Slavery and the Trumpocene: It's Not the End of the World

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It was perhaps predictable that commentators would connect President Donald Trump's inventive relation to reality to the postmodernism that taught us to abandon truth in favor of simulation. The more charitable in the press saw Jean Baudrillard's dire warnings of a society of the simulacrum as a prescient frame with which to view a world in which sound bites, images, copies, and fleeting distractions remove all sense of the world.[1] Other reporters would see the claim for 'alternative facts,' the scattergun cry of 'fake news,' and the appeal that there was 'good on both sides' at a neo-Nazi rally as the fallout of decades of questioning truth, reference and the possibility of certainty.[2] Jacques Derrida had, after all, declared that there was no such thing as *the world*; what each one of us lives as 'the world,' is always irreducibly our world, while the world of other persons can only be imagined as always already gone, lost, never capable of retrieval.[3] Bruno Latour, far more recently but perhaps with greater impact beyond the world of metaphysics, wrote a manifesto for compositionism: yes, there *is* a world, and to fall into doubt and nihilism is to hold the notion of world to far too high a standard.[4] For Latour, as long as we think of the world as that which is independent of or knowledge of it, we maintain the paralysis of the 'modern divorce.' This world we share is *composed,* and could be otherwise. What is made can be unmade. The late twentieth century saw a proliferation of theories of possible worlds, multiple worlds, composed worlds, singular worlds, and ultimately culminated in the twenty-first century vogue for *the end of the world.* What relation might we chart between the end of the world in the theoretical sense

The Oxford Literary Review 41.1 (2019): 40–50
DOI: 10.3366/olr.2019.0264

www.euppublishing.com/olr

(where we abandon the conception of an objective world to which language and discourse might be referred), and the end of the world in the ecological sense, where we fear the actual destruction of everything that has composed our reality? Here are some possible answers:

1. We can blame postmodernism and the questioning of all reality for our current predicament of climate-change skepticism. Decades of theory that were concerned only with texts mirrored, if not intensified, a mode of living that paid little heed to the planet.
2. Postmodernism is exactly what we need at the end of the world, as we stare at the sixth mass extinction event. Inhuman perspectives capable of thinking times and scales beyond human parochialism might forge new ethical and political possibilities. Rather than an appeal to truth, reality and the unavoidable facts of the matter, now is the time to work with the non-human forces that make up our world.
3. Neither blaming postmodernism for suspending reality, nor hailing postmodernism as a way of re-composing reality, we can think about a more radical extinction that is *truly the end of the world.* Here, I would suggest that we can, and should, see the discourse of fake news, alternative facts and 'good on both sides,' as unwittingly disclosing that as long as we hold on to the world we cannot face up to the world's imbrication with extinction. It is this third possibility that I will pursue in what follows. Everything that has come to be known and valued as *the world*—or what we often refer to as 'social fabric,' 'horizon of meaning,' 'humanity,' and 'civilization' has relied upon a strict moral opposition between extinction and the end of the world.

The End of the World

There are many ways in which one might interpret the imperative to make America great again. One would be simply to mark it as a rhetorical strategy: any appeal to a lost greatness allows a political order to offer some promise of a world other than the present. It gives political hope some (however mythic) imagined object. Another way to read the imperative is to connect it to a broader occlusion of the future and an incapacity to imagine a mode of existence that would not be

worldly, or rich in world. That is, if we think about Martin Heidegger's spectrum where animals are poor in world, stones have no world, and *Dasein* lives as being-towards-the-world[5] then one might think of modern Western existence as bound up with a highly normative conception of existence in which one is nothing more than an ongoing series of decisions, projects and potentialities, with one's milieu and others defined in terms of how one lives towards one's own end; the end of the world would always be the end of one's own world. If this is so then any genuine reckoning with the planetary condition we have framed for ourselves would force us to confront the end of the world and the end of *Dasein.* One possibility would be to imagine that there might be a form of life that lived with (rather than narrated its way out of) the two-fold sense of extinction (human-caused extinction of species and modes of life, and the possibility of the extinction of the human). There might be a mode of human existence no longer defined through global self-projection, and there might be a profound transformation of the prima facie value we place upon what we have come to call life.

