

Anthropocene futures: Linking colonialism and environmentalism in an age of crisis

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journals.sagepub.com/home/epd**Bruce Erickson**

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Abstract

The universal discourse of the Anthropocene presents a global choice that establishes environmental collapse as *the* problem of the future. Yet in its desire for a green future, the threat of collapse forecloses the future as a site for creatively reimagining the social relations that led to the Anthropocene. Instead of examining structures like colonialism, environmental discourses tend to focus instead on the technological innovation of a green society that “will have been.” Through this vision, the Anthropocene functions as a geophysical justification of structures of colonialism in the services of a greener future. The case of the Canadian Boreal Forest Agreement illustrates how this crisis of the future is sutured into mainstream environmentalism. Thus, both in the practices of “the environment in crisis” that are enabled by the Anthropocene *and* in the discourse of geological influence of the “human race,” colonial structures privilege whiteness in our environmental future. In this case, as in others, ecological protection has come to shape the political life of colonialism. Understanding this relationship between environmentalism and the settler state in the Anthropocene reminds us that the universal discourse of the Anthropocene is intertwined with the attempt to sustain whiteness into the future.

Keywords

Canada, Anthropocene, race, settler colonialism, futurity

In what has become an often-cited phrase, Patrick Wolfe (1999: 2) argues that settler colonialism “is a structure, not an event.” That is, settler colonialism establishes itself in place not through a moment of conquest, but through an invasion that is a continual production of physical and discursive infrastructures that stabilize and secure settler states. Cole Harris

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(2004) makes a similar point when he argues that colonialism dispossesses land not just through removal, but also through the coordination of physical violence, discursive justification, and ongoing physical occupation. Similarly, Shiri Pasternak (2017: 14–15) argues, “the perfection of settler sovereignty – that is, the fusing of sovereignty claims with the effective exercise of territorial jurisdiction over Indigenous land – remains unfinished today.” Colonialism is ongoing because it is a structure that is fraught with anxiety and, more importantly, because it constantly butts up against Indigenous resistance. While the tactics have changed throughout history, in Canada productively working on the land has certainly been a part of the justification of this structure and its imposition (Bracken, 1997; Braun, 2002; Harris, 2002; Mackey, 2016). In recent years, this labor has included environmental protection, and conservation goals have been folded into the structure as one of the justifications of the settler colonial vision, “where Indigenous identities are defined and contained *within* the environmental imaginaries of European environmentalists” (Braun, 2002: 81). Indeed, in decisions on aboriginal rights in Canada, the Supreme Court has listed conservation as one of the potential justifications for the state to infringe on aboriginal title (*Delgamuukw v British Columbia*, 1997: para 165). Ecological protection has come to shape the political life of colonialism, something that debates around the Anthropocene are only starting to reckon with.

While specific to the context of Canada, the structure of this “green” settler colonialism highlights one of the key discursive weaknesses of the ongoing push to rename our geological epoch the Anthropocene. Specifically, in its attempt to place environmental collapse and change as the defining problem of all of humanity in the future to come, the Anthropocene discourse legitimizes the continual colonial assertions of jurisdiction through conservation. This is both a side effect of the Anthropocene label and a fundamental feature of its discourse. It is a side effect in the sense that many current practices of dispossession (like those at stake in the Canadian Supreme Court) are mobilizing the crisis of the environment to continue their dispossession (Büscher and Fletcher, 2018; Lunstrum et al., 2016). But more than this, the Anthropocene, as more and more people are noticing (Bonneuil and Fressoz, 2016; Crist, 2013; Davis and Todd, 2017; Haraway et al., 2016) is dependent upon a universal image of the anthropos, which is itself a colonial figure. Thus, both in the practices of “the environment in crisis” that are enabled by the Anthropocene *and* in the discourse of geological influence of the “human race,” we find colonial structures that privilege whiteness as the savior of our environmental future.

To make this argument, this article is divided into two sections. First, I examine the way in which the Anthropocene discourse labels the future. Unlike any other geological epoch, the Anthropocene is focused squarely on the future, on what is to come. As such, it begs the question both about its accuracy and its prescriptions for today. There seems to be a significant amount of hubris involved in the belief that we will be able to predict the future on a geological scale, including knowing when the supposed transition between different epochs happened. Whether we are at a point to declare such a transition—and when it would be if we can—are some of the debates happening within the geoscience discourse on the Anthropocene (see Finney and Edwards, 2016; Ruddiman et al., 2015). Within the social science and humanities discourse, there is much concern over the consequences of naming the Anthropocene and how this characterization of the future shapes what we are doing now (Crist, 2013; Instone and Taylor, 2015; Malm and Hornborg, 2014; Yusoff, 2016). There is, as we will see, a tendency within the Anthropocene discourse to use this future to justify the actions of today. The Anthropocene acts as a political naming, and as such, the Anthropocene depends upon a future in order to justify the broad political and ecological changes its proponents are suggesting.

