Hypatia (2025), **40**, 731–745
doi:10.1017/hyp.2024.82

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

INTERVIEW

A Conversation on "Ecology, Extinction, and Posthumanism" with Claire Colebrook

Asijit Datta

Assistant Professor, Department of Media Studies, SRM University-AP, India
Email: asijit.d@srmap.edu.in

(Received 28 May 2024; accepted 27 June 2024; first published online 20 January 2025)

Abstract

This dialogue between Prof Claire Colebrook (Pennsylvania State University) and Asijit Datta is based on an online discussion, "Ecology, Extinction, and Posthumanism" which took place on the 1st of August, 2020 during the raging days of the COVID-19 pandemic. The transcript echoes Colebrook's sentiments that the ethical demands of the climate hazard or the imminent extinction cannot be addressed to a particular subject or 'we'. The predominant tension is concealed in the idea of the human and its values. As humans, we refuse to ask whether there is a future where life continues with endless possibilities for us. For Colebrook, the inability to adopt such a stance emerges from the historical condition that we as language-beings have always been the ones to define life, the ones that are essentially racing towards extinction. Following the extinction experiments of Husserl and Bergson, Colebrook contends that only the death of the ethical and political subject can provide us with alternate modes of survival in this world. This conversation engages with issues like the COVID-19 pandemic, American politics, and post-apocalyptic cinema to arrive at an imagination that requires the annihilation of the human as we know it.

Introduction

This dialogue between Professor Claire Colebrook (Pennsylvania State University) and Dr Asijit Datta (SRM University-AP) is based on an online discussion, "Ecology, Extinction, and Posthumanism" which took place on August 1, 2020 during the raging days of the COVID-19 pandemic. The transcript echoes Colebrook's sentiments that the ethical demands of the climate hazard or the imminent extinction cannot be addressed to a particular subject or "we." The predominant tension is concealed in the idea of the human and its values. As humans, we refuse to ask whether there is a future where life continues with endless possibilities for us. For Colebrook, the inability to adopt such a stance emerges from the historical condition that we as language-beings have always been the ones to define life, the ones that are essentially racing towards extinction. The supposed value of human life is now facing the death of its own value. This vanishing of this value is a direct byproduct of the inhuman humanity, the monstrosity that we have thrown over and into life (especially other organic and inorganic lives). Following the extinction experiments of Husserl and Bergson, Colebrook contends that only the death

© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Hypatia, a Nonprofit Corporation

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.82 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of the ethical and political subject can provide us with alternate modes of survival in this world. After the evaporation of "the subject of thought, a common humanity, a proto-politics" what remains is "a fragile life that is not especially human" (Colebrook 2014b, 148). Once we are past the anthropocentric assumptions of species superiority and intrinsic values of humanity, we might be in a position to think of other kinds of living systems, and "whether the future should not be saved for another mode of life altogether" (Colebrook 2014b, 148). Colebrook wishes for another kind of human imaging and imagination that is capable of perceiving a world without humans. To read time, and the planet that existed before humans, and will continue to do so after humans, we need inhuman perception. Colebrook imagines "a mode of reading the world, and its anthropogenic scars" (Colebrook 2014a, 23), an earth that will offer a reading of human history and its exploits. These scars of the world without readers will be explored by a "future geologist" akin to a separate kind of stratigraphic imaging: "In imagining this world after humans we are reading what is not yet written or inscribed" (Colebrook 2014a, 24). With the help of such an extinction or Anthropocene experiment or impersonal imaging, "we can begin to imagine imaging for other inhuman worlds. That is to say: rather than thinking of the posthuman, where we destroy all our own self-fixities and become pure process, we can look positively to the inhuman and other imaging or reading processes" (Colebrook 2014a, 28). The eye is released from the body and assumes the role of a semi-organic device that reads the geological strata, our inhuman present (that will soon become our past), and a "world without bodies" (Colebrook 2014a, 28). In this posthumous, posthuman time, human existence will be read by the eye of the future, speculative geologist. This conversation engages with issues like the COVID-19 pandemic, American politics, and post-apocalyptic cinema to arrive at an imagination that requires the annihilation of the human as we know it.

Datta: Thank you so much for joining us in this session, Dr Colebrook, and agreeing to be a part of this interview. Our topic today is "Ecology, Extinction and Posthumanism", and I think that our current pandemic condition is the most appropriate time to discuss issues related to the environment and sustainability of humans as a species.

Colebrook: Thank you so much for the invitation.

AD: How do you differentiate between the notions, "personal as political" and "personal as geological"?