Here, though, is where we need to look back to the ways in which the present and its constitutive occlusion of the future are essentially bound up with fake news, alternative facts, and a faux relativism: as long as one remains within the world politics will take place within the polity, and within already established rules and limits of engagement. The condition for the possibility of a world of fake news and alternative facts is the modern conception of the world and politics as a public sphere of ongoing legitimation. To look at neo-Nazism and contemplate 'good on both sides' is not radical relativism; it merely inhabits a bourgeois comportment of good and bad, and weighs out proportions. What is not considered is a genuinely relativist contemplation that would question whether what we assume to be intrinsically worthy about the world might be otherwise. More importantly, there is no profound interrogation of the history and trajectory of techno-science and the ways in which we have imagined the end of the world as the negation of all the regimes of truth and story-telling that mapped and plundered the planet in the very specific and contingent history that we now appear to be unable to think beyond. In this respect it is important to link the fetish for the end of the world, with the era of fake news, and with the historical myopia that holds them together. We can only

imagine the present as *the world,* as what must be saved at all costs, if we set aside the role this historical trajectory has played in extinction, both in its ongoing intensification and its erasure. 'Make America Great Again': there is something revealing, if not honest, in positing greatness as past, and as requiring some turning back of the clock. What is deemed to be important is *not* something hitherto unimaginable, but saving or retrieving *the world as we know it.* This is why 'end of the world' mania is an insistent refusal to think of extinction both in terms of the tragedies that have composed the present and in terms of the possible scenarios that make up any number of futures.

More often than not 'the end of the world' is a lament that has little or nothing to do with extinction and is, if anything, a symptom of the unthinkable nature of extinction. As any number of post-apocalyptic novels, television series and movies testify, what we imagine as the 'end of the world' is not the sixth mass extinction; nor is it the reprise and intensification of the genocidal practices of what has come to call itself the world. Rather, it is either a post-apocalypse in which the urban conditions of Western hyper-consumption have vanished and we are reduced to mere life, *or* it is a horrifying return to stateless nomadism, such that 'we' are now living in conditions that we simply cannot call a world. It might appear odd that the twenty-first century's panic and mourning regarding the end of the world has rarely touched upon the problem of extinction. The one exception might be Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* where the 'end of the world' for humans is set in a landscape that appears to harbor no non-human life. Yet, the absence of non-human life in *The Road* is not part of an extinction narrative. *The Road*'s solely human wasteland is an intensification—however critical—of the sense in which the world, at its most extreme and at its end—is a human world that can only imagine its own decay as the end of life as such. Narratives about the end of the world create a historical imaginary in which extinction is unthinkable. This is not simply because the 'end of the world' is usually the end of urban affluence and hyper-consumption, with resource depletion rather than extinction figuring as the horror-factor of climate change. It is also because *the* world that we are already mourning in end of the word narratives was only possible because it ended so many worlds. To imagine the end of the world—without buying back into one of the many salvation narratives that characterize post-apocalyptic

culture—would ultimately entail imagining the end of the blindness to extinction.

This would be so in two senses. First, even though extinctions, and mass extinctions precede what has come to be known as the Anthropocene, the very conditions that we mourn at the end of the world (such as an imminent end to hyper-consumption) are the cause of accelerated extinctions rates. Second, and more importantly, there is a marked narrative and genre difference between the end of *the* world and the end of *a* world. James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), or any number of historical novels and elegies that mourn the end of indigenous peoples and peasant communities, and even narratives of near genocide, are about the loss of *a* world. However mournful and tragic we find narratives such as Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's Ark* (1982) or Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976), the near-genocide of a people, or the complete destruction of a people's world, occurs within a different narrative frame from the post-apocalyptic end of *the world*. Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* is not 'The Last European Man' It is invariably the loss of the global north that is figured in end of the world disaster epics. *This world that is the world* is the world of a narrating and global 'we' who can look upon the loss of other's worlds. Extinction, genocide, erasure of a way of life: when these occur elsewhere they are occasions for lament. But when the loss is contemplated of the humanity that forged itself as *the world* (by narrating and making sense of its others) *that amounts to the end of the world.* As long as we privilege 'world' or a horizon of sense and possibility then what we fear is the loss of meaning and connectedness, and *not* the loss of an existence other than our own.