In the second section of the paper, I consider how the future-oriented discourse of the Anthropocene parallels colonial environmentalism in Canada. Although not always paired overtly, when environmental groups and those aligned with them circumscribe Indigenous agency in the interest of a greener future, they are mobilizing the logic of the Anthropocene as a crisis of the future. Drawing on the case of the Canadian Boreal Forest Agreement, I illustrate how the “forest in crisis” discourse established a future landscape that justified the actions of colonial environmental groups and corporations. This crisis narrative works within the same register as the future-oriented label of the Anthropocene as it is rationalized through the future—a forest that will have been saved. In this parallel we can see how both the Anthropocene and colonial environmentalism justify contemporary actions based on a prediction of the future (and the present need to respond). It also speaks to one of the reasons for the popularity of the Anthropocene, as it fits well with liberal settler colonialism. As Pasternak (2017) and Mackey (2016) argue, the ability to assert jurisdiction over land, and not just claim it, lies at the heart of the structure of settler colonialism. With the growing awareness and demand of the environmental crisis, the colonial state, environmental groups and, more recently, corporations (through the use of environmental rhetoric) have mobilized the need for conservation as one form of the justification of colonial jurisdiction.

As such, the environmental crisis (as defined by the discourse of the Anthropocene) serves as an impetus for the settler colonial state to look to the future, a future in which the crisis has been mitigated or transformed, as a form of justification for colonial dispossession. This becomes part of the broad structure of colonialism, in which the state, environmental groups, and corporations are bent on approving settler jurisdiction in the interests of a (supposedly) greener future.¹ The Anthropocene becomes, then, not just the geological era of human impact, but the geophysical justification for a colonial environmentalism. Importantly, the Anthropocene itself is not a specific practice of environmentalism. While some advocates have ideas about how to move forward in this new epoch, the discourse is a wake-up call for a broad environmental consciousness.

It is the discursive act of using the future anterior (the grammatical tense of “will have been”) that anchors my argument about this colonial practice. Drawing from Jacques Lacan’s theory of language and meaning, I argue that the future anterior serves not just to produce forms of ecological interventions, but also secures the continued dominance of whiteness as the guide for the Canadian nation (see also Erickson, 2013; Winnubst, 2006). I place the two distinct discourses of the Anthropocene and Canadian colonial environmentalism together because they both illustrate the dangers of banking on the future when evaluating the present. While certainly connected in some contemporary discussions, what I want to highlight is not just that the Anthropocene and colonial environmentalism both mobilize crisis to obfuscate social differences, but that they both reassert a racialized jurisdiction through the threat of environmental destruction. As the international community moves closer to consider the Anthropocene officially, it is worthwhile to understand how the logic of the future anterior has played out in Canadian Environmentalism to assert colonial jurisdiction in the 21st century.

The Anthropocene

There is no need to reproduce the history of the Anthropocene as a concept or its movement through the International Commission on Stratigraphy and the International Working Group on the Anthropocene (WGA) (see Bonneuil and Fressoz, 2016). However, it is worth looking briefly at three propositions for the start of the Anthropocene. Paul Crutzen (2002) originally suggested that the Anthropocene starts with the steam engine in

1784 and the rise of the Industrial Revolution. Specifically, he pointed to the rise of carbon in the atmosphere and the dramatic change in energy use that the Industrial Revolution empowered (Crutzen, 2006; Steffen et al., 2007, 2011²). More recently, agreement has coalesced around the middle of the 20th century as the dawning of this era, specifically the testing of the first atomic bomb test in 1945 (Waters et al., 2016; Zalasiewicz et al., 2015). The 1945 date signals what is known as the “Great Acceleration,” in which the industrialization of the past 200 years is fully globalized and put into high gear. In 2015, a third date—1610—was proposed to recognize the entrance of the “World-System” of modern colonialism into human history. It points to a dip in atmospheric CO₂ caused by the dramatic and devastating loss of human populations in the Americas, where over 50 million people are estimated to have died from disease, war, and starvation arising from European contact (Lewis and Maslin, 2015). The resultant drop in fire use, agriculture, and the regeneration of over 50 million hectares of natural forests and grasslands can be read on ice core sampling as CO₂ levels dipped dramatically. Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin (2015: 174) call this marker the Orbis Spike:

The arrival of Europeans in the Caribbean in 1492, and subsequent annexing of the Americas, led to the largest human population replacement in the past 13,000 years, the first global trade networks linking Europe, China, Africa and the Americas, and the resultant mixing of previously separate biotas.

Like those who recognize that capitalism has its own set of ecological relations, the 1610 date suggests that colonialism is itself an ecological regime. In support of this position, Lightfoot et al. (2013: 108) look at the ecological changes brought about by colonial systems from 1600 to 1800 in California, concluding that:

The colonization of the Californias is not unique in marking a fundamental historical transformation in human-environment relationships, when Indigenous landscape management practices, often in operation for centuries or millennia, underwent extensive modifications as new colonial resource extraction programs were unleashed in local areas.

Canada is no different. To give but one example, the dispossession of space in the western provinces was brought about in part through a changing ecology that saw the loss of bison, the reduction of parkland forests, and the draining of the wet prairie of the red river valley that facilitated settlement (Bower, 2011; Colpitts, 2014; Gayton, 1990; Potyondi, 1994). These are ecological structures of colonization that impede Indigenous livelihoods. Some anthropologists have suggested also calling the Anthropocene the Plantationocene to acknowledge the colonial roots of the problem (Haraway et al., 2016). Of course, it is hard to separate settler colonialism from the growing world-system economy of capitalism, but it seems relevant that the dominant marker of the 1610 date is not simply about acceleration, but about a precipitous loss. While accumulation is certainly central to both capitalism and colonialism, it seems colonialism’s mode of operation is equally about loss (see Davis and Todd, 2017).

