Extinction and the Anthropocene: to End or Mend the World? A Conversation with Claire Colebrook

David Bennett, Jeremy Gilbert, Mandy Merck, Nicholas Thoburn

In a suite of recent books, including *Death of the PostHuman*, *Sex After Life* and the co-written *Twilight of the Anthropocene Idols*, Claire Colebrook has placed the problem of extinction at the heart of philosophy and cultural studies. The human and its world are *not* to be saved from extinction, she contends. Rather, the encounter with extinction might just detach us from the human, with its false universalism, its ceaseless production, consumption and extraction, its bounded and constrained self, family and society, allowing for a new fidelity to planetary life in all its complexity. We at *New Formations* were therefore keen to interview Claire for this special issue, *Living with Extinction: After the Tipping Point*, to explore together themes arising from the problem of saving or ending the human and its world.

Currently appointed as Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of English at Penn State University, Colebrook has developed her critique of humanist thinking over thirty years of research and publishing on visual art and culture, queer theory, literature, poetry and film, and the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze. Her critique of the humanities also informs her engagement with new models of publishing, as co-editor of the influential series Critical Climate Change at the open-access Open Humanities Press. This *New Formations* interview was conducted by email in Spring-Summer 2022, shortly before publication of her latest book, *Who Would You Kill to Save the World?* A book about post-apocalyptic cinema, the title is not an ethical injunction, but a symptom of the problem to be overcome.

New Formations: *Thank you very much for agreeing to contribute to this special issue on 'living with extinction' by responding to questions your writing on this topic has raised for us. Can we begin by asking what 'extinction' means to you: in what ways do you use the concept? You have written repeatedly, and admonishingly, of a human 'inability to confront the imminent demise of life' (whether precipitated by catastrophic climate change, nuclear warfare, bio-weapons, viral pandemics or resource depletion) and you describe this as a 'strange incapacity to ask the question of life. That is: now that life appears to be in danger of disappearance, diminution or mutation beyond recognition, living humans indulge both in greater and greater insistence on the sanctity of life, and seem incapable of directly confronting the intensifying threats that menace the present.'*[1] *Accordingly, in your forthcoming book,* Who Would You

1. Claire Colebrook, *Death of the Posthuman: Essays on Extinction, Volume One*, Open Humanities Press, 2014, p186. (Hereafter *Death of the Posthuman*.)

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Kill to Save the World?[2], *you analyse the scenarios of post-apocalyptic cinema as so many ruses of self-deception and distraction from that direct 'confrontation' with 'the question of life'. This raises the question of what you think looking extinction full in the face might possibly entail – what would follow from confronting unflinchingly the valuelessness (and hence, paradoxically, the culpability) of human species-life and its humanistic conceptions of life* in se*? Would it be Olympian indifference, political despair, programmatic species-suicide? Or would it entail precisely the kinds of ameliorative projects – ameliorative life-behaviours of our species-being and its relations with other life-forms – that you seem inclined to view as rearrangements of deckchairs on the Titanic, diversions from a catastrophic confrontation with 'the question of life' or humanity's questionable 'right to life'? And who is the 'we' of whom you write in this context, given a humanity divided by countless inequalities of power, wealth and opportunity? Would confrontation with 'the question of life' entail something different for, say, a Harvard philosopher and a Bangladeshi peasant with five children to feed?*

2. Claire Colebrook, *Who Would You Kill to Save the World?*, 2023, forthcoming. (Hereafter *Who Would You Kill?*)

Claire Colebrook: If I use a simple sense of 'our' inability to confront our non-being (which I often do!), this 'we' needs to be qualified. It is what Derrida referred to as the 'silent presupposed we' of (for him) European philosophy. The inability I refer to can be historically and politically delimited. This is what I am trying to write about in my book on fragility: the more secure we become, the more unthinkable contingency, volatility and non-being become. Accepting that this world will end (regardless of whether it should or not) would be the first step to living well. Rather than a state of emergency where everything is done to save the world – including the wars that save the West and the internal propping up of the state and markets because of a 'too big to fail' logic – one might ask what might be possible at the end of (or without) this world. For example, Jonathan Crary's recent *Scorched Earth* argues for a future without the internet, but there are many other positive imaginary futures of stateless societies.[3] There's a literal sense in which 'we' face extinction – of humans as a species – and then a broader sense in which 'we' (as private subjects of modern state societies) are witnessing the end of our world. Contemplating the idea/fact that humans are a fragment in a broader cosmos might have practical philosophical merit in creating some degree of detachment from the highly specific world to which we are attached.

3. Jonathan Crary, *Scorched Earth: Beyond the Digital Age to a Post-Capitalist World*, Verso Books, 2022.

NF: *Are you, then, using 'extinction' in two different ways, to signify extinction of the human species as such and extinction of the life-world to which it has accustomed itself, and suggesting that the threat of the former could precipitate the latter? In other words, are you inviting us to entertain the possibility of the survival of (an albeit changed) human species beyond the Anthropocene – a subsequent era in which our species takes a back seat, as it were, accepts and lives its status as a fragment, no longer 'master of the planet'? Is this (hard to imagine) possibility also what the 'degrowth' agenda tries to envisage? And, incidentally, what grounds are there for hoping that 'accepting that*

this world will end ... would be the first step to living well', rather than to living very badly indeed, more recklessly and self-centredly than ever before?