Here, then, rather than attributing the destruction of truth and the planet to postmodernism, and rather than thinking that we might deploy that same postmodernism to once again find the life and connectedness that Cartesian man and enlightenment truth had abandoned, I would suggest that we step on the slippery slope of relativism, and that we *truly* live without any of the moorings that have given us our world. The only way we can think about extinction (both past, present and future extinctions) is to end the world. In some ways this has already happened: despite the Occupy movements of a decade ago what the twenty-first century is witnessing globally is a version of one of the final moments in Theodor Dreiser's *Sister Carrie.* Faced

with the end we appear to have two choices: either eke out an existence by parsing out the few remaining morsels we can afford, *or* party as though it's the final hour. We appear to have chosen the latter path*:* grab the last dollars we have, and live large. Those who see themselves as deserving of the world, as though they were *the world,* are robbing the present and future in the manner akin to the final scenes of Visconti's *The Damned*. Extinction, though, offers a way out of this either/or: neither saving the world, nor partying like it's 1999, we might embrace what has been dismissed as postmodern nihilism. Once you question truth, the human, the enlightenment and the veracity of the news, *there is nothing left.*

There is No Limit

As Naomi Klein (2014) suggested with the notion that 'this changes everything,' climate change would seem to demand a new mode of politics as a matter of urgency.[6] Once the survival of the whole is at stake, then the system that composes the whole—capitalism—would have to confront and overcome its limits. Unfortunately, 'this'—climate change—hasn't changed everything, and the political issue to end all issues (the Anthropocene) has been trumped. Prior to the twenty-first century we might have set aside all other tragedies, and consoled ourselves that 'it's not the end of the world.' Climate change, as Klein's 'this changes everything' suggests, *is the end of the world.* What the twenty-first century has taught us is that the end of the world can be trumped. Not only are we entering the sixth mass extinction, but we are doing so in a way that intensifies the barbarism that got us here.

The Trumpocene has three inter-related senses. First, it trumps the Anthropocene by way of erasure. Climate change becomes a scary hoax, a form of fake news, to the point where talking about climate change reinforces the sense of a liberal elite speaking indulgently of ecological justice when real people who are really suffering need the real jobs that come from industry, coal and overall productivity. Second, for those of us who were sympathetic to Klein's claim that questions of the climate were bound up with social justice, and that nothing could be more urgent than *this* question, suddenly we are drawn back to political minimalism. Let's accept that it's game over, that it's the end of the world, *or*—and this is related—that focusing on the seeming evils of Trump is a distraction from the white neo-liberal elites who

occupy all aspects of the system, and that retrieving the EPA and the Paris climate accord is an alibi, a comforting lure that covers over a broader deep state white supremacy that Trump conveniently seems to isolate from the seemingly innocent rest. Even if we accept this version of 'no alternative,' could we not still resist heightening the brutality, injustice, misery and vindictiveness of the end times? The problem of global justice in this sense has been trumped by the urgency of minimal decency, of demanding some water for Puerto Rico even if that doesn't really change anything. Finally, and this is the sense of the Trumpocene I want to pursue here: rather than panic and demand survival because it's the end of the world, we might think that the end of the world, fake news, alternative facts and weak relativism are precluding us from contemplating extinction, both the thousands of extinctions upon which the world is built, and extinction to come.