Following the recent recommendation of the WGA, the Anthropocene as a geological formation is likely to be dated as beginning with the Great Acceleration, moving away from the moments of loss toward those of growth (although the bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima followed shortly after the Trinity nuclear test, they are rarely listed in the discussion of the golden spike of the Great Acceleration). In many ways, not only does the geological record support this choice, but also the rhetorical force of the label

Anthropocene. Remember here, the great acceleration not only signals progress, but also the supposed universality of that progress, as it is the enhancement of globalization. The Anthropocene conceptualizes globalization as the impact of humanity on the environment. As Christopher Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz (2016: 65) argue, “the heart of the Anthropocene thesis,” is its “totalization of the entirety of human actions into a single ‘human activity’ generating a single ‘human footprint’ on the Earth.”

One of the main criticisms of the Anthropocene (Bonneuil and Fressoz, 2016; Crist, 2013; Davis and Todd, 2017; Haraway et al., 2016) is of the imagined universality of impact in a world that is highly differentiated in both experience of and contribution to these impacts. There are two significant objections to this universality: first, we have the material difference in the responsibility for these geological impacts. As the Orbis Spike makes clear, the geological impact on the planet is decidedly uneven in its origin and consequences. The second objection to the universality of the Anthropocene, one that deserves careful consideration, is that it is not only inaccurate, but relies upon a set of assumptions about human history and society that will become ingrained into our approach to the environmental crisis that the Anthropocene seeks to name and solve. These assumptions hold consequences not just for the name that we use to understand the ecological crisis, but also for the ways that we respond to it.

The (White) anthropos: The universal human footprint

The idea of a human footprint—the “anthropos” in the anthropocene (Yusoff, 2016)—is a particularly modern, and liberal, concept established through both liberal humanism and scientific objectivity. As Kathryn Yusoff (2016: 6) argues, the larger debate in the scientific and popular realms is often over the impact of that footprint, “but what is not often remarked upon is the supposed unity of the ‘anthropos’ as it is gathered *into* the geologic as a form of collective material subjectivity.” Yusoff highlights how the unity of this subjectivity has the potential to erase the stratifications within the human sphere. In other words, the “we” of the Anthropocene often forgets that the geological record of human footprints, like that of the Orbis Spike of 1610, is actually a series of human footprints literally stepping on other human lives.

To be clear, the “we” assumed by the Anthropocene is certainly a white anthropos. While the universal (liberal) human subject is unmarked, the marked racialized body is always a nonwhite other that, as Fanon (1963) reminds us, has been expelled. This leaves the universal subject implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) white. Racialization is the production of “others” in opposition to the universal and pure white position (Baldwin, 2013; Seshadri-Crooks, 2000; Winnubst, 2006). Whiteness holds a position here not just as an unmarked race (as per the early claims of whiteness studies, cf. Frankenberg, 1993), but as the position that race can be understood from (McWhorter, 2005; Seshadri-Crooks, 2000; Winnubst, 2006). Thus, what becomes solidified as white is not simply skin color, but the values of this universal subject—values of objectivity, of equality, of normalcy. Difference is understandable only in so much as it is different from the normalized ideal of whiteness. Whiteness, as Seshadri-Crooks (2000) describes it, attempts to signify “being,” full stop. The liberal vision of race, based upon this idea of whiteness, is not one of racist exclusions (although those are certainly still predominant and powerful), but one that seeks the normalization of “human” through the values attached to whiteness. As the lessons of residential schools in Canada can illustrate, efforts to eliminate the native can take the form of either expulsion or incorporation (King, 2003; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015; see also Bracken, 1997). The Anthropocene depends upon this position of the human to anchor

its universal subject of the anthropos: a being that is both capable of the destruction of the earth as well as the salvation of the earth.

For Yusoff (2016), there is the danger that even as the scientific record acknowledges moments of injustice and genocide (research on the Orbis Spike was published in *Nature* after all), it is from the perspective of an elevated moral position for humanity. Certainly this is the case for Crutzen (2002: 23) who advocates for “scientists and engineers to guide society towards environmentally sustainable management during the era of the Anthropocene.” For many, the renaming of the epoch is not just a matter of scientific accuracy, but also a recognition that the old ways of changing planetary systems in ignorance are over (Crist, 2013). Thus, for Crutzen (2002), the path forward lies in the management by professionals, not in the opening up of the social and political sphere to discussions of what that path forward is. The Anthropocene politicizes geology in a time of climate change denial, yet it does so by depoliticizing the response options open to humanity and making them simply a matter of management: what are the scientific and managerial steps that are needed to achieve 350 parts of carbon per million in the atmosphere? This has been described as the “postpolitical” turn of climate change (Kenis and Mathijs, 2014; Swyngedouw, 2013). It is as if the history of human life, and the diversity of interests, impacts and opportunities contained within it, is written out of the record as soon as we become a geological agent. Instead, what matters is the geological time, which, it is assumed, is objectively just a matter of survival. The mistake being made here, as Yusoff (2016: 17) makes clear, is to assume that the Anthropocene was solely caused by the material structures in the late Holocene, and not by “the structures of thought and processes of undifferentiation that have been detrimental to any sustained challenge to human exceptionalism.” These structures of human exceptionalism anchor themselves in the universal position of the white subject.