CC: "Personal is political" is a phrase I was brought up with and educated on. It is a feminist phrase from Kate Millett. One can think of their family relationships, relationships between men and women, by saying the "personal is political." Kate Millett and that generation of feminists wanted to say that the domestic sphere is, in reality, composed of broader political forces, akin to the history of patriarchy. One cannot conceive of a Western history without an original sexual contract between men and women. That gives one the domestic space; that gives one reproduction, the family, i.e., the motto of Western history. But I wanted to expand it. Maybe, I would change it from the "personal is political," to the "personal is geo-political." The reason is as follows: let us look at the private space or the domestic space that feminists were talking about. For instance, there is the bourgeois nuclear family. It owes its existence to a much longer history. This history includes slavery and colonization: the entire history

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.82 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of empires that colonized certain peoples, and enslaved certain peoples. This history is what in the eighteenth century enabled the private space of the nuclear family. One can only have a private relationship between men and women in the liberal public sphere since slavery existed from Greece onwards. The whole notion of the private subject was enabled by slavery. Then again, the European project of the Empire, in its entirety, was enabled by colonization, indentured labour, and slavery. That transformed the planet too. It was because of slavery and colonization that there was industrialization; it was because of industrialization that slavery could eventually be abolished and liberalism could be extended to more and more peoples. In the end, it can be said that one could not have had the private individual, the personal, unless they had a history that has transformed the planet and has transformed the relations between the West and its "others"—which includes the colonies and also the nations that contributed to slavery.

AD: Human history or natural history has always been interdependent, communicating through various modes of inscriptions. Have human inscriptions benefitted nature in any form ever? How do you read the role of inscriptions in shaping the Anthropocene?

CC: One of the objections I often get, whenever I talk or present my work, is that people get very upset because I speak as though humans have always been a bad thing, especially when I talk about humans and their destructive relationship with the planet. To this, there are two answers: one is that every living being that contributes to the planet also transforms the planet in some way. There is always some sort of cost-benefit analysis, but that is not very meaningful. When I talk about the human, I do not mean all human beings. The reason being that the history of humanism, and the history of talking about humanity, have always excluded some humans. In that respect, there are two answers to your question. The first is: has the human, in its narrow sense, in the sense defined by Western humanism and normative conceptions of humanity, tended to solely benefit itself? What one is now looking at, with this global pandemic, is the cost of having created a global interconnected network. This not only means that one cannot contain events like viral pandemics, but also that viruses leap from one species to another. That has occurred as a consequence of certain forms of intensive agriculture that were benefitting a very small portion of humanity at the expense of others. If one wants to ask, have human beings, in the broader sense, ever contributed to nature? Not all forms of human existence are as destructive as the one that is now thought of as the privileged form of liberal humanity—the high-consuming, urban, predominantly white, predominantly privileged humans. I just finished reading a book called *Dark emu* (2014) by Bruce Pascoe about forms of indigenous Australian agriculture that were sustainable for centuries before the white invasion. That is just one example of forms of human existence that are not at war with the planet and with other humans. So, the first answer is that humans, in their narrow sense of humanity, in the sense of the form of humanism that one is now, in all probability, seeing to be in decline, have not been of a great deal of benefit. For example, I have domestic dogs and cats. They are one

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.82 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of the good outcomes of that form of humanity. But there are other forms of humanity that are not at war with the planet. People are now talking about the end of the world or end times—however, it is really the end of our world, a particular mode of world. Even then, there would be other forms of human existence that are possible, that are not necessarily at war with nature that they seem to at once valorize but also destroy in creating.

AD: Do you think the restrictive meaning of violence is somewhere responsible for the climate crises? That violence is usually seen as what humans do to other humans or human others, and not really to non-human others and natural resources? Is it an etymological problem then? Do you imagine a kind of corrective counter-violence?

CC: There is one way in which violence should be a human-on-human concept. The reason behind this is simply that when one thinks about large-scale organized or systematized violence—let us call it "industrialized violence"—then there has to be a significant shift between you and I fighting over something. That is one form of violence, where there is a relationship between one body and another. But imagine that I fight with you not because of a dispute between us, but because, for instance, I have been sent to war. Or, I own a factory, I extract exploitative labour, and you have never even met me. However, you are now subject to violence, from a human you have no relationship with. One can say that this form of systemic violence needs to be distinguished from local violence. So, there are two examples—one where I am sent to war to kill someone I have never met or the other where I own a factory, and every day of my life I am subjecting you to a form of violence which I am not personally inflicting on you. In these, one can always think that those forms of systemic human violence also have their costs on the planet. One might hesitate to call it violence to the planet because, unless one is of a certain way of thinking, the planet is not something that can feel injury or harm, or have a sense of justice, though, of course, an animal might feel that it is being treated unjustly. One could refer to that as a form of violence. However, what needs to be thought about is the way human-on-human violence—war, slavery, exploitative capitalism—has its effects on human bodies and the relationship those human bodies have with the planet. The colonization of Australia not only damaged the planet which, as it is being said these days, is being manifest through rising instances of bushfires and so forth, but it was also violence upon the indigenous peoples of Australia, who possibly had a non-violent relationship with nature.