CC: I am deliberately *not* using extinction in two senses, or deliberately being vague and confusing about the difference between species extinction (which is a certainty at some point) and the end of humanism or the global sense of 'us' as a single species, because what counts as humanity and the end that is feared is not the species but the species in a self-recognising form. If we think of all the humans that ever existed, and then all the humans who had a sense of themselves as subjects with distinctly human rights tied to all other humans also blessed with rights, the two circles of the Venn diagram overlap but do not coincide. Not only is the human of human rights, crimes against humanity, humanities and humanitarian causes *not* the same as the species – such that we can imagine *Homo sapiens* before and after the Anthropos of the Anthropocene – it's the impossibility of a clear distinction that is both fruitful and horrifying for the future. The very idea of nomadic statelessness seems intolerable and yet the erasure of that possibility in the name of the human has ended so many worlds and produced so many extinctions. I am deliberately using both senses – humans as a species, humans as 'humanity' – because that indistinction is already in play. At the same time, I am trying to find moments that imagine the human species in modes that are *not* human. This would include the degrowth agenda, and many possibilities that go beyond, or stop short of, the degrowth agenda. Quite concretely, accepting that this world will end would shift attention away from attempts to save the banks, save the housing market, save the humanities, save the stock market, save areas of wilderness, save America, save the constitution, and so on. The problem is how individuals have been captured by these 'too big to fail' systems, but there are community abolition movements of refusal that are starting to disinvest from the state. It's true that individuals can do only so much, and ecological imperatives for us all to do our bit by recycling, or buying local, or reducing our footprint do little when one compares this to huge corporations. Nevertheless, the neoliberal imperative that we all are driven by some ethic of self-maximisation does not exhaust forms of social relation and collectivity that are increasingly refusing profit and extraction. One can say no to global forms of extraction.

NF: *Focusing for a moment directly on the concept of the Anthropocene: a common criticism of the concept, however it is periodised, is that it elides fundamental differences in resources, power and hence responsibility and culpability between different sections of humanity, projecting a universally guilty species. When this criticism was put to the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, as a longstanding exponent of the concept, he acknowledged the force of the critique but argued that the concept remains indispensable for focusing the question of inter-species relationships and responsibility: 'If one could imagine someone watching the development of life on this planet on an evolutionary*

scale, they would have a story to tell about Homo sapiens rising to the top of the food chain within a very, very short period in that history. The more involved story of rich-poor differences would be a matter of finer resolution in that story … The ecological overshoot of humanity requires us to both zoom into the details of intra-human injustice – otherwise we do not see the suffering of many humans – and to zoom out of that history, or else we do not see the suffering of other species and, in a manner of speaking, of the planet. Zooming in and zooming out are about shuttling between different scales, perspectives, and different levels of abstraction."[4] You yourself have written disparagingly of the Anthropocene as 'a management scenario': 'If you look at the dominant narrative, the question of the Anthropocene is "what's our viable means of survival" and not taking an alienating or nihilistic view of our own species."[5] But do you, none the less, think the concept should retain a currency? For example, is it possible to imagine taking 'an alienating or nihilistic view of our own species' without a concept like the Anthropocene? Is this a contradiction in your argument?

CC: I *do* think the concept should be retained, partly because that's how language works (although some words can be easily dropped), but more importantly because the geological event of the Anthropocene (or what you see when you zoom out) is a consequence of a certain idea of the human that is bound up with geopolitical disparities (what you see when you zoom in). Here is where I differ from Chakrabarty: to explain what you see when you zoom out (the geological strata) you would have to zoom in to this odd political-cultural event of the human, where a whole series of technologies create private individuals with local sympathies and tastes that have planetary consequences.

4. Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Whose Anthropocene? A Response', in 'Whose Anthropocene? Revisiting Dipesh Chakrabarty's "Four Theses,"' Robert Emmett and Thomas Lekan (eds), *RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society*, 2, 2016, pp103-113, p111.

5. Peter Adkins, Wendy Parkins and Claire Colebrook, 'Victorian Studies in the Anthropocene: An Interview with Claire Colebrook', *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 26, 2018. (Hereafter *Victorian Studies in the Anthropocene*.)

NF: *In* Death of the Posthuman, *apropos the economic rationalist case for starving university humanities departments of life, you suggest that 'keeping something you value alive might best be achieved not by clinging to survival but by a joyously destructive and active nihilism' (*Death of the Posthuman, *p159). You go on to imply that this strategy could be transposed from the humanities to the broader canvas of the 'human', if not of 'life' itself. If so, in what would the joyous destruction consist and who could participate in and benefit from it? Do you envisage the carnivalesque destruction as an intellectual activity only, reserved for dialogue between philosophers? What, if any, is the philosopher's 'public' responsibility in this context?*

CC: My answer would have two registers. First, it is often the same people arguing to save the humanities who also argue against the State and against economic rationalism. There are ways of reading and learning that need not require humanities departments. It's not just that English departments are tied to a new moral mission of the early twentieth century and then later to transferable skills, but also that the cultivation of the human is bound up with dehumanisation. This is sometimes conceptual, where other cultures that are not blessed with the same archives as the world of the humanities are not

granted the value of more bookish worlds. It is often more than conceptual, and I take this to be the meaning of Walter Benjamin's claim that every document of civilisation is a document of barbarism: not that there happened to be violence alongside the love of Schumann, but that the high culture of Schumann is only possible with a great deal of plundering and injustice. So, what are the implications? I think something like the types of learning that were imagined in the second half of the twentieth century – things like open universities and access programs – give a hint of what is possible. But what might a world be like where you did not have to go to university to be in a milieu of intense and critical reading? And what might the notion of intense and critical reading be like if it did not have to be attached to the great books? I think this is what Harney and Moten have in mind with their notion of the undercommons.[6] In short, it would amount to a de-privatisation of reading.

6. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Commons*, Minor Compositions, 2013.

NF: *In your interview on Victorian culture and the Anthropocene you argue that the current model of academic 'leisure' – or perhaps the current division of intellectual and other forms of labour – is complicit 'with planetary destruction' (*Victorian Studies in the Anthropocene*). Many academics agree and propose reducing that destruction by measures such as online teaching and conferencing instead of flying, the open access publishing you employ for* Death of the Posthuman, *university and pension disinvestment in fossil fuels, etc. More broadly, they fight against a class-based, racialised or nationalised division of labour for an extension of 'higher' education to the entire populace by reducing tuition fees and crippling debt. Meanwhile, national and state governments are ensuring that university teaching and research ceases to be 'leisured' by casualising employment, increasing workloads, copyrighting recorded lectures, cutting pay and pensions, not replacing retiring staff and systematically defunding the humanities in favour of supposedly more remunerative technical or vocational subjects. Will this proletarianisation of the academy offset its contribution to climate damage or merely salve our consciences?*

CC: I think that exclusive disjunction is just the problem: either we whittle down academia in the direction it's going for the sake of the planet *or* we go back to positions of relative ease and security. Rather than accept that either/or, there would be nothing contradictory about decent wages and conditions for adjuncts, and reducing the footprint of universities as corporations answerable to boards of trustees. The reduction of academia to a gig economy is part of the intensification of the university as a corporation. Rather than a few professors using their research grants to buy out of their teaching and bring money into universities – money that is then spent on air travel and institutional add-on costs – there could be decent wages for junior academics and more security for junior hires. Grants bring money in, and then require vast amounts of institutional administration that does no one any good at all. It's because tenured academics are encouraged to apply for grants to buy out of their teaching that teaching becomes this minor annoyance that

stands in the way of institutional flourishing; research, in turn, has less and less to do with what we teach, more and more to do with vague notions of impact and public outreach. Free higher education would be possible on a different model of higher education, one that was not focused on turning campuses into Airbnb sites.

NF: *David Wood devotes a section of his book* Deep Time, Dark Times: On Being Geologically Human *to a critique of Deleuzian approaches to agency and responsibility in relation to climate change/catastrophe. He points out that just as the destabilisation of fixed identities and creation of new desires are compatible with an ecologically ruinous consumer capitalism, so 'accepting new identities, new relationships, new attitudes to death, and new shapes of community, is compatible with what we might otherwise call disaster'.*[7] *Wood quotes you approvingly in his conclusion but he also includes your work within his critique. How would you respond to him?*

7. David Wood, *Deep Time, Dark Times: On Being Geologically Human*, Fordham University Press, 2019, p105. (Hereafter *Deep Time, Dark Times*.)

CC: There's Deleuze, then there's what I say about Deleuze, then there's what Deleuzians say, then there's what one should quote approvingly. First point on Deleuzian forms of posthumanism: I would not be alone in saying that it is a misreading of Deleuze to think that taking Deleuze seriously would somehow amount to either a single domain of interconnected life without any difference in kind of 'the human' or that the imperative of Deleuze's work is to become 'posthuman'. Rather, 'the human' is an effect of a series of institutional, planetary, geopolitical, historic, cultural, racial and linguistic forces and relations; it would follow that facing disaster and collapse would require something other than the shrill affirmation of the value of the human and the creation and imagination of living differently, perhaps thinking of conceptions of personhood beyond human exceptionalism, perhaps thinking of personhood beyond the norms of the humanities, and definitely *not* affirming some general 'becoming' that would preclude any form of accounting for how individuation is always a collective event.

NF: *Staying with David Wood on agency and responsibility for a moment, may I put to you a question that Wood poses for himself in* Deep Time*? Glossing Nietzsche's critique of 'free will' as a 'hangman's metaphysics', in the sense that 'free will' is not an innate human faculty but an 'ideological implant' that enslaves us to public moralism by 'establishing responsibility, which generates guilt (felt or otherwise), and justifies punishment', Wood asks: 'How helpful is this caution with respect to guilt and responsibility in thinking of "our" situation in an era of global climate change?' Wood goes on to suggest that, while 'the critique of the autonomous subject as the product of [ideological] implants enabling social control has a point', none the less, 'an ideologically reductive repudiation of subjective autonomy could itself just as plausibly be seen as an alibi-generating device for those who genuinely are responsible' (*Deep Time, Dark Times*, p85) – such as the CEOs of fossil-fuel companies and their 'climate change-denying smokescreen minions'. In a Deleuzianised legal system, such CEOs could*

defend themselves against prosecution for wilful negligence by hiring 'a posthumanist lawyer who spoke of shared diffracted, hybrid responsibility', which would 'sound like a scarily inverted reprise of Eichmann's Nuremberg appeal to Kant and "following orders"' (Deep Time, Dark Times, *p86). Wood therefore insists that 'we need the language of accountability to stick around': it 'would be tragic if posthumanism were to provide solace and cover for corporate psychopathy'* (Deep Time, Dark Times, *p86). How would you respond to Wood's question about the usefulness of the post-/in-human critique of free will in relation to climate tipping-points and catastrophe?*