With this recognition, the calls to rethink the name of the Anthropocene are quite compelling. One of the more popular options is to call it the “Capitalocene,” the age of capital (Moore, 2016). By drawing upon a more specific set of causes, the Capitalocene puts a finer point on the problems of differentiation and the associated structures of thought that have given rise to this particular cycle of our changing planet. Other potential names, while not backed by as substantial of a critique as the Capitalocene, have pointed out the failings of the Anthropocene as a name: the Plantationocene (Haraway et al., 2016); the Oliganthropocene (the age of the oligarchs, Swyngedouw, 2014), the Eeconocene (the age of the economy, Norgaard, 2013), the Anthrobscene (the obscene age of the media, Parikka, 2014), the Technocene (the age of technology, Hornborg, 2015), the Manthropocene (Raworth, 2014), and the Misanthropocene (Patel, 2013). In these different epochal titles, the focus has been on sounding an alarm and pointing us to the solutions that will be necessary to make it in the coming world. These naming games are indicative of the same approach found in the Anthropocene—the proscriptive belief of what is required for a specific type of future, a future without ecological disruption, but also one without capitalism, sexism, modernist hubris, oligarchy, etc.

In contrast to these singular names, Donna Haraway (2015) takes pleasure in all of the different potential names, recognizing that perhaps the Anthropocene is not an epoch to come, but a boundary marker, signaling the end of the Holocene and the transition to something different. For that new epoch, she suggests, “more than one name, is warranted” (160). Her contribution to the multiply named epoch is the “Chthulucene” which provides a connection to the elemental forces of the earth as well as a species of spider (the *Pimoc chthulhu*) that lives in the same bioregion as Haraway in Northern California. In connecting stories of tentacular spiders and storied elemental forces, Haraway (2016: 36) hopes to

remind us that the boundary of the Anthropocene requires reflection: “Think we must; we must think” she repeats, quoting Virginia Woolf. This thinking is meant to bring us out of the utilitarian thoughtlessness of the crisis mode that abandons politics for technical solutions (Swyngedouw, 2013). Noting how the Holocene has been an epoch in which new beginnings, new worlds, were forged biologically and socially throughout the planet, Haraway (2016: 100) argues, drawing on conversations with Anna Tsing, that the new epoch should be about the reassertion of fertile spaces of refuge for multispecies migrants. The Chthulucene would be a time to “cultivate with each other in every way imaginable epochs to come that can replenish refuge.”

The already existing Anthropocene

I am certainly sympathetic to Haraway’s insistence on reflection as the necessary entry point to the next epoch. The value of the Chthulucene is perhaps just that—its abstract, mythical, and storied meaning demands a moment of pause—what exactly is it? Why this name? What do we get from this name? The Anthropocene, and perhaps even the Capitalocene, certainly does not engender such necessary pause. “The Age of Man” (or “the Age of Capital”) is already embedded with meaning, and so, like a book judged by its cover, we already assume that we know what it is that we are getting into.

The Anthropocene is perhaps even more embedded with meaning than this, as it projects the already established meaning backwards into the past, framing the Great Acceleration, industrialization, or even perhaps the colonial genocide in the Americas, as a geological event in the making. These events, experienced in their own particular way as they happened, are subject to revision within the deep time framework of the geological scale. The Anthropocene becomes the link that connects the environmental changes of the last 500 years together, from global warming and ozone depletion to biodiversity collapse and habitat loss. In the way that it has been used to represent a problem that “we all know already exists,” the Anthropocene is a retroactive production of meaning that tells a story not just about the planet and its ecology, but also about the world that has made that ecology. For example, in describing the antecedents of the Anthropocene, Steffen et al. (2011: 847) point to the Industrial Revolution as one of the “great transitions. . . in the development of the human enterprise.” While they acknowledge reasons for this transition were “probably complex and interacting” (847), they focus on the transition to fossil fuels as a form of energy use. In this focus, which is certainly warranted, the danger is that this transition becomes the moment of the Anthropocene, and the “complex and interacting” features of a changing political, economic, and social system are left behind in understanding how the global environment has changed. The Anthropocene becomes an epoch started by coal and oil, and not by capitalism, colonialism, or even liberalism. Of course, this is only a story we can tell of the past two centuries by virtue of the gift of hindsight (and the blinders established by a managerial approach to world ecology).

It is helpful to think here about how such stories of the past live on into the future, for the Anthropocene is certainly based on the past, but looks squarely forward into the coming epoch. To do so, I turn to Jacques Lacan’s theory of signification, which argues that meaning is only ever produced retroactively. For Lacan (1960), drawing upon structural theories of language, the meaning of a particular term can only ever be established through its relation to other signifiers, or other ways of interpreting the world. Most often, following de Saussure, these theories suggest that one term, say the Anthropocene, can only be understood in relation to the signifiers that came before it, including “global warming,” “climate change,” “acid rain,” “ozone depletion,” and others. The Anthropocene is given meaning by