AD: Then there is also this false information that we are fed from our childhood days about the abundance of nature, that nature is non-depletionary, that it's auto-generative and self-renewable. What was the beginning of such a notion about nature?

CC: From the perspectives of the Christian theological tradition, one answer would be to be fruitful and to multiply—for all creatures great and small are the abundant gifts of God. This is not there solely in the biblical tradition. More pertinently, this idea that God gave us the earth and it is our duty to make it abundant is there in the Christian pastoral tradition which follows the ideas of dominion theology. The notion of a nature that is ever-giving towards humans, who are, in this way, privileged, was built

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.82 Published online by Cambridge University Press

first within the Christian tradition, and then within the Christian pastoral romantic liberal tradition that increasingly has a notion of nature as infinite plenitude. One counter-example to this can be that, if one were to look at the Australian indigenous tradition, the notion of nature being infinite is not present. There is a notion of nature as something—if one wants to call it nature that is—that one needs to have a conversation with, that one needs to have some form of respect towards, that it is not a resource, and that it is certainly not infinite in its plenitude. One has to manage, and give back and do things like move on from one plot of ground to another, be somewhat nomadic, as opposed to thinking that this is an infinite supply chain. One might have other examples from different cultural backgrounds. It can be said that the notion of nature as an infinite resource is something that begins in the Christian liberal tradition. But now something like monopoly capitalism has become completely intense. In central Pennsylvania, where I live, one can buy tropical fruit all year round, there is a sense that everything is already available, and that, if it is not available, something has gone wrong—as opposed to the idea of things like these actually having some form of non-free productivity at some point in their lifespan.

AD: We who think about extinction do realize that it's a macro-disaster. What according to you makes people so blind to this imminent outcome? So, is the existence of micro-worlds, or micro-territories based on the rise of nationalism and xenophobia, any way responsible for this micro-level blindfolding regarding extinction? Is it some kind of "political unthinkability"?

CC: To take the example of America, what one can see currently is the weaponization of the fragility of the peoples. I have only recently become a citizen of the USA. I grew up with this notion of the greatness of the US. I was fed on all the television and myths about this country. Whereas it is actually a country that suffers from poverty, lack of healthcare, from the sort of violence that follows from abandonment and exposure to fragilities. On the question of parochial nationalisms, it can be said that the people are hungry, deprived of water, they cannot make it to the next meal, and they have to go to work in the midst of a global pandemic without any form of protection, and when they are massively exposed, of course, their concern is not for the planet and humanity. Of course, it is for a form of immediacy, an immediacy that can take two forms: one is the reactionary form, which is that there comes an immediate demand for greatness—"Make America great again." One has to focus on getting back to work and getting back to productivity. Whereas if one points out that, in reality, these current lockdowns have given the planet a chance to breathe; someone who is very exposed and vulnerable can say, "Yes, but you are a university professor, you are still getting paid for what you teach from home. I cannot work, I cannot eat. I cannot live, just get me back to work and to hell with the planet." That is the bad form of it, but it has created these parochial nationalisms. A lot of the current disasters have resulted in anti-immigration and a resurgence of racism, and not just in America. America has become more enclosed, and more parochial but, if one were to look into the situation in Australia, the same thing has

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.82 Published online by Cambridge University Press

happened there. But there is a good outcome to the state of emergency, which the US has also seen, including everyone worldwide. The Black Lives Matter protests are one such good outcome. These protests also have to do with fragility and exposure and immediacy, which is, to say that we might be at the end of the world, that the climate might be falling apart, that there might be no hope, that we might be living in end-times, but at least one can be good traders, do good on the way out. Maybe there is no grand solution for climate change and world justice, but the phrase that one might use is "minimal ethics." *Minimal ethics of the Anthropocene* (2014), which is a book by Joanna Zylinska, says that though we have not got big macro solutions to extinction, we can have things like fresh water, food, some form of economic justice, a redistribution away from the 1 percent. Thus, even though climate change and the Anthropocene are big issues, these do not displace the smaller interconnected issues about social justice, instead, these somehow intensify such issues. So, parochialism can take two forms. It has had a good resurgence in these protests against white supremacy.