There would seem to be two distinct timelines: a past in which humans were barbarically divided between plunderers/consumers and the enslaved, and a future in which—because of that hyper-consuming past—we are all implicated. The past of slavery and the future of the Anthropocene might be related but there would seem to be a crucial distinction: slavery is delimited, suffered by some humans for the sake of some other humans, while the Anthropocene encompasses us all. Slavery is also in the past and can, or should, be left behind. The Anthropocene by contrast knows no limit; occurring at a geological rather than human/historical level it requires us all to think and act differently. Thinking about slavery today would *appear* to be in part symbolic (having to do with what we choose to celebrate from our past) and in part reparative insofar as the legacy of slavery is still played out in racism, inequalities and the apparent right to kill young, unarmed black men with impunity. Such an apparent sense of limit and temporality, I would argue, needs to be reversed: slavery is the horizon in which the Anthropocene needs to be considered. Doing so, in turn, alters the temporality of extinction: rather than panicking about an end that may start to affect *us,* we should pay heed to the wreckage of extinction from which the 'we' of the Anthropocene unfolded. The Anthropocene is, in its all-inclusiveness, utterly parochial. If there is anything indelible about the Anthropocene it resides in the negating force of the figure of Anthropos who, in recognizing the way his past destroys *his* future, proclaims that there is no other possible temporality.

There is a date that I would like to mark as one of the many opportunities to abandon thinking about the end of the world, and to begin to think about extinction. August 2017: who would have thought that slavery would once again be back in the news? After a series of white supremacist marches in the U.S. where protesters objected to the removal of statues celebrating confederate figures (such as Robert E. Lee), two historical points were made. First, president Donald Trump used the slippery slope argument to ask where the destruction of 'culture' would end.[7] George Washington and Thomas Jefferson owned slaves: should they also no longer be celebrated? Soon after, Fox News's Tucker Carlson also engaged in historical argument, this time in the form of an apparent syllogism. As he was speaking on 'Tucker Carlson Tonight,' the right-hand side of the screen listed four bullet points: 'Slavery is Evil,' 'Until 150 yrs ago Slavery was Rule,' 'Plato, Muhammed, Aztecs All Owned Slaves,' and 'Slaveholding Common Among North American Indians.'[8] Like the president, Carlson's rhetorical tactic was to suggest that if we question or reject *some* aspects of our past then we may end up erasing our entire history. Noble anti-white-supremacists in the media were quick to make two points: Washington and Jefferson may have owned slaves but were nevertheless law-abiding citizens who did not rebel against abolition.[9] Further, slave-owning may have been widespread, but it was in the past, and that past is something that needs to be left behind rather than celebrated. What I want to question is whether marking a distinction between good and bad slave owners, and between a guilty past and a progressive present does not preclude the thought of a history that would refuse the benevolent slave owner (and that would extinguish his legacy).

Rather than think of the Anthropocene as a geological event in the present that generates a common (if tragic) future, and rather than think of slavery as a past event that leaves a trace or injury, it is perhaps better to get onto the slippery slope, or—to quote Carlson - accept that 'There is literally no limit when you start thinking like this.' If there is *no limit* then rather than see slavery as an event within the Anthropocene, such that we might think of some statues as depicting a destructive side of humanity that we would rather set aside, and others that are noble reminders of a generally enlightened and benevolent history, slavery would bear an all-pervasive inscriptive

force. This would amount to a reversal of the Anthropocene's elevation of geological inscription as the ultimate scale, *and* a reversal of the relation between extinction and the end of the world. It may only be by ending the world that we might confront the force of extinction.