these signifiers as containing them all and linking them together. Since we already understand what these previous terms are, we have a greater sense of what the Anthropocene means.³ However, for Lacan, this linear path of meaning does not hold. Instead, he argues that to understand a term, or an event, we project meaning backwards, onto the previous signifiers we think are relevant. In the case of the Anthropocene, we can see this, as although it certainly links itself to global climate change and global warming, it also redefines those terms to be more than what we used to think of them. Under the discourse of the Anthropocene, ozone depletion is no longer simply a problem of CFCs, something relatively under control by the Montreal Protocol. Rather, it is now part of a larger, geological process that although significantly better than it once was, will linger through the next epoch. The Anthropocene weaves itself backwards, a process for Lacan that is not simply about discovering the geological links between previously unconnected events, but about projecting the meaning of an event backwards to produce its narrative. This is the “retroversion effect” (Lacan, 1960/2002: 294), which Slavoj Žižek (1989: 104) describes as the construction of “something which was already there from the beginning.” In the search for a boundary marker, whether it is 1610, 1786, 1800, or 1950, the Anthropocene, discovered in the new millennia, is produced as already existing. This comes out in the measurements themselves, but also in the way in which the story of an anthropogenic geological age ties into the story of species loss, ozone depletion, and global climate change that makes up the environmental crisis as popularly described. In the context of the geosocial history of the Anthropocene, this narrative—the naming—takes on an ideological function, providing a particular lens through which to see the buildup of anthropogenic environmental changes. In the debate between the Anthropocene and Capitalocene, we are asking which history do you want to see?

Of course, the Anthropocene projects backwards and forwards—we are asked at the same time about which future we would like to see? Lacan’s theory of identification is useful here not just to highlight how the naming of this geological age works ideologically to shape the way we see the ecological (or economic) crisis, but it also illustrates that this meaning moves forward into our planning for the future. For Lacan, the retroversion effect is a feature of how individuals understand themselves and plan for the future. This planning takes the form of the future anterior, the grammatical form that describes not what is *going to* happen in the future, but what *will have* happened in the future. The future anterior, more commonly known in English as the future perfect, describes an event that has happened at a time in the future. For example, one might describe a university course by explaining what the students will have done by the end of the course: “students will have had 10 hours of teaching practice,” or “students will have read the fundamentals of political geography.” In each case, the achievement and the action are both in the future, but a future that will have already happened. The future anterior is a tense in which both the future and the past collaborate to proscribe action. In order to have engaged in teaching practice, one must actually be in a classroom, have students and have material to teach them. To have read the fundamentals, one will have to have a list of those fundamentals and then read them. The future anterior also shapes the outcome. The fundamentals of political geography are not a universally agreed-upon list, but in having described the objectives of the course in such a way, I would be asserting not just what my students are doing, but also providing a label for those readings that I have assigned as fundamental. But all of these actions are not themselves the meaning of the event, rather it is the event in the future anterior that provides them with meaning. In this case, being a teacher is what sutures our understanding of the future to come into a meaningful history: Having engaged in the teaching practice, I am one step closer to being a teacher. In this way, Lacan’s description of the future anterior as a

dominant mode of reasoning in our time is central to the postpolitical analysis of Žižek (2005) and others.

The Anthropocene is certainly an example of the future anterior being presented to us as a geological age. Crutzen's (2002: 23) statement that "mankind [sic]⁴ will remain a major environmental force for many millennia," while not framed in the tense of the future perfect, similarly projects the meaning of the present into the future. Indeed, it also suggests that only in the future can we assess what it is that is meant by the Anthropocene: Is it the epoch of recognition, of change, and of recovery, or is it the epoch of the apocalypse, the feedback loop that eliminates the world that we know and recognize. It is certainly the epoch of judgment: it asks us what will we have done to change our world? In answering this question, the focus on ecological collapse tempts us to forget the other issues of the world, and concentrate only on the Anthropocene, only on the relationship between the anthropos and its footprint on the earth. Here we can see the importance of the story being told about the past. In the Anthropocene as described above by Steffen et al. (2011), it is the fossil fuels that matter, not the political system. Thus, we should be worried about the fuel, the carbon and its impact, and not about the social compromises that we take to get there, as was the case with the CBFA. However, to paraphrase Wolfe (1999: 2), the Anthropocene is a structure, not an event. The popularity of the Anthropocene arises not so much from its ability to disrupt entrenched patterns of thinking, but as Yusoff (2016) suggests, it is from its extension of those patterns.

The structure of colonial environmentalism

I have been arguing that the Anthropocene recasts both the past and future through the lens of an ecological crisis. This crisis, the Anthropocene discourse suggests, is manageable in so much as scientific analysis can enumerate and mitigate the impact of a universal anthropos. While the criticism of the technocratic depoliticizing impulse of the Anthropocene is important, it is also vital to recognize that its universality lies heavily upon a presumed whiteness. Thus, it becomes possible, from the position of the Anthropocene to recognize the contributions of racialized others to the project of a sustainable future, but the future itself is determined by the values of the normalized anthropos. In what follows, I will illustrate, through the case of the Canadian Boreal Forest Agreement, the way in which the values of the forest are established through a projection of the crisis of the Anthropocene into the future of the Canadian forest. It stands as an example of the production of whiteness as both a subject position through which white people in a settler state mobilize privilege (the privilege to control and dispossess territory for environmental goods) and as the discursive core of the universal human subject (through the alignment between the subject position of whiteness and the goals of environmentalism in the services of humanity).

It should be noted that there have long been efforts to decolonize environmentalism in Canada, as numerous critics and activists have pushed for inclusion of a colonial analysis in the way conservation works in Canada (Baldwin, 2009; Braun, 2002; Smith, 2015; Thorpe, 2012). Indeed, in recent years, many environmentalists see Indigenous peoples' struggles for their land as the most promising avenue for reaching environmental sustainability.⁵ Yet, despite this action, and the promise of what Indigenous-led conservation can achieve, colonial environmentalism continues in Canada. In these instances, the environmental logic inherent within the Anthropocene overrides the decolonizing efforts of some parts of the environmental movement. This next section illustrates how this structure of colonial environmentalism works through the CBFA.

