of respect, but of taking sides, of solidarity. But this is hardly a satisfactory solution, because in taking sides they miss the driving force of this kind of politics, which is precisely the search for recognition and respect." Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," 70. In the same breath, Taylor is happy to place conditions on who gets the presumption of worth. Conditions include "that cultures that have provided the horizon of meaning for large numbers of human beings, of diverse characters and temperaments, over a long period of time—that have, in other words, articulated their sense of the good, the holy, the admirable—are almost certain to have something that deserves our admiration and respect, even if it is accompanied by much that we have to abhor and reject." Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," 70.
20 *Mabo and Others v. the State of Queensland (No. 2)*, [1992] HCA 23; (1992) 175 CLR 1.
21 Brennan, *Mabo v. Queensland (No. 2)*, §29.
22 Scambary, *My Country, My Mine*; Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*.
23 Anand, *Hydraulic City*, 7.

CHAPTER ONE. THE FOUR AXIOMS OF EXISTENCE

1 What Sylvia Wynter has argued is a "descriptive statement of the human, in whose logic the non-Western, nonwhite peoples can only, at best, be assimilated as honorary human." Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality," 329. See also da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*.
2 Anand, *Hydraulic City*, 7.
3 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, ix.
4 Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 32. Haraway makes the political stakes clear, "If we appreciate the foolishness of human exceptionalism then we know that becoming is always becoming with, in a contact zone where the outcome, where who is in the world, is at stake." Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 244. Haraway's