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## Review

# Between Gaia and ground: Four axioms of existence and the ancestral catastrophe of late liberalism

Elizabeth A. Povinelli  
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Elizabeth A. Povinelli's latest book, *Between Gaia and Ground*, offers a bold, timely, and much-needed critique of what is considered by many the cutting edge of contemporary environmental philosophy, law, infrastructure, and technology. The book discusses a range of initiatives, from recycling and geoengineering projects to Indigenous land claim legislation and the recognition of rivers and mountains as legal persons, as well as the popular 'rhetoric of the common earth' (p. 47) that has become widespread and authoritative in recent climate science and theory. Povinelli skillfully exposes the 'colonial reason' (p. 15) that underpins these purportedly progressive green practices and discourses. In particular, she shows how they 'reaffirm settler sovereignty' (p. 41) even as they seek to confront it by 'smuggling into existence Western images and concepts' (p. 115) that further entrench capitalist extraction, accumulation, and dispossession.

The book extends Povinelli's earlier analysis of 'late liberalism', a phrase she uses in *Economies of Abandonment* (1) to refer to the new liberal governmentality that emerged in the 1950s in reaction to anticolonial critiques of liberalism. As it attempted to preserve its legitimacy, liberalism 'entered a new stage of reflexivity' (1), p. 25) and instituted a 'politics of recognition' (1), pp. 23–24) that advocated greater inclusivity. However, this new 'governance of difference' (1), p. 34) absorbed radical critiques instead of indicting liberalism. As Povinelli clarifies in an interview, the point of conceptualizing a distinct late stage of liberalism was to show that liberal policies perpetuate existing power dynamics under the guise of reform. In other words, liberalism's capacity to adapt and self-correct paradoxically enables the 'conservation of a specific form of social organization and thus a specific distribution of life and goods' (2, pp. 76–77). When challenged, capital and state 'do not sit passively' (p. 123); they constantly devise 'juridical innovations'



and ‘new [strategies] of governing difference’ (p. 11) as they attempt to retain power. The result is liberal violence’s ‘eternal return’ (p. 132) in ever more ‘dynamic unfolding forms’ (p. x) that are only superficially progressive.

*Between Gaia and Ground* brings the analysis of liberalism’s ‘repetition compulsion’ (p. 16) to bear on a whole new set of practices and discourses pertaining to the environment. Here, Povinelli shows how liberal green initiatives that are presented as solutions to the climate crisis have often devastating impacts on already fragile environments and populations. An example is recycling, which is typically thought of as repurposing waste into new products but in fact involves moving large amounts of waste from affluent to poor areas of the globe. In general, considerations such as ‘the *towhere* and thus *whichwhom* the removed contamination will be put’ and ‘the *fromwhere* and thus *whichwhom* the replacements will be taken’ (p. 34) are systematically bracketed. Povinelli’s argument is that these harms are not collateral effects but stem from liberalism’s ‘built-in structures of disavowal’ (p. 32). The disavowal of violence, she suggests, is ‘constitutive of [liberalism’s] history and present’ (p. 49). Moreover, this disavowal is made possible through the imaginary of ‘the progressive horizon’ (p. 46), a long-standing liberal trope whose philosophical origins Povinelli traces back to Hegel. Saturated with spectacular visions of technology and promises of better worlds, the horizon is deployed as ‘a means of bracketing all forms of violence as merely unintended, accidental, and unfortunate consequences of liberal democratic unfolding’ (p. 41). Povinelli suggests that the tactical transformation of actual violence into horizontal hope will continue to be necessary insofar as liberalism and capitalism ‘require new spatial fixes’ and ‘depend on a possessive logic’ (p. 47) that sees land as property.

