

“We don’t seem to live on the same planet” —A Fictional Planetarium

Bruno Latour

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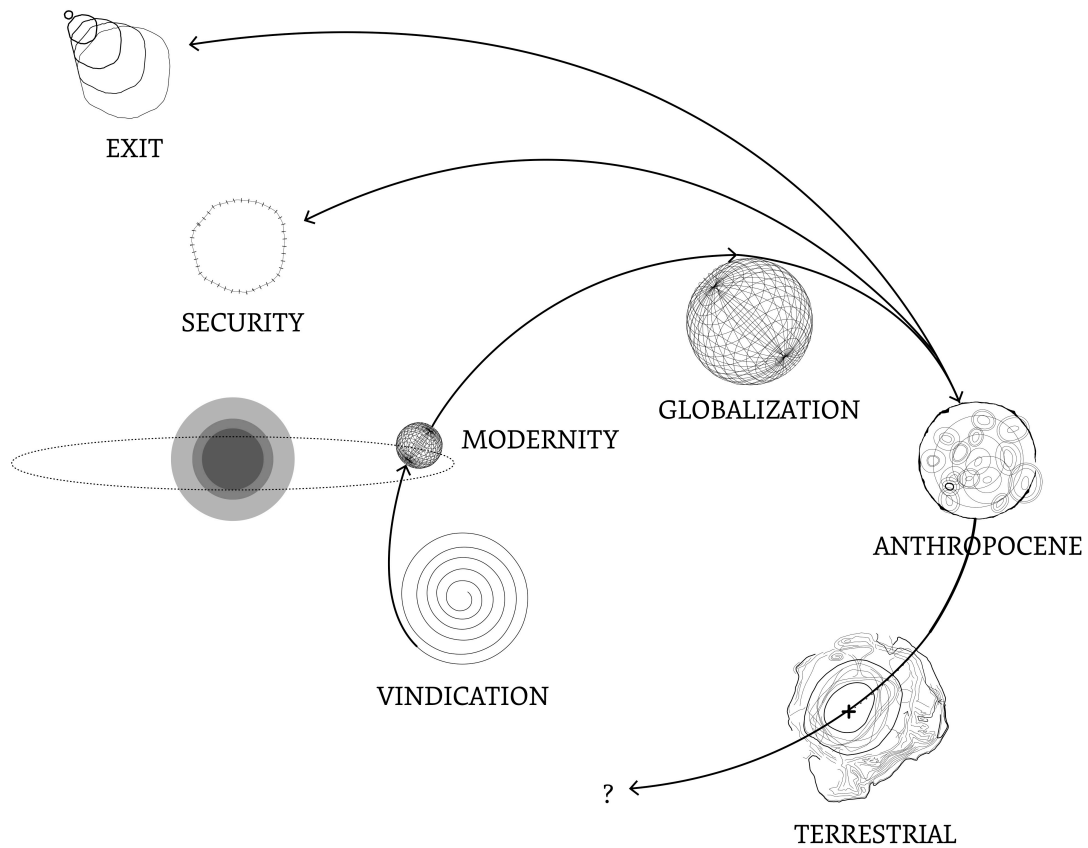


Fig. BL1. Diagram of the spatial configuration of the seven imaginary planets proposed by Bruno Latour, drawing by Alexandra Arènes, 2018

Architects and designers are facing a new problem when they aspire to build for a habitable planet.¹ They have to answer a new question, because what used to be a poor joke—“My dear fellow, you seem to live on another planet”—has become literal—“Yes, we do intend to live on a different planet!” In the “old days” when political scientists talked about geopolitics, they meant different nations with opposing interests waging wars on the same material and geographic stage. Today, geopolitics is also concerned with wars over the definition of the stage itself. A conflict will be called, from now on, “of planetary relevance” not because it has the planet for a stage, but because it is about *which planet* you are claiming to inhabit and defend.