CC: So, we really think there's a possibility that an Exxon CEO in court facing negligence charges might claim to be an ideological puppet? Isn't it more likely – as with Eichmann – that the agency is pushed up the hierarchy: 'I was just doing my job, doing what I was told, obeying the shareholders'? Agency is alive and well. The figure of the evil CEO or the 'one bad apple' cop covers over the collective desire that allows those figures to emerge and survive. There is too little sense of the collective, historical and institutional production of agents. Especially with neoliberalism, the problem is not too little sense of private agency, but too much: everyone can be a CEO if they just try hard enough, and if something goes wrong then we can be moral about this evil individual. The moral imaginary we have is highly privatised and dichotomous. Films like *The Big Short* presented the crisis of 2008 as the doing of a group of elite players, just as *The Green Book* locates racism in the narrow-mindedness of isolated individuals (and then shows fellow feeling to be the true path to justice). Yes, there are ruthless CEOs and flagrant white supremacists, and there are companies that are giant polluters, along with the workers and displaced persons who suffer (and contest) the conditions of exploitation. The system in place to deal with those forms of transgression is not only inadequate; it may well be what allows the game to keep being played. A conviction of Big Pharma over the 'opioid crisis' allows one to think that there is a non-criminal or benevolent form of medical capitalism. If there is a place for a postmodern dissolution of individual agency its role is to look at the collective forces that generate the possibility of an apparent rogue player, and the dream that one day a great moral triumph will occur. All we need is to rid the world of Trump and everything will be OK. Our imaginary Deleuzed-up lawyer is probably going to be saying that putting Eichmann or Madoff on trial is a fragment of what really is a collective problem, and that analysis needs to be focused on the desires that compose such CEOs, the people who aspire to be CEOs, and the people whose pension funds rely on that CEO not being prosecuted; there's a libidinal investment in the types of life that occasionally appear in moral show trials. In short, making private subjects feel guilt and responsibility, and having spectacular cases of public guilt, directs attention away from the more crucial problem of privatisation. Not only are there general political reasons to question beginning analysis from the point of individual agency – when the problem is the composition of

the privatised subject – it is also timely to question the geopolitical injustice of the private subject. Why is everyone in their own car, driving from their own block of land to a workplace of private office spaces, carefully managing their private funds and acquisitions? Sure, Eichmann needed to be found guilty, but the bigger question is how the destructive desire of the Third Reich became so powerful. The Deleuze-Spinoza question turns to how bodies form desires that weaken what they can do. I think John Protevi's work on political physics is really important here: what are the collective conditions that lead to individuals undertaking acts of violence, and how do some social systems enable and *require* such seemingly rogue acts?[8]

8. John Protevi, *Political Physics: Deleuze, Derrida and the Body Politic*, Continuum, 2001.

NF: *In* Death of the Posthuman *you urge us 'to accept that humanity is and must be parasitic … to be a body is to be a consuming body, to be in a relation of destructive consumption with what is effected as other … Climate change would be the condition of human organicism in general' (*Death of the Posthuman, *p178). In* Ecocriticism on the Edge *(2015) Timothy Clark responds: 'Colebrook's version of "Anthropocene Disorder" draws on the denunciatory force of more moralistic kinds of environmental ethic even while denying their plausibility. It gives witness to a sense of alternative norms even in denying them, for in fact it is hard to see the point of writing a book that asserts forthcoming human extinction with an odd kind of intellectual exaltation if the traditions of humanism, idealism, speciesism and so on being shown to be destructive are not being attacked in relation to some implicit sense of preferable norms'.*[9] *In your forthcoming book on post-apocalyptic cinema,* Who Would You Kill to Save the World, *you seem to offer a norm, the necessity to recognise that life in the developed world (the authorial point of view is USA and Australia) continues to depend upon colonial slavery and is thus irredeemable, relentlessly racist and exclusionary in its own attempts to stage and solve the problem of global destruction. Living ethically requires a disidentification from a quotidian 'us' founded on the moral superiority of (explicitly racist) Kantian rationality and the magisterial worldview and American imperialism of Hollywood cinema. This prompts a question: Where does the force of your frequently denunciatory rhetoric come from? Your interview on Victorian culture and the Anthropocene appeals to late nineteenth-century nihilism and 'the idea that there is no intrinsic value to the species' (*Victorian Studies in the Anthropocene, *p19). So, are you channelling Nietzsche's indignation or some other source of anger and despair at humanist pretensions? Are there pitfalls to this rhetoric of reproach?*

9. Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2015, p154.