AD: Whatever humanity means now is a category so completely enmeshed in the Anthropocene that imagining a human without, say, a nuclear bomb to protect their country, would be an impossible task. How do you propose a reshaping of this imagination?

CC: I have written a lot about post-apocalyptic cinema. If one were to watch American cinema, the end-of-the-world is always the end of New York or Los Angeles. Usually, those films will tend to show countries that, depending on who the enemy is of the day, tend to suffer. For example, one might see Shanghai and Beijing just being swept away, which is disastrous, but, in terms of the narratives of these films, it does not really matter as much, as long as the small pocket of Manhattan is contained. So, when one speaks about the end of humanity and the end of the world, one is often talking about a very limited and privileged conception of humanity: invariably white, urban, usually American, sometimes Londoners. When one talks about the Anthropocene and says that the humans have transformed the planet, it is those humans and not indigenous Australian humans who are hyper-consuming and destroying the planet. This concept of humanity can be repurposed. In one of the many recent incidents of race violence in the USA, a woman called the police on a black man who was bird-watching and claimed he was attacking her. That was premised on the fact that if one calls the police on a black man, chances are he will get shot. He did not get shot. And after the incident, he said: "I refuse to be dehumanized." That is when the human becomes a polemical term. It is not about saving humanity or saying this is not who we are—it is about someone claiming humanity. Thus, there are always two sides: one being that we need to rethink what counts as human, and if it is that human who is at work. When one talks about saving humanity, they tend to be usually talking about saving hyper-consuming humanity. But if they are to talk about just saving something that one might recognize as a life worth living—"I refuse to be dehumanized"—then that counts as a different use of the term. It is a more open term; it pertains to a right to exist. I am suddenly reminded of

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.82 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Spinoza and trans-individuality. It is not just an individual and their humanity that is inviolable; it has more of a sense of something that one experiences. The more human one is, the more human the other is. It comes through mutual recognition, and then inter-objectivity, as opposed to inter-subjectivity—where one assumes that they are all the same, that they are all connected, but they are unreadable, they are not subjects. It can be argued that it is a term that really needs at least to be rethought, as opposed to just saving humanity.

AD: Talking of post-apocalyptic cinema, especially Hollywood, we always find that people are saving people or people saving one's own kind. In every post-apocalyptic film, there must always be this savior complex, or racial superiority, or a drug which saves humanity. It is never the animal world or nature itself being saved or people being saved because of ecological sustainability in itself. What is it symptomatic of, that people are always saving their own kind?

CC: There are two ways in which this question can be answered. One, in Hollywood cinema, saving the world amounts to saving Manhattan. That has to do with a very specific form of American exceptionalism: if one is not born in America, even then, they were probably brought up watching British, American, Indian, or some other culture, at least more than one of these cultures, at least more than just their own culture. So, one may have a sense that, "Yes, one is who they are." But one can also have a sense of people speaking English with different accents, or other modes of existence. Most of those who grew up outside the USA were brought up that way. In contrast, Americans have tentatively been brought up watching solely America, with a much narrower conception of the human. So, Hollywood post-apocalyptic cinema does tend to think of saving the world as saving America. This is a thing that is unique to Hollywood. However, the question is about saving one's own kind. It makes sense that, unless one lives a completely suicidal existence, which some beings can do, one has a parochial interest in saving themselves. I might point out to you that your cost of living is too much for the planet to bear, but it is very hard for you to decide, to say: "Okay, my life is not the best, therefore, it shall cease to exist." There is a parochial interest in saving one's own kind. What is interesting in the twenty-first century is that humans are being confronted in many ways with the cost of one's own kind. Therefore, the question of ecological ethics is one of recognizing that one wants to save one's own kind, but there are other kinds that also want to save their own kind. This view is in opposition to viewing forms of existence, and saying that they are not worthy—as Western imperialism has tended to do with the rest of the world. It looks at Mexico, Africa, and other parts of the world in this way. It is as if those forms of existence are not worth living and that they need to become "just like us." A lot would be gained by thinking that other forms of existence seek to save their own kind. It is a politics of the more-than-human. This is to say that there are forms of being that seek to preserve themselves, instead of those that are not "just like us."

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.82 Published online by Cambridge University Press

AD: And yet saving one's kind gets subverted when we think of religious fundamentalism, suicide bombings, and forms of fascism that attempt to preserve one by exterminating the other?