I am starting from the premise that what I have called the New Climatic Regime organizes all political affiliations.² The climate question is not one aspect of politics among others, but that which defines the political order from beginning to end, forcing all of us to redefine the older questions of social justice along with those of identity, subsistence, and attachment to place. In recent years we have shifted from questions of ecology—nature remaining outside the social order—to questions of existential subsistence on threatened territories. Nature is no longer outside us but under our feet, and it shakes the ground. Just as at the beginning of modern political philosophy, in the time of Thomas Hobbes, we are dealing with humans not unified but divided by nature to the point that they are engaged in civil wars as violent as the religious wars of the past, and forced to look for peace by altogether reinventing the social order.³ Climate mutation means that the question of the land on which we all stand has come back into focus, hence the general political disorientation, especially for the left, which did not expect to have to talk again of “people” and “soil”—questions mostly abandoned to the right.

Since it is impossible to tackle this sort of conflict head on, I will turn to fiction and take you on a brief tour of a planetarium of my invention. Whereas old planetary influences on our horoscopes have been thrown into doubt for quite some time, there is no question that the gravitational pulls of my seven hypothetical planets have an immense influence on the way you feel, the way you behave, and especially the way you predict your destiny. So, let’s visit a fictional astrology verging on serious geopolitics!

The principle that will lead me in this reckoning is the link between the territory necessary for our subsistence and the territory that we recognize—legally, affectively—as our own and thus as the source of our freedom and autonomy.⁴ In

what follows, a territory is considered not as a chunk of space but as all the entities, no matter how remote, that allow a particular agent to subsist. I will start from the assumption that the present disorientation is due to the fabulous increase in the lack of fit between the two sets of constraints: we inhabit as citizens a land that is not the one we could subsist on, hence the increased feeling of homelessness, a feeling that is transforming the former ecological questions into a new set of more urgent and more tragic political struggles. People everywhere are again in need of land, a situation that I call, for this reason, the new “wicked universality.”

1

The first planet I will show shining in the planetarium is what could be called the planet GLOBALIZATION, that is, the sphere imagined by the recent attempts at modernizing the earth. Although it has properties drawn from cartography, geology, and some geography, it is a sphere of ideas, since it implies that everyone on earth could develop according to the American way of life, and forever, without any limit. It is the globalization that was pursued—as a positive utopian or dystopian ideal—until the end of the twentieth century, and that still has some attraction.

None of the nation states composing GLOBALIZATION’s map occupies only the official space inside its borders and frontiers. China, Europe, the United States—all occupy other territories in many ways, either forcibly or through the partially hidden means of “ghost acreage,” to use Kenneth Pomeranz’s powerful expression.⁵ This is what Pierre Charbonnier calls the “ubiquity of the moderns” to underline that there is no correspondence whatsoever between the shape of nation states in the legal sense and the widely distributed sources of the wealth its citizens benefit from.⁶ Belonging to a territory on such a planet is a sure way of being misled and lost: your wealth, or your misery, comes from places that are invisible on the administrative map of your own land.

So, GLOBALIZATION is simultaneously that toward which the “whole world” is supposed to have progressed and a totally skewed utopian domain where time and space have been colonized to the point of rendering it uninhabitable and paralyzing any reaction to the threat everyone clearly sees coming. The lack of agreement between the two meanings of *territory* is well illustrated by the constantly receding date of Earth Overshoot Day, which measures the moment in any given year when humans have eaten up their natural capital and begin accumulating debt against the earth (in 2018 in France, the date is May 5; in the United States, March 15).⁷ The paradox is thus that the Promised Land for everything universal ends up in a cramped space, with no people able to truly say, “This is where I belong, and it is from

here that I draw my subsistence and where I find the source of my liberties.” The land of free people is made up of people who are paralyzed.

2

For the last forty years, this planet GLOBALIZATION has felt the increasing gravitational pull of another planet, which could be named ANTHROPOCENE. It is different from the former precisely because it began to *rematerialize* all the elements that had been left aside, a bit too quickly, by those who had embarked on the great progressive movement toward globalization. All that was externalized by that one planet is internalized in this one. Planet ANTHROPOCENE is planet GLOBALIZATION, but where the earth is reacting to human enterprises⁸—no longer a frame, or a stage, but a powerful actor with its own agency and its own tempo, and at a scale that is comparable in size and weight to that of the human technosphere. Its presence is captured by expressions such as *Earth system*, or *Gaia*, or the *Anthropocene*, or the *Great Acceleration*, or the *tipping point*, or *Earth’s boundaries*—a whole vocabulary that has transformed what was to have been a theater stage that could be altered by human ingenuity into a player intervening as a third party in every human activity. The key point is that it is not nature as such, whose immensity, indifference, aloofness, importance, and all-encompassing substance have always been celebrated, but an agent with its own force and power that requests to be integrated, in some way, into the political domain. Facing Gaia is altogether a different adventure than facing nature.