CC: Are there pitfalls? There are only pitfalls. This means that one can adopt a critical denunciatory tone towards the hijacking of all possible modes of existence by the form of 'the human' and recognise that other modes of existence – those that have resisted hyper-extraction and catastrophic climate change – nevertheless work by transforming climates. The question is one of range: does the mode of existence that defines the human require a global system of climate change, a network of industries, states and institutions that make no other life possible in its crushing relation to biodiversity? In

this case the human is already less than ideal, producing a series of pitfalls precisely in its ideal of a life that is nothing other than maximisation and profit. Alternatively, one might accept pitfalls and focus on how every mode of existence is a negotiation with a volatile planet. Can we accept that the very idea of endless growth, and inclusion of us all in prosperity and futurity, is exactly what has annihilated forms of existence that depend on minimal climate change? The problem with utopian conceptions of capitalist humanism – that we can all have smartphones, laptops and private dwellings – is that it has no space for pitfalls, no sense of a compassion or tolerance towards forms of life that are not blessed with technological maturity, no charity towards forms of life that are neither aspiring towards, nor capable of living with, less. What has come to be definitive of 'the human' both precludes many forms of possible existence and places the burden of its own flourishing upon those who, for that very reason, are regarded as not-yet human. More specifically, to say that there is a necessary parasitism in 'the human' would challenge some notions of dating the Anthropocene from the moment that there is intensive agriculture, as if there would then be a prior moment of pure ecological harmony. The Anthropocene may seem to operate as an indictment of the species, but it does so indiscriminately and suggests that there can be a marker or prior date when something like the human had 'not yet' become geologically significant. The temporality of the Anthropocene seems to mark this point at which 'the human' becomes an inescapable and inevitable condition, rather than opening a space for thinking at smaller scales – not the history of the species, but history as so many opportunities for other futures. To say there is no *intrinsic* value to the species both opens the idea that the form the human takes now – in its massively destructive mode – is one that seems absolutely valuable from within but has no necessary value beyond its own attachments, *while also* allowing for a transvaluation of what appears as the end of the world.

Working within the literary tradition – perhaps suspending normativity – one can observe the ways a moral binary is formed between 'the human' (the world of private property and technological maturity) and a seeming statelessness. There's a notion of literature as to some extent suspending normativity, allowing things to be said that are in quotation marks or not one's own. At a simple critical level, it is possible to note that 'the human' is not the species, but a highly normative and frequently violently exclusive concept. So, one quality of questioning the human is that suspension of attachment: what forms of existence might be possible beyond the assumption that the world, as it is, simply ought to be saved? At a deeper level, though, that suspension is itself normative and tied to a form of 'the human' that is critically distanced from its world. This suspension could take two forms – highly privatised (as in Richard Rorty's notion of irony, where each subject adopts a necessarily public discourse but always with a degree of detachment) – or collective. Regarding its collective form, one can think of broad projects of collective

refusal. Whatever else it might have meant, one of the ways to read Occupy's conception of the 1 per cent was to say that the world that is being held up is not the world of private attachments.

What ties your questions together is the problem of accusing who 'we' are, as if there is some privileged space of critique that would look at the human as an unworthy species. But that is the point of view of the Anthropocene that delimits something like 'the human' within geological time. The Anthropocene not only marks a certain mode of human existence but also relies upon the sense of 'the human'. What looks like a collective concept actually precludes any sense of the different form of non-privatised existence that did not assume the general form of possessive humanity. One of the things I have tried to get at with focusing on parasitism is that climate change is not some unfortunate late accident – 'oh no, we changed the climate!' – but is intrinsic to 'the human'. The human as a category is bound up with globalism, imperialism, capitalism and hyper-consumption; it is a category so large as to preclude forms of solidarity that would be possible in genuinely collective forms of existence. Caring for a space of land, working on networks of support where being in common does not amount to being of one's own kind: existing in other forms of collective that are not those of the generic human family are possible. The question, then, is not one of being inside or outside the Anthropocene – inside or outside the Capitalocene, finding some moment before destruction, finding some pitfall-free space of ecological harmony – but of thinking more critically and differentially about the various ways in which climates are changed. The idea of a pristine space that is untouched by human existence is crucial to a capitalism of climate change; the imagination of a new world that would be available for colonisation cannot be detached from the dream of a pure ecology. It is especially obvious in Australia that colonisation was climate change. The importation of European agriculture followed from an assumption that the land being invaded was untouched. It is better to think of differences of degree in the ways multiple climates are changed, rather than a difference in kind between the Anthropocene and its pure others.

NF: *Much of your discussion of capitalism in* Who Would You Kill to Save the World *focuses on 'hyper-consumption'. The mode of production is largely identified with slavery or its postcolonial effects. What about the capitalist exploitation of waged labour, however imbricated with colonial and indeed modern slavery, that is paying people less than the value of their work and appropriating the surplus for the 1 per cent? Given the consequent extent of global poverty, including in developed countries such as the UK, where a quarter of children now live in poverty, is it more reasonable to identify consumerism as an ideology and hyper-consumption as a practice reserved for those who can afford it?*

CC: Yes!! I think living and working in the USA made me more aware of systemic racism and anti-blackness than I ever had been before moving here.