CC: Yes, definitely, this makes one go back to your question on violence: what is it that one would die for? What sort of violence would one inflict either upon themselves or another for something that they are not going to experience? The interesting thing about that form of dying for something is who would one kill and what would one do in order to *save* the world? Who would they kill, and what would they do? Currently, one makes that decision every day, particularly in the hyper-consuming West. Everything one does here has a knock-on effect that is probably going to harm someone. This can be compared with the outlook of the suicide bomber, as someone exceptional, as someone who will kill themselves and kill others in order to save an idea which, supposedly, is transcendent. This is an extreme form of everything one does every day of their lives in order to save themselves. Whereas the suicide bomber has one notion of what is worth saving. Similarly, the hyper-consuming, affluent, urban individual has one conception of what is worth saving. And ecological ethics, in a time of extinction, asks about saving what is not oneself, and has to then ask those questions within the "more than human" setup, because one is always asking others to make some form of sacrifice for their lives. And at some point, there would be things that one would not do in order to save themselves. This needs to be seen as ecological ethics, based on which one is doing something like what the above example cites, every day of their lives: they are making decisions about what is worth saving and not worth saving. It has always been more about themselves.

AD: When you speak of the possibility of human history after humans, what kind of humans are you referring to? Who or what is the post-extinction gist? Will they be the cryonic humans awaiting a later life?

CC: You and I are academics. We spend our day reading books, talking, working on computers etc. This is something I have been thinking a lot about because of living in America right now: if someone were to take this all away from us, if we no longer have books, if we no longer have Zoom or Facebook, or no longer have an intellectual conversation, and if we are left at the level of mere subsistence, then you and I would probably feel that as a tragic loss, and probably think that life is not worth living. If I ask you to go away from the life you live now into one where you are merely gathering food, fending off the forces of destruction, and fighting for water, we might think that it is the end of the world, when life's not worth living. However, we know that there are forms of human existence that have not had books, computers, Facebook, universities etc., and that those forms of living have deemed themselves to be worth living. So, when one argues for after-humans, it might mean just after the types of humans that we are right now. We are both different, but we do have this commonality: we share this private-reading, private-thinking subjectivity in its rich, academic sense. We know there are forms of human existence that would look at what we do and think that it was a life not worth living. Genuinely, we probably have students who think that our lives are a living hell: "What! You are reading and writing all day, O my god!"—they might

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.82 Published online by Cambridge University Press

wonder. So, it is being suggested that one ought not to universalize what one takes to be as life: that it is a life worth living for them, that it has absolute value for them. Instead, in all probability, there are going to be forms of human existence that one does not recognize that might have a future, even if one does not.

AD: Are you proposing a reshaping of man, vis-à-vis the end of man?

CC: I use the word "man", and "end of man" because that is exactly what it has been. So, let us call it what it is. It has been a privileging of man. The human is "man" in its usually white Western reasoning form. What is thought of as a life worth living, as human existence, is but one possible mode of existence. It is nearly impossible, from where one is to value, for themselves, other forms of existence. This is because they have been composed from reading books, having academic conversations, social media and so on. But that is one modality of the human. So, the thought of extinction, right now, is to imagine other forms of existence, that do not indulge in violence, while being reliant on one part of the world, experiencing privilege, and practising a form of existence where one outsources their violence and fragility elsewhere. This is about imagining other forms of human existence, those that sometimes have not been recognized as human.

AD: You have also said repeatedly that "man" has always been posthuman, in an ultra-humanist way. But isn't this what posthuman advocates like Braidotti or Haraway are against? For example, the Western Vitruvian/transhumanist model? Of course, they are extending human (and therefore humanism?) and you are ending them. Is it a form of reconstitution that you are proposing?

CC: I do believe the Sartrean assertion that "existence precedes essence," that we have no essence, that we create ourselves, though he says that only in the twentieth century. For Western humanism, that's always been the case—one is not a being that one can be. One is always self-creating. That is the liberal Kantian tradition. But it goes back before Kant. The history of humanism has always been about that: humans are not things, they can't be defined, and they create themselves, even in Aristotle, we are beings who narrate ourselves, and give our lives for a cause that enhances the human. In that respect, that is what has been meant by saying humanism has always been posthumanism. Thus, when one sees certain forms of humanism today which are anti-essentialist or anti-biologist, which say that one is nothing other than what they make of themselves, it can be argued that these are forms of humanism; it can be argued that this form of posthumanism is another kind of humanism. It can further be argued that it is problematic—this notion that "I create myself, I give myself being, I have no essence," which has prevailed in the twenty-first century. It is a form of neo-liberalism—one makes oneself; one can buy oneself, one can refashion oneself, and one is nothing other than what they decide to be. This precludes all the different ways in which one does not have control over their being. That would include race, gender, sexuality, and all the ways in which one does not decide who they are. For example, one cannot just take on another race. There are many ways in which that notion of self-creation has created an alibi for all the forms and ways in which certain things cannot be recreated.