How to define planet ANTHROPOCENE with the little reckoning principle that detects the overlap of legal and real territory? On the face of it, it should be the great solution to the radical homelessness suffered on planet GLOBALIZATION: the human, now as big as the earth, is easily *superimposed* on a planetary system of comparable size, in such a way that all questions of freedom are also questions of subsistence. You depend on the whole planet? Well, the whole planet is reacting to your actions. And yet, there is no such overlap, for reasons Dipesh Chakrabarty has tried to disentangle since his first paper on “Four Theses.”⁹

A good locus from which to see why this is so is to consider the great “Anthropocene quarrel.” As soon as the term *Anthropocene* was used in geology, climatology, biochemistry, and stratigraphy by natural scientists, it was immediately criticized by social scientists for its insensitivity to the complex history of human societies.¹⁰ There was indeed a rematerialization of conditions for subsistence, and a welcome one at that, but the *anthropos* of the Anthropocene is too much of an abstraction to provide a real superposition of the legal and social questions of

freedom and autonomy on the earthly conditions of subsistence. Although it was better to live in the ANTHROPOCENE than suspended in midair as in GLOBALIZATION—with an Earth Offshoot Day somewhere in March or May—the point is that geologists and biochemists are not offering any view of an earth that citizens and activists could recognize as their home.¹¹ Although the principles of homelessness were tackled—in the Anthropocene there is a material earth under our feet—people still had no abode where they could express their living conditions in terms compatible with those of social justice. Humans are plugged in as a box in the models developed by Earth system science at the Potsdam Institute or in the reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a box just like those for soil, vegetation, or ocean currents. In spite of Gaia’s pull, this planet could be felt as another attempt at *naturalizing* social life, that is, as the end of the *human* world.

3

That planet ANTHROPOCENE was seen as, really, the end of human domination can be shown by looking at two other, darker bodies that are coming frighteningly close to it, planets whose gravitational fields could engulf all the others, as in a replay of Lars von Trier’s *Melancholia*. The first of the two dark planets to consider is what could be called planet EXIT.

Considering that it is barely thinkable to imagine any harmony between the resources necessary for subsistence and the unfettered exercise of freedom, some have concluded that the two main assumptions of modernism should be abandoned together: freedom is for the few, not for the many; breaking from the limits of nature is the essential destiny of those few only. Hence the name EXIT: let’s forget about the universality of the modernist dream still entertained by people on planet GLOBALIZATION, and let’s *accelerate* the break away from earthly conditions. If we wanted a simile of such a liftoff, Elon Musk’s red Tesla car sent hurtling into space would be a good one. Although it superficially resembles the modernist ideal of expanding in space ad infinitum, it is much more sinister, as Musk himself recognized when he said of his enterprise, “It’s silly and fun.”¹² To my ears, with what was supposed to be a joke, he broke any continuity with the former ideals of progress for all. This is indeed another planet.

On planet EXIT, the plan is that it will soon be possible to download our mortal bodies into a mix of robots, DNA, clouds, and AI, thereby situated as far as possible from the humble and limited earth. Technology is transcendence. It needs no earth except as a provisional platform before new adventures begin. On to Mars! In case those accelerations evaporate as so much hype—if, for instance, the terraforming of

Mars takes more time than anticipated—it might be wise to buy a gated community or underground bunker somewhere, preferably in New Zealand, a real, material, well-protected terroir down on old, already-terraformed earth.¹³ Wherever the gated community ends up being situated, the great difference between the planets GLOBALIZATION and EXIT is that there is no longer any project for the billions of humans who are explicitly now *left behind* or, to use a cruel but frank adjective, have become *supernumerary*. Civilization, in the narrow sense of a project invented in the eighteenth century, is now abandoned for good.