What also became apparent while living through the 2020 election was the way in which anti-blackness was used to deflect attention away from capitalist violence. It's not possible to reduce racism to capitalism, but it is necessary to see the different ways in which racism enables ongoing wage inequity. James Baldwin was neither the first nor the last to note that 'whiteness' is not a cultural commonality, but what poorly paid workers were given in order to secure a sense of non-exploitation. What Baldwin adds to that is the way in which the cultural emptiness of whiteness creates a dependency on capitalist exploitation. It also creates a form of identity defined through aspirations to hyper-consumption, and this is crucial to global poverty. Even if, as you correctly note, hyper-consumption is enjoyed by the few, it nevertheless becomes the only means of self-formation globally. There's an idea that 'we' all end up with smartphones and laptops and cars, even though that idea is only possible *if* there are forms of wage exploitation that make such aspirations impossible. And those wage differentials are highly racialised, both historically (with capitalism being built on slavery) and structurally – with anti-blackness directing political energy away from wage inequity, and with wage inequity itself being intensified for persons of colour.

NF: *Your analysis of post-apocalyptic cinema in* Who Would You Kill to Save the World*? shows how the humanist narrative of 'us' who must 'save the world' is established on watching most of the world's population die or become inhuman. Those who die are no mere collateral damage; their death is constitutive of the 'we' who saves the world. It is 'the annihilation of them that affirms who we are' (*Who Would You Kill?*). For you, then, if the crisis of climate and ecology provokes a political and ethical imperative, it is not to* save *but to* devastate *the 'we' and its 'world', the world that the humanist subject has never stopped saving. It's a powerful and rightly unsettling confrontation. I'm keen to ask you about some of its political consequences, my questions arising in particular out of your dialogue with Afro-pessimism, especially the work of Frank B. Wilderson. Both you and Wilderson find the most acute articulation of your imperative in Frantz Fanon, as he quotes Aimeé Césaire: 'The only thing in the world that's worth beginning: The End of the World, no less.'*[10] *For Afro-pessimism, the human subject and its world are conditional on a foundational and ever-renewed anti-blackness, where the gratuitous violence meted out to black people renders blackness at once 'a void of historical movement' and the negative condition by which civil society defines and ever renews itself (Red, White and Black, p38). This is 'not simply oppositional,' you write, 'but takes up the very problem of the opposition'. I think you're right. Wilderson aims to show how social democracy, neo-Gramscian hegemony, autonomist multitudes, traditional Marxist understandings of the liberation of labour, and so forth, are premised on structures of subjectivity, analogy and narrative progress that are conditional on and perpetuate anti-blackness. It seems to me that this unflinching interrogation of the 'problem of opposition' is the political aim of your book, too: to undermine not so much the 'we' and 'world' of Hollywood cinema, but its articulation among those who imagine themselves to be the resistance. Would you agree with that reading of your book?*

10. *Who Would You Kill?*; Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms*, Duke University Press, 2010. (Hereafter *Red, White and Black*.)

CC: Yes, and even though my book is in press and not even out, I'd both agree with that reading and then say I've tempered my opinion somewhat. What's compelling in Wilderson is the existential dimension, and this was something I was always drawn to in Baldwin and his criticism of a form of feel-good liberal anti-racism that can set itself apart from a more structural anti-blackness that cannot confront its production of the inhuman. But Baldwin added to that both a historical and political sense of the lures of whiteness, and a sense of the specificity of the USA. I would now say that Wilderson's stark diagnosis of anti-blackness is necessary, but that there are other dimensions of Afro-pessimism that move from negation towards composition.

NF: *Given that you agree with that reading, are there particular political formations, groups or writers who seek to 'save the world,' or in the space of emancipatory politics more broadly, that you would pick out for critique?*

CC: I think I can observe a tendency in my own work to smuggle my own attachments into heaven. I've paid my scholarly dues reading French theory and Romanticism, and for that reason that's where I find a space beyond saving who we are, and finding works that think about other worlds. In that sense I am saving my world, and that is why Wilderson is so alluring; he is vehement about anti-blackness, but he is fully readable within a tradition of theory. Taking Wilderson seriously would mean not giving him the last word on Afro- pessimism – looking at Hortense Spiller's or Lewis Gordon's criticisms of Afro-pessimism and finding other modalities of life not defined by negation. This means reading other canons of work, and even though that does not amount to decolonising the university it goes some way to transforming the presupposed 'we' of the humanities.

NF: *Conversely, are there any political formations, strategies or writers in the realm of environmental, anti-racist and feminist politics that are facing up to Fanon's injunction of starting 'the end of the world'?*

CC: I've already mentioned Crary's *Scorched Earth*. It is an utterly scathing and convincing attack on social media and utopian conceptions of the internet. And it is written in the name of collective politics that are not then returned to the small screen of private consumption. It is possible to find organisations at universities in which students use identity – LBGTQ or Black or Latinx – to form groups of collective concern and support, and often do so in ways that resist the university's corporate capture of identity. The theorisation of Elite Capture by Olúfemi O. Táíwò describes how identity could create forms of solidarity that are not privatised and depoliticised.[11] In terms of starting the end of the world, the 2020 protests in the USA following the killing of George Floyd were often events of refusal. Protestors were criticised for destroying

11. Olúfmi O. Táíwò, *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (And Everything Else)*, Haymarket Books, 2022.

their own communities or being indiscriminately destructive – some statues that were destroyed were supposedly innocent – but that destructiveness is refusal.