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.82 Published online by Cambridge University Press

AD: When you talk of a single plane of indifference, where humans and non-human animals proliferate with independent claims and expressions, are you specifically going against the inter-relational existence propagated by a specific branch of posthumanism, that there should be an interrelation?

CC: There is one form of posthumanism in which everything is interrelated. This can be criticized with the suggestion that, of course, it is technically true—one lives on a planet in which everything is interconnected. The moment one encounters another human being they speak either in a common language or they have a sense of language. In one sense that inter-relational thesis is trivially true. By non-rationality, it is suggested that all the ways in which the geo-political system creates one form of interconnectedness, one can call it global capital or neo-liberal global capital. But there are some forms of difference which it cannot recognize or bear any relationship with. There are forms of value or forms of existence that are not recognized, and that do not want to be recognized, that do not want to be included within a general global humanism. The same can be said for some forms of existence—those that one cannot recognize, towards which one bears no relation. That should be seen as somehow refusing recognition or understanding. When there are claims for sovereignty from indigenous peoples, there is often a refusal of relation: "I do not want to be included in your country. We want to make a separate claim—one which has a certain form of autonomy—an autonomy that has not been recognized within your own political system."

AD: Does posthumanism have no other value for you except acting as a reference point or except as a hyper-Cartesianism or humans facing threats of non-being where "man" is nothing other than becoming?

CC: One might ask, does posthumanism have a value? Of course, it is such a broad term. There are so many versions of what counts as posthumanism. One has a lot to learn from feminist indigenous, queer, black speculative fiction. As for those forms of posthumanism that try to refashion what would count as a recognizable mode of existence, of course, they have incredible value in the present. I am currently reading or rereading the work of a contemporary American writer N. K. Jemisin, who writes about a world in which we relate to each other through the vibrations of the planet, through stone. So, what counts as being human is not a human-on-human liberal public sphere, but a connectedness, through the earth, feeling through the vibrations of the earth. In that form of posthumanism, there's a different form of relationality: it is not human-on-human, it is not merely Cartesian subjective relatedness. Rather, it is a sense of relationship to each other through the earth, through the common myths and vibrations we share about the planet. This form of posthumanism is, of course, the only way in which we are going to have a future. This is to have some perception of the other-than-human. However, there is a form of posthumanism that, someone like Nick Bostrom at Oxford Future of Humanity Institute speaks of, which is that one can manufacture and refashion themselves and that artificial intelligence and technology can be used to live forever. The Institute at Oxford is actually arguing right now that one should be working out how to live forever. It can be argued that this constitutes not recognizing the planet or its other individuals.

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.82 Published online by Cambridge University Press

We need to ask if a post-extinction world constitutes a fundamental form of living and becoming. That is what is being argued for. Imagining that one does not live forever is the first step towards getting rid of that form of posthumanism. If one gets rid of the idea that one can constantly supplement, augment, and transform oneself to be stronger and more robust, that form of posthumanism includes the Ray Kurzweil version of singularity. However, an alternative to this can be through forms that ask one to live with a sense of their own fragility and finitude in relation to the planet. Those are the forms of black, indigenous, queer, speculative posthumanism that are the opposite of the Nick Bostrom version of posthumanism as infinite transformation and technological enhancements.

AD: Is this the point where you break away from posthumanism and enter critical study of life?

CC: In this context, one needs to speak of critical life studies. What my colleagues Jami Weinstein and Myra Hird tried to do with critical life studies is to shift the notion of life. You mentioned in one of your earlier questions this notion of nature as infinitely abundant, creative, proliferating endlessly. When this notion of critical life studies was launched, we tended to think of life as in the neo-Christian form, as infinitely creative, infinitely abundant, infinitely proliferating; it was a sort of post-romantic notion of life. And what we wanted to do was to look at other conceptions of life that are non-continuous, destructive, fragile, at war with themselves. Going back to some of the ideas about speculative posthumanism, Jemison writes of a world in which the power to create and transform is built in with destruction and loss. It is a critical form of life in which not everything is proliferation, it is about becoming, vitalism, vibrancy, in which one recognizes the destruction, the violence, the loss, the fragility, the vulnerability of life. That is a very non-Western non-Christian understanding of life. So, one can be critical of the simple valorization of life, or vibrant materialism that one gets in some forms of what can, for the want of a better word, be called "vitalism."