4

The simple question becomes: But where will all those supernumerary masses go, all those left behind? There is no difficulty in finding where they are heading. It has been in the news every morning, especially after Election Day. When it is not in Brazil, it is in Hungary; when not in Hungary, in Germany, or England, or France, or Italy. You name it. Here there is another dark planet, let's call it SECURITY, that is today the biggest planet of all, the one that overshadows, it seems, all the others. Where do the millions of people go? In one direction and one only: wherever they would like, so long as they remain behind walls, and thereby retain at least one element of the former civilizing project—protection and identity.

Although troubling for the inhabitants of the other worlds, the migration is perfectly reasonable. If prosperity and freedom are gone and it is impossible, as scientists insist, to bring prosperity and earthly conditions together, then let's at least have an identity, a sense of belonging. Does it solve the problem of the superposition between subsistence, territory, and freedom? Maybe not, but the promises of planet GLOBALIZATION have been left aside anyway, modernization is stuck, inequalities are growing every day, and, to top it all off, we have been betrayed by those, the inhabitants of EXIT, who are fleeing toward Mars without us—Mars or New Zealand, that is. They don't even pretend to work for our benefit: Noah's Ark is for them, not for us. They have abandoned us; we abandon them.

Planet SECURITY's attraction appears to be overwhelming. Almost everybody dreams of fleeing inside a neo-national, neo-local bounded space, even though it might mean abandoning any pretense at maintaining the civilizing project of the recent past. On planet GLOBALIZATION there was, remember, a fundamental disconnect between the legal borders of states and the real territory they had to command in order to subsist, but their horizon remained global and their ideal was still that of coordination and shared sovereignty. Those states were in an awkward position, to be sure, cantilevered over an abyss, but they had at least the project of

coping with it—the best example of such intention being the hapless but still admirable effort of the climate conferences, those famous COPs (Conferences of the Parties) culminating in the Paris Agreement in December 2015.¹⁴ But on planet SECURITY—as well as on planet EXIT—there is no need for such a horizon, as we know from the decision of the present administration to withdraw from the Paris Agreement. Climate denial is consubstantial to their projects.

While on EXIT it is technology that is supposed to be the saving hand of God, on SECURITY there is not even that hope. Hope is no longer a possibility. You can't even say "it's silly and fun." Above all other attitudes, it is rage and despair that are valued most. Which makes sense, since homelessness is pushed to its most extreme expression: the desperate effort to possess an identity but without any realistic material ground to settle on and provide a soil. The most tragic aspect of this planet is that, in spite of its appeal to the forces of *blut und boden*, its vision of the soil is even more abstract and idealized than that of planet GLOBALIZATION. Populists are people, yes, but without a real land under their feet.

5

We should introduce here planet MODERNITY, even though its gravitational pull has been decreasing and might be hard to feel any longer. For Europeans, at least, it could be called planet GALILEO or DESCARTES to mark more clearly a change in the very material with which the body of the planet was understood to be made, and a new position in relation to the sun—a type of "worlding" that was not so detectable before what is called, in quotation marks, the "Age of Discovery" or, again with scare quotes, the "Scientific Revolution" (a fabulous expansion of the world but without any similar expansion of the feeling of identity). Hence we have the strange creation of "otherness" that has been coevolving with the sentiment of "modernity," and the predicament of those who have never been moderns but who have transformed the others into "Others."

You could object that this is then exactly the same planet as GLOBALIZATION, with its growing overhang between the legal and the lived territory. But this would be to confuse the earth of *before* and *after* the main event, that is, the introduction of carbon—"coal and colonies," to use another of Pomeranz's expressions. What is becoming clearer and clearer, viewed from the point of view of planet ANTHROPOCENE, is that there is not much continuity between the first and the second modernizing project—let's say the period from the sixteenth through eighteenth century, with its coal, and the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with coal and oil. Economics was still an art of dealing with prudence and limits, and not

yet with what could render as invisible the conditions of subsistence and infinitize profit. To use Timothy Mitchell's thesis, they could not render invisible all links to earthly conditions.¹⁵ On the contrary, states entrenched more and more the notions of development and civilization within a newly material and complex world that they delighted in figuring out through thousands of representations. It is carbon that has transformed what was a bit of chance—a lucky boon—into a destiny. Without carbon, Europe's expansion was an intrusion complicating the ways of life of all sorts of other empires and agents, as postcolonial studies have so elegantly shown. With carbon (and all that is associated with its extraction), it became, as Eric Voegelin has said, "an apocalypse of civilization."¹⁶