If one accepts the Anthropocene as the 'agent' of a negative universal history, then one accepts that the present re-inscribes the past.[10] Now that we can see the ways the earth has been altered as a living system it becomes possible to see a single (now threatened and implicated) humanity as that which will have emerged from a series of technological, industrial, colonial, and agricultural events. Even if those who were enslaved, indentured, colonized, or displaced were not the agents of beneficiaries of what called itself 'humanity,' there is now 'a' humanity that has emerged from the dispersed events of history; the possibility of our collective non-being generates a universal humanity, *and* a twenty-first century collective cogito: we, as a species, are facing the end of the world, and therefore *must survive,* as a species. Even if there were no such original humanity who coursed through history but rather a series of genocides, enslavements, annihilations and bifurcations, it is the possibility of the end of the world that draws 'anthropos' together. Such a narrative, for all its inclusiveness, nevertheless knows a limit. More accurately, it is *because* of its inclusiveness that there must be a limit. The 'we' who emerges from that story of the Anthropocene is now faced with a common future, and will have to make a decision regarding survival. Will 'we' continue to think of our world as *the* world, and will 'we' continue to allow extinction (of other species and worlds) to be nothing more than collateral damage for the sake of the world? Will we continue to think that slavery and the foundation of anti-blackness is in the past and forms *part* of our history, or will we accept that there is no limit, and that once you destroy the statue of Robert E. Lee you are on a slippery slope that will entail widespread destruction? How much of that past do we want to save, or are we able to save? How much less do we need to hold onto if we are going to have a future? How many statues and name changes do we need to accept before we can move on? Within the humanities, should we stop reading and teaching Heidegger, Celine, Pound and de Man, but leave Plato, Aristotle and Sartre? More concretely, should we give up privately-owned motor vehicles and stop consuming intensively grazed animals, but keep

using computers and watching television? If the Anthropocene is our inscriptive frame, then the alteration of the earth as a living system becomes a way of (negatively) situating the events of the human species in the lead up to the (now unified) present. We then have to ask, united in a tragedy of the commons, what must be done. But there is another way to think of the commons and it is prompted by shifting narrative energy away from the end of the world (and 'we the people') towards extinction and the destructions that have, do, and will occur in the holding up of the world: the commons would not be the world, but that which has already been occluded by the world (what Harney and Moten refer to as the 'undercommons')[11].

If, by contrast, slavery, the middle passage, pedagogies of the crossing,[12] and the undercommons become all-pervasive inscriptive forces there would be no limit, and there would be no (negative) universality. Let's take seriously the slave-owning and slave-implicated stain of all 'we' hold dear. Plato, Washington, Jefferson, all the thinkers of the enlightenment (including abolitionists), and the current cosmopolitan gaze that now laments that same history and seeks to unify and move on: all would rely upon the distributions of force and value of slavery. What we call the Anthropocene would have been one of slavery's events: the capture and harnessing of human bodies enabled the agricultures, industries, invasions, technologies and philosophies that gave birth to the man who came to recognize himself as a geological agent. *There is no limit.* Man can ask how he (or 'we') will build a future. Alternatively, everything that was negated or *held* by this same man might not care at all for that quite particular universal future and might open to the thought of extinction: not an extinction that unifies a species under threat, but an extinction of everything that is bound up with *the world*.

Notes

[1] https://newrepublic.com/article/143730/americas-first-postmodern-president

[2] http://www.dailyprincetonian.com/article/2017/02/postmodern-trump

[3] Michael Naas, *The End of the World and Other Teachable Moments: Jacques Derrida's Final Seminar* (New York, Fordham University Press, 2015).

[4] Bruno Latour, 'An Attempt at a "Compositionist Manifesto"', *New Literary History* (2010), 41: 471–90.

[5] Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude.* Trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1995), 350.

[6] Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism Vs The Climate* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 2014).

[7] http://www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2017/08/15/donald-trump-jefferson-washington-slaves-sot.cnn

[8] http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2017/08/16/tucker-carlson-if-want-to-erase-past-must-prepare-for-consequences.html#

[9] https://www.mediaite.com/tv/msnbcs-ari-melber-mocks-tucker-carlson-for-ridiculous-observation-on-slavery/

[10] Dispesh Chakrabarty, 'The Climate of History: Four Theses', *Critical Inquiry* 35:2 (Winter 2009), 197–222.

[11] Stefano Harvey and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013).

[12] Annette Henry, "'There's salt—water in our blood": the "Middle Passage" epistemology of two Black mothers regarding the spiritual education of their daughters,' *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 19:3 (2006), 329–45.