NF: *In asking the previous question I'm conscious that, for Wilderson, the vertiginous challenge of Afro-pessimism lies in staying unflinchingly 'in the hold of the ship', its aim being to 'heighten [sensitivity to] social and political contradictions', to foundational anti-blackness, rather than to imagine ways out, routes to redress which are necessarily world-consolidating (*Red, White and Black, *pxi). And your book clearly favours Jordan Peele's* Us *over Kim Stanley Robinson's* Ministry for the Future, *arguing that while N.K. Jemisin and Peele 'will confront the existential violence of those who are not us, Robinson will forge a narrative and point of view that can distance humanity from itself', a humanist narrative of world-saving (*Who Would You Kill?*). I'm very much drawn to your formulation here. But doesn't the actually-existing climate and ecological crisis facing the global south, facing racialised others – as old as modernity, but quickening – confront politics with the necessity also of developing and extending tactics, strategies, solidarities and imaginaries for the end of the world?*

CC: We are speaking about modes of solidarity, though, and this is where I would perhaps tie Wilderson to Kim Stanley Robinson in their use of point of view, where the solidarity is produced from the top down, from a diagnosis of elites and then the marking out of a new relation to the Earth. This is why KSR can imply the value of eco-terrorism because there is a clear enemy that stands in the way of authentic solidarity. There are other modes of solidarity that produce lateral connections desperately trying to forge relations irreducible to those of capital; there are many ways to live off the grid. Things like open access publishing are a start; although, for an academic, it is really only advisable to publish open access after you've secured a job or tenure, because universities privilege overpriced university press monographs over widely read blog posts. What troubles me about Crary's diagnosis of the internet is that the few forms of collective creativity I can think of are all enabled by the internet; so, now I have to think of forms of knowledge transfer and production that might take place elsewhere. In the face of the striking down of Roe v Wade in the USA there are communities of women forming, who will help women cross state lines, who offer information on home pregnancy termination. It's not the underground railroad, but there are always these attempts at solidarity at the margins, and unlike KSR's global solutions they rely on the production of networks that destroy global capture. Jordy Rosenberg's *Confessions of the Fox* is, at both a literary and a political level, a great antidote to KSR. Instead of some magisterial point of view that grasps the whole and imagines its reconfiguration by a network of terror, Rosenberg writes a counter-history of sexuality, where collective desires create local destructive incursions in a police state and recall a time of the commons. It's a novel about refusing ownership – of sexuality, of land, of

history, of the archive; by writing a counter-history the present becomes an event that might not have been.

NF: *You place Deleuze and Guattari as allies in this project of the end of the world – it's a joy to see them back in the fray of abolition and revolution, given tendencies today to read them as radical democrats or stooges of neoliberal capitalism. You do this by registering the rarely noted importance of Fanon to* Anti-Oedipus, *with that book's '*anti-*oedipal sense that "the human" is but one way in which one might think of existence, and one which ought to be placed within a history of colonisation and racialisation' (*Who Would You Kill?*). And you find in Anti-Oedipus also conditions for conceptualising politics against the human and its world, continuing: 'If "we" are the effect of a history of evolving perceptions that can be mapped in relation to technologies, it would be both possible* and desirable *to think of potentialities beyond the human because desire itself transcends and precedes the human.' As for political, aesthetic or narrative* practice, *though, it's not in* Anti-Oedipus *but in Deleuze's work on cinema that you find resources – his writing on the 'time image'.*[12] *Here images are untethered from the co-constitutive relation to the human subject, the sensory-motor apparatus of the human body, to 'enable a thought of time beyond the point of view of the subject', 'perceptions not grounded in a human point of view' (*Who Would You Kill?*).Hence, in this regard, 'cinema is bound up with the end of the world, capable of releasing perceptions from the point of view of the lived' (*Who Would You Kill?*). You make a point of separating this becoming of the image from Deleuze and Guattari's concept of becoming imperceptible, becoming woman, etc., and I know from your earlier work that you're critical of the latter. But I wonder if you find other resources in Deleuze for associating this world-abolition image with modes of socio-material being, and hence means of conceptualising a social terrain of world-abolition broader than cinema? I'm thinking in particular of Deleuze's association of the time image with what he calls third-world cinema-and 1970s black American cinema after Black Power. Here, the notion of a coherent collective subject – always the imposition of the master – is ditched in favour of affirming the condition that the 'people are missing', a condition of enforced minoritisation that is simultaneously the condition of revolutionary politics, minorities that 'should not be united, in order for the problem to change' (*Cinema 2, *p216, p220).*

12. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (trans.), University of Minnesota Press, 1989. (Hereafter *Cinema 2*.)