The Canadian Boreal Forest Agreement

Between the years of 2003 and 2007, Canada's forestry industry was in a crisis, with almost 25% of the workforce displaced or losing their jobs and over 100 sawmills across the country shut down (Tulloch, 2008). Facing international competition, an increased tariff into the United States, a weak dollar, and the end of the housing boom, industry actors across the country started to rethink their strategies (Bullock, 2010). During this period, forestry companies in the Canadian Boreal Forest were facing pressure from environmental groups to restrict their practices to already fragmented areas and leave intact forests alone. Starting in 2007, ENGOs Greenpeace Canada, ForestEthics and Canopy orchestrated a wide reaching "Do-Not-Buy" campaign against the forestry products of major companies operating in the boreal forest (De Souza, 2007). The campaign was motivated, in part, by the addition of the woodland caribou to the endangered species list in Canada in 2000. Industrial forestry had been moving further and further north, impacting more and more of the woodland caribou's habitat. Woodland caribou are also important to environmental groups because they act as an "umbrella species that indicates the overall health of the forest" (Greenpeace Canada, 2010: 14) especially since caribou depend upon large forested areas. Caribou, of course, are also important because they are legible within the larger settler-based environmental discourse that privileges charismatic species and ecosystems. According to estimates, the forest industry lost almost \$200 million to the pressure of the environmental groups (Huddart, 2010).

The end of the boycott came with the signing of the Canadian Boreal Forest Agreement, a deal between 9 environmental organizations and 21 forest companies operating within the broadly defined Canadian boreal forest. Largely negotiated behind closed doors, the agreement was to "pursue a shared desire for a renewed and world-competitive sustainable forest sector, robust northern communities, vibrant wilderness, and a healthy, fully functioning boreal ecosystem" (CBFA, 2010: 4). The CBFA supported the use of forest product certification, the expansion of protected areas in the Canadian north, the protection of species at risk (with a specific focus on Woodland Caribou), and the reduction of greenhouse gases produced in the forest industry. The CBFA replaced years of conflict between the forestry and environmental groups with an agreement to work toward market recognition that would "demonstrably benefit" the industry signatories. The industry groups were organized through the Forest Products Association of Canada while much of the work on the behalf of the environmental NGOs was done through the leadership of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society and the Ivey Foundation. For the Ivey Foundation, this was the result of 20 years of focused funding in the area of forest conservation, toward which they directed 60% of their granting throughout that time (Huddart, 2010). Indeed much of the negotiation between the two positions was orchestrated by CPAWS and the Ivey Foundation with other groups, including Greenpeace and the David Suzuki Foundation joining in after much of the agreement had been established. The Ivey Foundation saw the focused negotiations with business without too many distractions or interested "stakeholders" (including government and First Nations) as a key to the success of bringing industry to the table (Huddart, 2010).

Initial reactions to the deal focused on both the agreement as a key to ending the crisis in the forest, as well as the innovative approach that sidestepped the government (and, along with it, issues of jurisdiction). Described as "radically programatic," an "unlikely alliance" (Pala, 2010: 279), "a historic truce" (Stueck, 2010: s1) and "compromise in action" (Reid, 2013: 41), the response to the CBFA generally prioritized industry and environmentalists as the two major stakeholders in the Boreal Forest. While government, First Nations, and

other resource industries were often listed as part of the next steps of the process, the fact that industry and conservation came together was heralded as a victory. Describing the process, Wayne Clegg, senior vice president at West Fraser Timber Company, compared it to the “traditional” model of negotiating through government:

The traditional model is: government sets up a table. [An environmental group representative] comes in. He [sic] sits at one end. I sit at the other end. We spend our time throwing tomatoes at each other. We walk out. We both give a different recommendation to government; they come out with something in the middle. (quoted in Paulson (2010: 14))

Some analysts suggest that the CBFA takes “a management position towards the forest, as opposed to a conservation position. This agreement thinks about the long-term needs of the other interests: the idea of where to preserve for conservation and where you can extract” (Cashore quoted in Bonoguore (2012: 22)).

It did not take long for First Nations groups to remind the signatories of the agreement that industry and environmental groups are not the only stakeholders in the Boreal Forest, and, more significantly, that many Indigenous groups assert jurisdiction above both industry and environmental groups. The First Nations of Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN) (a council representing 49 First Nations communities in Northern Ontario) wrote to the signatories of the agreement to request the termination of the conservation agreement. In the letter, Grand Chief Stan Beardy (2011: 1–2) wrote,

The First Nations in NAN have taken major exception to the CBFA being negotiated in secret, without any form of involvement or even notice to them despite the fact that it is proposing to regulate forest management practices across 72.3 million hectares of boreal forest across Canada, including 11.8 million hectares in Ontario, which, as you know, is subject to Aboriginal and Treaty rights. ...The CBFA is a fundamentally bad deal for most Canadians, but especially First Nations. It is a bold and radical attempt by private interests to force the hand of provincial and federal governments in critical policy areas such as resource development, environmental protection, species protection, and First Nation rights. The signatories to the CBFA are not government agencies with the public interest in mind. They are private interests with narrow and self-interested agendas.