6

Although MODERNITY seems a slightly weakened, outdated, backward version of the planet GLOBALIZATION, the same cannot be said about what I have called, in my book *Down to Earth* (2018), the TERRESTRIAL. The planet TERRESTRIAL is at once that toward which it seems all progressive political movements are heading, and yet that which is terribly difficult to define. Paradoxically, the main attractor does not seem to be so attractive!

And yet, using the same principle I have used to describe the other planets, it seems to offer, finally, a solution to the homelessness detected as the source of our general disorientation: it overlays the strange shape of territories (remember that a territory of any living form is defined as that which allows this life form to subsist) atop territory understood as that which free agents can decide *on their own*. If Anna Tsing's book on how to study ecological crisis takes on more and more importance, it is because it is probably the first to show in enough detail how such a superposition is possible, even though her "mushroom at the end of the world" fits none of the earlier categories of nation states, sovereignty, capitalism, class struggle, and so on.¹⁷

Why would TERRESTRIAL be different, then, from the planet ANTHROPOCENE, whose presence and influence have been growing since the 1960s? Precisely because it might offer a solution to the great Anthropocene quarrel mentioned earlier. You cannot insert into politics just any sort of natural entity without transforming the search for freedom and autonomy into the simple domination of necessity and heteronomy. So, to tell humans that they behave just like a geological force, as the Working Group of the Anthropocene does regularly and beautifully, even though it is technically true—the scales are correct, the influence indisputable, the effects devastating¹⁸—is not something that any political agent can

hear without ceasing to be a human political agent. In becoming geology, Anthropocentric humans have become as immobile as pillars of salt.

But where did we learn that freedom was reserved for human life forms? This is where the discovery of Gaia comes in. Gaia is not Earth system science. It is a much more interesting and astute sort of being.¹⁹ I have no room here to develop the idea fully, but the key element is the realization that what all life forms have in common is the *making up of their own laws*. They don't obey rules made elsewhere. The crucial discovery is that life forms don't reside in space and time, but that time and space are the result of their own entanglement. So, although reconciling the realm of necessity with that of freedom is a waste of time, connecting free agents with other free agents opens up completely different styles of association and allows the building up of different societies. The TERRESTRIAL is the same planetary body as the ANTHROPOCENE, but where the politicization of nature might finally take over.

7

If I am somewhat confident in the gravitational pull of this sixth planet, it is for a reason that is not visible until you bring all the planets together in a spatial configuration—just as fictional as the rest, of course (fig. BL1). In this diagram, you will notice that the TERRESTRIAL is pulled toward the gravitational field of a seventh planet that I have not yet mentioned and that I am tempted to call VINDICATION. Why this name? Why do I end with this planet when it is clear that it should have been the first to be considered? Precisely because it has never been allowed to be freed from the retrospective judgment of five of the other planets. Whenever it is treated first, it becomes “primitive.” Whenever people talk about modernization, they immediately create, by way of contrast, a primeval site, that of archaic attachment to the soil, to the ground, which is then either ridiculed as that from which the whole civilizing project has been extricating itself, or—what is worse—celebrated as a mythical, archaic, primordial, autochthonous Ur-Earth free from all the tragic sins of civilized humans.

If there is one lesson to draw from the extraordinary rebirth of anthropology in recent years, it is that for the first time—probably because of the symmetrical pull of the TERRESTRIAL—the many societies of humans and nonhumans that are active on the earth are allowed to stop having to define themselves by comparison with modernity, or to be taken only as having rich “symbolic” views of nature. With what has been called in anthropology, rather misleadingly, the “ontological turn,” they are free, at last, to be our contemporaries, and maybe also to exchange some of the prescriptions they might have for composing societies made of free agents. As

Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro are fond of saying, what is sure is that these societies of humans and nonhumans are experts at survival.²⁰ Now they have their own planet, and they can fight back. It is about time we move from modernity to contemporaneity, that is, to the present, and seek vindication.