The book’s main accomplishment is to show that similar tendencies are at play at the level of theory, owing to the ‘correlational (if not causal) dynamics between critical thought and social power’ (p. 8). Tracking the parallel relationship between environmental discourse and late liberalism since the 1950s, Povinelli homes in on three key discursive moments: the discourse of ‘the whole earth’ (chapter 3) that emerged during the atomic age; the concept of ‘the biosphere’ (chapter 4) that became prominent in the heyday of cybernetic theory; and current claims about ‘entangled existence’ (chapter 1) articulated by posthumanism and new materialism. Across their respective aims and interventions, these theories derive their ecological significance from the fact that they dispel the idea of the human as a discrete person; by underscoring mutual dependence and interconnection with nature, they upturn traditional conceptions of subjectivity, agency, solidarity, and responsibility that are inadequate in a context of environmental collapse. Yet, as Povinelli argues, this emphasis on relationality fails to account for how colonialism, capitalism, and liberalism have ravaged the earth by entangling the existence of earthly beings. Moreover, the notion of distributed agency derived from the view of existence as entangled often works to downplay our relationship to distant devastation. What Povinelli points to is the failure of discourses of the



common earth to intervene in questions of power, a failure she attributes to the ‘syntax of critical thinking’ (p.15) more broadly, whereby concepts are ‘abstracted out and said to exist outside of existence’ (p. 7) and only subsequently grounded in analyses of power. This ‘narrative logic’, she makes clear, ‘recapitulates a form of colonial reason even though it seeks to confront and unravel it’ (p. 15).

To counter this tendency, Povinelli proposes that we return environmental theory to the ‘uneven social and physical terrain’ (p. x) of existence. She turns to Hannah Arendt and Édouard Glissant, providing an original reading of the two thinkers that highlights their efforts to challenge the abstract universalisms of philosophy. She examines seminal Arendtian concepts such as the ‘human condition’ and ‘immortality’, offering a fresh perspective on her work’s relevance for green politics. For instance, Povinelli shows how Arendt’s concern to theorize human nature, not as an abstractable entity but as an entity inextricably conditioned by its location and dependence on the earth, ‘[foregrounds] the necessity to care for the earth as the irreducible ground of human worlds’ (p. 72). Yet, it is on Glissant and his notion of *Relation* that Povinelli ultimately focuses. Glissant grounds his theory of relationality ‘in a specific situation, the open boat’ (p. 26) of the Middle Passage; he ‘not only puts the concept of relation to political and historical use but also signals that all concepts are precipitates from and for locations in the differential spaces of the entanglement of existence wrought by colonialism’ (p. 26). A sustained study of the applicability of Glissant’s work to environmental theory has yet to be undertaken, and the steps Povinelli’s book takes in that direction are both exciting and welcome.

*Between Gaia and Ground* makes several major contributions to the fields of environmental philosophy and political theory. First, the book pushes against the centrality of the global concepts of ‘earth’ and ‘world’ for environmental philosophy. If these have gained in popularity since the 1950s to the point of appearing today ‘as self-evidently true’ (p. 15), and if they constitute the main themes that have motivated green reappraisals of twentieth-century continental philosophy until now, Povinelli argues instead for the need to ground environmental ethics and politics in particular ‘regions and modes of existence’ (p. 2). This is not to deny the reality of globalization, or to fail to grasp the ethical force of the imaginary of the common earth; rather, it is an attempt to counter the totalizing and universalizing tendencies of this reality and imaginary. Povinelli rightly recognizes that Glissant’s late work (and his concept of *Relation* in particular) is pivotal here. It acknowledges the fact of our global entanglement and its colonial origins, while offering to think it from the perspective of the differences it generates—what Povinelli calls ‘globalizing entangled difference’ (p. 33). Second, by denouncing the trope of the open horizon, the book challenges the primacy of hope and empathy for political theory. It proposes instead a politics of ‘survival and obdurate refusal’ (p. 8), whose imperative is to know that the good life of some requires the dispossession of others. Accordingly, individuals must ‘relinquish their



benefits' (p. 34) or else 'recommit to the current organization and distribution of powers' (p. 33). Lastly, by borrowing from philosophical pragmatism and anthropology to chart a new path for environmental theory, the book is also of methodological interest. Povinelli formulates an approach to questions of responsibility and solidarity in the shadow of environmental collapse that is at once pragmatically oriented toward dismantling colonial power and responsive to local conditions of existence.

Ambitious in scope and far-reaching in its critique, Povinelli's *Between Gaia and Ground* offers invaluable insights toward a decolonial environmental theory that can inspire more just ecological practices. It will undoubtedly shape future discussions across many fields.

## References

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