NAN’s opposition to the agreement was perhaps the most sustained and oppositional, but First Nations opposition to the agreement spanned the country. Norman Young, Grand Chief of the Algonquin Nation Secretariat criticized the agreement for inviting Indigenous participation after the fact: “They draw up the documents and then say, ‘The door’s open, come on in.’ That’s not consulting” (quoted in Stueck (2010: S.1)). Not all First Nations groups were as strident in their opposition. After some members of the CBFA (notably the David Suzuki Foundation and the Canadian Boreal Initiative) issued an apology, some partnerships developed with First Nations groups, who saw the agreement as an imperfect but workable opportunity (Smith, 2015).

As an example of the tendencies of colonial environmentalism, the CBFA illustrates the logic of the Anthropocene as an epoch of crisis in which experts need to manage for the future that “will have been.” This can be seen in the management of Indigenous participation. Even though the participants of the agreement were technically not ignoring First Nations in their management of the forest, First Nations desires were assumed to be a set of (easily understood) needs as opposed to a holistic approach to the forest. Since this agreement is based on the principle of managing the forest, what was first established was

a unified vision of what is valued in the forest (caribou, board feet, consistent access, intact ecosystems, etc.). First Nations were then invited to submit their approaches to managing those objects; however, the value of the forest had already been established before they join the table, leaving First Nations input significantly narrowed in its impact.

So how was the value of the forest created in the CBFA? The CBFA prioritized a new certification process for sustainable forest products in the boreal forest, one which environmental groups would see as key to their conservation goals. Selling those wood products became integral to the success of the agreement, enabling both sides to have a common ground on the economic value of the forest. Further, the agreement protects the forest as the sum of its parts. Thus, the 72 million hectares of the boreal forest were divided into parts that were valuable for different reasons—some as a forest, some as timber, some as caribou habitat, etc. While pieces of the forest could be given over to industrial logging, the larger boreal forest as a stable ecology would be maintained. As Baldwin (2003) has shown, this production of the boreal forest as an ecosystem establishes it as an object for management, initially as an object for commodification, and more recently also as an object for conservation.

Through the CBFA, the value of the forest would best be realized through a managerial approach, not through political contest (as had been happening during the boycott). Like the postpolitical tendency of the Anthropocene, the promise of the future value of the forest justifies the restriction of Indigenous peoples' vision for the forest to variants on this master plan. Consultation was expected to isolate which areas were of interest to First Nations and could thus be incorporated into the overall managerial plan of the Canadian boreal forest. This attempt to circumvent First Nations in the initial stages of the agreement posits a similar (white) universal subject as seen in the Anthropocene discourse. First Nations participation is deemed to be important in their specific locales, but the ideal protector of the Boreal Forest as a homogenous managerial unit is the "anthropos" that is found outside of the special interest groups of the First Nations groups. This is built upon the construction of the forest as an object in its entirety and emphasized by the crisis rhetoric of a larger environmental collapse signaled by the Anthropocene.

The story by Wayne Clegg of ENGOs and industry meeting at different sides of the table illustrates that the drivers of the CBFA saw government (and its obligation to First Nations) as an impediment to this agreement. This is partly a discursive neoliberal move, in which the "government" becomes unnecessary when the private sector puts its heads together, but it also highlights the crisis at the heart of the agreement. From the listing of the woodland caribou as an endangered species to the economic decline in the forest industry, the parties in the CBFA were motivated by the oncoming collapse. First Nations were seen as barriers to the agreement, and the value of having an agreement without First Nations was believed to be important because of the pressing issues the parties brought to the table. These priorities of collapse (similar to those in the Anthropocene) displace Indigenous concerns (over jurisdiction, land claims, and their vision of the forest) and support the implicit dispossession of Indigenous peoples.

In distinction from the CBFA, Indigenous peoples throughout Canada have developed their own priorities over the forests they interact with and conservation agendas they are interested in supporting. Indeed, in his letter Beardy points to the work of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature which is committed to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Across the boreal forest you have numerous other illustrations of Indigenous groups taking forestry and conservation into their own jurisdiction, from the blockades over clear cutting by the Algonquins of Barriere Lake

(Pasternak, 2017) or the Grassy Narrows First Nations (Willow, 2012) to forest management plans like the Whitefeather agreement (O'Flaherty et al., 2008).

Conclusion: Environmentalism without a structure

In her discussion of the production of whiteness, Shannon Winnubst (2006) argues that the political system that sustains white privilege and power is dependent upon the conscription of the future toward utilitarian ends. Within the frame of competition, the future bends questions of history and difference into simply yet another avenue to profit from. In the CBFA, the limitation of First Nation participation lies not in the denial of their claim to the land, a claim rooted in history. Instead the CBFA discursively limited the future of First Nations control over the forests because it prioritized their own vision of the forest to come. First Nations were invited to be in it, but not to control the future. In opposition to a future bent on accumulation, Winnubst argues that we need to consider a political response to modernity in which we forget about the future, in which we follow a politics without a future. Within the context of settler colonialism, this would mean recognizing the way in which the material and discursive structures of the past frame the present-day struggles for justice. It would also mean recognizing that some of those structures would need to come down.