AD: I find it very interesting, as you also pointed out a while back, that there is always this residual humanity which is left behind or fought for in post-apocalyptic novels or films, a form that triumphs ultra-humanism. What do we learn from the current pandemic then? Is it the time to engage in speculative realism or emerge as an ecological being?

CC: One can learn a lot from this pandemic. One can learn about the things that are most essential. When one pares down to essential, one can see that there are things that one pays the least for. It is a feature not solely of America. The people who kept on working—the food workers, health workers, transport workers: they are the people who are the most vulnerable, the most exposed, the least privileged with this proliferative nature. The other thing that the pandemic really has taught us is that things change. Life does not necessarily go on the way it has before. It can be argued that this is the beginning of a genuine sense of extinction, that things end, that things might end. Yet another thing is that most humans have lived with a sense of global catastrophe, unless one was born in the US after World War II, and died before last year, 2020. But even then, they would have had things like the Cuban missile crisis and the Rwandan

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.82 Published online by Cambridge University Press

genocide. Those were, for my generation, a seemingly unprecedented global catastrophe. But at some point, in someone's life, this is the norm: that the world one knows, the interconnectedness, the continuity one has of the world, can suddenly be exposed as possibly extinct. For example, Heidegger says that one only knows that one has a world. Suppose one is typing something on their computer, suddenly their computer crashes and they realize that their world is composed of that computer. Heidegger had spoken of that in relation with everyday objects: the world breaks down when your hammer breaks. He was right and he was wrong. Where he was wrong is that it is not only the small things. There has been something like this global pandemic, one can also think of World War II—these were near-extinction events. For many peoples from outside the West, there have been other near-extinction events all the time. So, what one might want to say about extinction is, "Yes, it is something about time!"—in the twenty-first century, there is a particular form of it, which would be climate change. But probably, that global catastrophic sense, that their world might end, is probably a far more common human experience—one that a certain generation has been sheltered from. If one looks at history and geopolitics, one cannot think of many humans who would not have experienced some form of global catastrophic near-extinction event. People could have counter-examples, but those would in all probability constitute rare universal experiences.

AD: How do you read the posthumous as a shift away from posthumanism?

CC: In the book I wrote with Jami Weinstein (2017), we came up with the concept of posthumous existence, and we wanted that to have a couple of senses. Obviously, the first sense of "posthumous" is living after you have died, and what it might mean to bid farewell to a certain form of humanism, including posthumanism, and to live in a manner that is somewhat mournful. Thus, instead of having films and books about saving the world, one might start to think about saying goodbye to the world they have, learning to distance themselves from themselves, not be so concerned about saving themselves. That is the first sense of "posthumous": recognizing, in the era of the Anthropocene, that a certain conception of the human has to be over, recognizing that one has to live after their own kind. The second sense of "posthumous" is of course "humans": the word "human," *humus* comes from the earth. It comes from that Adamic myth. It constitutes living with a sense that we are living after the earth, that we no longer have a right to the earth, that the earth is no longer ours, that we are its cohabitants rather than its owners. So, that sense of "posthumous" is "after the earth." But then there is a third sense of "posthumous," which is rethinking the concept of the earth itself: "after the notion of the earth," as humus or fertile soil—that the earth is also something that lives and dies and breathes, has a limit and has its own forms of internal violence, that we are probably not owners of the earth, that instead we have probably been at war with the earth to a certain extent. That is what was sought to be expressed through the "posthumous."

AD: In your Extinction theory, are you somewhere advocating the death of institutionalized theory in humanities and otherwise, and a vehement focus onto praxis?

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.82 Published online by Cambridge University Press

CC: As academics, we are theoretical animals. It would, in some ways, be hypocritical for me to read and write all this theory, and then ask about its end and say: "Oh but it does not matter, it is insane." That leaves us with a paradox. This paradox is that one values their own kind, they want to save themselves, and that includes saving books and saving theory. And one does that. But from within that, one also needs to look outside at things other than their own kind. Here I think of speculative fiction, new forms of writing, new forms of theory. It has always been the case that theoretical life, the life of art, lives on only by destroying itself. One cannot merely keep doing the same stuff. So, there is a negotiation between living on, doing what one does, and recognizing that there are certain parts of them that would not eventually live on, and then, nothing will be there. And that is okay. It is about this attachment to living on, preserving as forms of inscription, of keeping something that is there forever, that has to be said goodbye to, dismissed, abandoned. That is what it is about. It is post-extinction ethics, one in which one can live with the idea of not living on.