Concluding this tour through my fictional planetarium, we see that there is not one but three or four different arcs of history. Modernism appears now as a small parenthesis that went quickly from MODERNITY to GLOBALIZATION and that is now being torn apart by two radically different gravitational pulls: one generated by what I have called the dark planets, EXIT and SECURITY, and the other by the planets that are rematerializing the earth in different, contradictory fashions, namely ANTHROPOCENE and TERRESTRIAL.

It is no wonder that we feel politically disoriented: these seven planets make their influences felt simultaneously over every one of us and modify the paths of our enterprises minute by minute. We are not divided in two, but in at least seven! Just like good planets do in our solar system, they all act on one another. So every one of our issues today—whether we wish to build something, design a situation, make a plan, settle a controversy—is pushed and pulled, divided and influenced by the overlapping, contradictory, still-unsettled fields of attraction of these seven bodies. Right now, the probability that they will coalesce to make *one* common world is nil—and I would say, fortunately so, since the largest of all, SECURITY, is probably the darkest and holds the least promise of unifying the political situation. Architects and designers may now understand that one qualification should be added to the project of designing for the planet—the question, “For which planet?”

¹ A version of this essay was given as the Loeb lecture at the Harvard Graduate School of Design on October 16, 2018. I thank Richard Powers for comments on an earlier draft, Michael Flower for mending my English, and Alexandra Arènes for the drawing.

² Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018).

³ Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017).

⁴ Here I am following Pierre Charbonnier's recent work; for a preview, see "L'écologie, c'est réinventer l'idée de progrès social," *Revue Ballast*, September 26, 2018, <https://www.revue-ballast.fr/pierre-charbonnier-lecologie-cest-reinventer-lidee-de-progres-social/>.

⁵ Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) <277, 312, for example?>.

⁶ Pierre Charbonnier, « L'ubiquité des modernes : Souveraineté territoriale et écologie globale, » February 2, 2017, <https://www.college-de-france.fr/site/philippe-descola/seminar-2017-02-02-10h00.htm>.

⁷ See the Earth Overshoot Day website, <https://www.overshootday.org>.

⁸ This is what Chakrabarty calls the "planetary"; Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Human Condition in the Anthropocene," in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, vol. 35, ed. Mark Matheson (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016), 137–88.

⁹ Chakrabarty *Four Theses*

¹⁰ See Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History, and Us*, trans. David Fernbach (New York: Verso, 2016).

¹¹ Jason Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (New York: Verso, 2015).

¹² Quoted in Devin Coldewey, "Starman Has Gone Dark," *TechCrunch*, February 7, 2018, <https://techcrunch.com/2018/02/07/starman-has-gone-dark/>.

¹³ Douglas Rushkoff, "Survival of the Richest," *Medium*, July 5, 2018, <https://medium.com/s/futurehuman/survival-of-the-richest-9ef6cddd0cc1>; republished as "How Tech's Richest Plan to Survive the Apocalypse," in *The Guardian*, July 24, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/jul/23/tech-industry-wealth-futurism-transhumanism-singularity>.

¹⁴ Stefan C. Aykut and Amy Dahan. *Gouverner le climat?: Vingt ans de négociations internationales* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2014).

¹⁵ Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (New York: Verso, 2011).

¹⁶ Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction*, with a new foreword by Dante Germino (1952; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 130.

¹⁷ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

¹⁸ For instance, Jan Zalasiewicz et al., "Scale and Diversity of the Physical Technosphere: A Geological Perspective," in "Perspectives on the Technosphere (Part 1)," ed. Sara Nelson,

Christoph Rosol, and Jürgen Renn, special issue, *Anthropocene Review* 4, no. 1 (April 2017): 9–22.

¹⁹ See *Critical Inquiry* Special Feature, An Early Look at Bruno Latour and Timothy M. Lenton’s “Extending the Domain of Freedom, or Why Gaia Is So Hard to Understand” (Spring 2019), November 2, 2018,

https://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/extending_the_domain_of_freedom/.

²⁰ Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *The Ends of the World*, trans. Rodrigo Nunes (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017).