For a while, many in Canada believed (or hoped) that the new Liberal government headed by Justin Trudeau would bring a new approach to the state's colonial relationships. Certainly, this hope was one of the things Trudeau capitalized on and made a central part of his rhetoric. Speaking about the burden of abuse, isolation, and blame felt by the survivors of the state-run residential school system that separated children from their families, cultures, and nations, Trudeau (2015: para 6–7) said:

Moving forward, one of our goals is to help lift this burden from your shoulders, from those of your families, and from your communities. It is to accept fully our responsibilities – and our failings – as a government and as a nation. This is a time of real and positive change. We know what is needed is a total renewal of the relationship between Canada and Indigenous Peoples. We have a plan to move towards a nation-to-nation relationship based on recognition, rights, respect, cooperation and partnership, and we are already making it happen.

In Trudeau's mind, the future is already happening. However, early decisions by the federal government, including the approval of two high-profile and contested resource development proposals (the Kinder Morgan Pipeline and the Site C dam in the Peace River Valley), prompted Indigenous activists and environmentalists to question the sincerity behind the rhetoric of the Prime Minister. Instead of actually being a tool of decolonization that addresses the colonial power of the state, the government has opted to present itself as the key to decolonization itself. Canada, in this equation, becomes not a hindrance to Indigenous sovereignty and the end of colonial, but the vessel to those goals. Once again, the future becomes a justification of the jurisdictional claims of the state over Indigenous lives and land.

Compare Trudeau's statement on reconciliation to Erica Lee's, a Cree scholar and an Idle No More activist.⁶ For Lee, reconciliation is a relationship between the past and future, but in a way that is significantly different from Trudeau's official vision. "Reconciliation," she writes, "is the realization of worlds that *should have been*" (Lee, 2016: 19). Drawing from Metis Elder and author Maria Campbell, this realization relates to the resurgence of "our languages, our knowledges, our governance systems, and journeys home to our traditional

territories” (Lee, 2016: 18). From Lee’s perspective, knowing the history of residential schools is not about blame or responsibility, as Trudeau presents it, but about understanding the loss of that world that would have come without the interruption of colonialism—the world that would have been. Addressing the liberal script of being all on the same boat (adopted, literally, by the Environment Minister of Trudeau’s Liberal government’s use of the hashtag #Allinthistogether), Lee (2016: 19) replies, “We are never ‘all in this together’ while Indigenous communities are stripped to the bone for the fat to maintain Canada.” Her rejection echoes the rejection of the CBFA by many Indigenous groups who are concerned about being left behind in the decision-making processes.

There is much to say about reconciliation in Canada that cannot be covered here. What I want to highlight by analyzing it in the frame of the future anterior is how this approach to reconciliation on the part of the Prime Minister places the resolution of colonialism as an event his government will have done in the future. For Lee, in contrast, reconciliation is the recognition of the past and that the future we might have wanted can never be. It is, in other words, a rejection of the authority of the nation to establish the future.

This is perhaps a matter of words, like the debate over the name of the Anthropocene. What does it matter if we are talking about the past or the future in our rhetoric about reconciliation. Reconciliation after all is a hinge between the past and the future. But it is clear that as a story about the future, it matters how we talk about colonialism, so that, as Kathryn Yusoff (2016: 17) warns us with the Anthropocene, we do not bring along the “structures of thought and processes of undifferentiation” that have supported colonialism. While geologically we know that the physical changes brought on by human-induced environmental changes will structure life to come (human and nonhuman life), we must do what we can to ensure that these geophysical structures do not lead us into a depoliticized vision of the future.

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Notes

1. This paper deals most specifically with the context of Canada, a settler colonial state. In a settler state, the logic of the Anthropocene as a justification for colonial jurisdiction makes itself present in formal jurisdictional settings (as in the supreme court and conservation projects). However, outside of a settler state, the Anthropocene still exists as a colonial opportunity that functions along imperial lines, in which the interests of marginalized groups can be written off to achieve the greater good of the environmentalist era. There is a significant literature within political ecology that illustrates the colonial conservation agenda that operates through green grabs, carbon markets, and development schemes (see, e.g. Bachram, 2004; Bumpus and Liverman, 2011; Fairhead et al., 2012).
2. In later publications, the date was rounded up to 1800 to make it simpler but more recently he has favored 1945 as the marker (see Steffen et al., 2007, 2015; Zalasiewicz et al., 2015).
3. For a summary of this process, see Hall (1997).

4. “Mankind,” again, holds the markers of whiteness within it, a particularly gendered formation that normalizes being within the geological impact, and its potential solutions. The choice of the word mankind here should not be dismissed—although Crutzen would want us to understand it as gender neutral—it highlights how the universal position of the anthropos is decidedly specific, not only through gender, but also through race (and sexuality, class, ability).
5. For example, Naomi Klein (2015) champions Indigenous forms of “blockadia” as the leading edge of resistance to climate change capitalism. Martin Lukas (2014) similarly presents Indigenous claims to the land as the most effective forms of environmentalism in Canada during the Stephen Harper years (see also Moola and Roth, 2018; Suzuki, 2015).
6. Idle No More is a broad movement for recognition of the injustices faced by Indigenous peoples in Canada. Originally organized at teach-ins and rallies in response to an Omnibus bill by the federal government (of the previous Prime Minister, Stephen Harper) that would have eroded First Nations sovereignty alongside streamlining environmental protection regulations, the Idle No More slogan became a calling card for protests throughout the world.

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