CC: My short answer to that is that D&G – from within the canon of philosophy and high modernism – provide a different way of reading their own canon that is, as you say, avowedly collectivist. This explains the shift from *Anti-Oedipus* to *A Thousand Plateaus*, where sometimes it is not at all clear whether they are using or mentioning an idea. I do think they owe more to Fanon than appears from their brief quotation of him. In terms of going beyond the cinematic tradition that works so powerfully for Deleuze, I was trying to find forms of politics that did not rely on the formal apparatus of the time image – where aesthetic form is directly revolutionary. This I take to be D&G's somewhat uncritical debt to high modernism and that is reiterated in *What*

is Philosophy?. This is why I find Jordon Peele so compelling. I learned more from watching *Us* than from a lot of political theory, and then beyond cinema – and I assume you don't mean television – there were hints of refusal during the 2020 quarantine orders. My local community has 'buy nothing' groups, where we do all we can to *buy nothing*. There are real opportunities built into some of the worst aspects of pandemic life. Technologies like Zoom enabled reading groups and conferences without air travel, but they also reduced talks and meetings to the pure work component without the added non-productivity of shared workspaces. I have started to try to think about creating ways of reading and sharing that are also refusals of productivity and privatisation. On one hand, it's hard to see how that might work outside the internet and, on the other, the internet is not available to all and does produce a form of watered-down solidarity.

NF: *Marx and Marxism appear not to be a resource for world abolition in your book; in the context of* Ministry for the Future *you identify Marx, along with economics and global history, as 'the master's voice'* (Who Would You Kill?). *I agree that a certain Marxism – the Marxism of social democracy and the historical workers' movement, what Moishe Postone calls 'traditional Marxism' – was an agent of capitalist development, through the ideology of labour and its liberation, the reterritorialisation of class on nation, and identification of socialism with the unfettered forces of production. But much contemporary Marxism has, thankfully, left this behind. It works instead with the Marx of proletarian self-abolition; of the capitalist tendency toward 'surplus population' rendering global proletarian life ever more precarious; of the impersonal domination and value forms of capital. This largely communist Marx is arguably the one that informs* Anti-Oedipus *and* A Thousand Plateaus. *I don't mean to assert the necessity of routing all politics through Marx and Marxism, but they offer a definite route for indexing world abolition to the dynamics of global capitalism and one where the agent (an inadequate word in this context) is the negation of the 'we'. My question is, then: do you find any resources in contemporary Marxism for world abolition?*

CC: I have recently been working on the extent to which Deleuze and D&G are quite Hegelian, insofar as the world is greater for being regained after its dissolution. This is what seems unjustifiable in a lot of Marxism – that after dissolution there will emerge a new world all the greater for having vanquished a capitalism that brought the conditions of social production to the fore. Other forms of Marxism – those focused on worker solidarity, a commonality achieved *not* through production but through often being cast aside from production, a commonality of being surplus – these are becoming increasingly relevant.

NF: *'It's after the end of the world. Don't you know that yet?' is a famous chant from Sun Ra and his Arkestra's 1972 film* Space is the Place.[13] It's After the End of the

13. Sun Ra, *It's After the End of the World*, 1972, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c3alIZ7llxQ

World *is also the title of their 1970 live album. These phrases are normally interpreted as evoking the sense that for those who experienced colonialism and slavery, the post-apocalyptic future that science fiction had already begun to evoke in the mid-to-late twentieth century was already an accomplished fact. There seems to be a strong affinity between these sentiments and some of the core themes in both of your most recent books. Is that right? Would you like to comment?*

CC: Oddly enough, I was brought up on Sun Ra, and then had it beaten out of me when I studied music at university. I have thought a lot about it since then, and how studying music deflected attention away from the force of that work. It's not just that what is feared as the end of the world has already been experienced in 1492 and beyond, but that the way in which the end of the world is imagined *today* is that 'we' are now occupying the conditions of *them*. When Agamben says that 'we' are now all *homo sacer*, he just gives a high theory version of this horror of statelessness. He's right, in that it would be horrific to become yet one more disposable person, and also right to note that including us all in productivity is no cure at all; but not looking at the forms of life that survived the end of the world – like Sun Ra – is a real problem. There are celebrations of statelessness that are focused far less on abandonment and far more on the creation of fragile solidarities.

NF: *If you were to explain the basic arguments of* Death of the Posthuman *to a non-expert in the field, what would you say were your primary aims in writing the book, what exactly were you objecting to in it, and in what ways would you like a reader to think differently after having read it?*

CC: What calls itself posthumanism – humans have no essence and are self-forming, creative beings – is basic humanism. What posthumanism often attacks as the 'liberal bourgeois subject' is actually not liberalism (which is an anti-foundationalism). I struggle to think of philosophers (beyond Jordan Peterson) who argue for the humanism that posthumanism often attacks. I would argue that anti-humanism is something else – where humanism is a distinct technology and archive and that that archive can't just be willed away but is structurally embedded.

NF: *Perhaps this is a version of the same question, with reference to your new book. You write, 'As long as the figure and dialectic of "the human" is one of self-loss, self-enslavement, and self-redemption, the actual bifurcation of the world – the consignment of many humans to non-relational yet wondrous things – will be occluded'. What, then, would a mode of thought look like that genuinely avoided such occlusion? Is the problem with this mode of thought the fact that the human is defined in terms of self-enslavement and self- redemption, rather than being defined in some other terms, or is the problem with it that the only figure of self-enslavement and self-redemption is the human, leaving us in need of some other way of figuring those processes?*

CC: Yes, to the second question. The problem is the dialectic of the human which takes place within the human rather than, say, geopolitically and the different ways that assumptions of who 'we' are get to distribute rights to life.