AD: I am really intrigued by your notion of "after-man," specifically not "posthuman" but "after-human": this strangely reminds me of Beckett's Godot, the after-man who is supposed to come, to read the signs, induces waiting, but never comes. So, is your after-man a mere metaphor?

CC: In some ways, yes. However, there has always been a sense—when one talks about humanity and saving humanity and the human and humanism, they never mean about humans as they actually are. Every conception of humanism is what one would be, what one could be, and what we ideally are. Whenever there are events of torture, these are called crimes against humanity, as though humanity is not torture, it is not mass murder, it is not genocide. These are crimes against humanity, even though these are what humanity does. So, there has always been within the tradition of humanism a condemnation of actual humanity, and a valorization of this virtual humanity. When one talks about saving humanity, one does not mean saving slavery, colonization, or exploitative capitalism; one means saving something that does not yet exist. So that virtual or "after-human" is built in within the human tradition. Thus, in that sense, humanity has always been a figure or a metaphor or an ideal. However, there is another way to look at the "after-human" or the "after-man." That is not as this ideal of what one is, or what one should be, or what one could be if they just fix things up a little bit. It is something that abandons that notion of a proper humanity, one that is lying just in wait, as long as we clear up the accidents of things like war, slavery, indentured labour, colonization: those things that happened to us. If one is to recognize that these are there within humanity, then it follows that there is something about saying goodbye to that progressive, rational, cosmopolitan tradition.

AD: What is, according to you, the ethical way of imagining extinction? Is it a total annihilation through nuclear warfare, or a slow, perpetual elimination of what we call humans, let's say, through a pandemic situation?

CC: It can be argued that speaking about ethics after extinction is using the term problematically. It is saying that humans cannot be saved. But one

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.82 Published online by Cambridge University Press

thing we know is that what calls itself humanity—let us say, the global liberal capitalism that relies upon the private sphere of hyper-consumption—cannot continue. It is destined to end. It is a question of not when, not if, but how bad. At some point, that has to end. Maybe sooner, maybe later. We are all aware, or should be aware, that the private domestic sphere of hyper-consumption has to end. What follows from this is how one lives with that knowledge. Two things can be said about this. The first is to imagine other forms of existence: that is the speculative version of it, one that has a broader Anthropocene ethics to it. One needs to imagine other forms of existence and start to recognize other ways of being human. However, there is also a sense in which one knows that they cannot be sustainable, and knows that this cannot go on. How well can one behave in end times, knowing that this is the end? Would one want to steal everything for themselves and live large in the last days, which is what is being said (through global liberal capitalism)? One can currently see in corporate America a massive grab of resources and a massive shift of wealth towards the more and more privileged. Is that how one would want to see things out? Or would one want to have minimal ethics, where the killing of black people in America for no reason can be stopped, where everyone can have drinking water, and where there is some form of distributed healthcare? Thus, there is one sense in which it cannot be saved as a whole. But if it cannot be saved, let us live out the end days peacefully. How would one like to live their last days? Grabbing everything for themselves, or having some form of ethics of distribution. So, one form of post-extinction ethics is not the Naomi Klein version: this is an opportunity for everyone to get everything. That cannot happen. This is an opportunity for us to live better, knowing that one is unsustainable.

AD: Do you think COVID-19 has offered us a chance of reimagining our extinction? What are we to learn from this, because this is clearly a case of the animal leaving an imprint on and in the human? What I am asking is, once we do realize this urgency and emergency, what should our next step be?

CC: The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed how destructive the system of current global capitalism is. There is massive inequity in who dies, there is massive inequity as regards who bears the economic cost of this. It is an exposure of massive inequity. One thing that might have been seen, as a part of the economic panic, is that we do not, in reality, need to be buying all the things that we have been buying, and doing all the things that we have been doing. Air travel has grounded to a halt. Hyper-consumption has grounded to a halt. Yet, we are still okay. The other thing that the global pandemic has taught, in a positive sense, is about the dependence the hyper-consuming world has on those who are called "essential workers": the poorly paid, the most vulnerable. This is also an exposure of injustice. It has shown that the world can change. There is not much positive in America right now. But one of the positive things that has happened in the wake of these Black Lives Matter protests is that the discourse of white supremacy has shifted dramatically. Even cynically speaking, there are all these corporations stating in public that even those

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.82 Published online by Cambridge University Press

think that Black Lives Matter—of course, that is hypocrisy, but at least it is the right kind of hypocrisy. Thus, the discourse around valuing life in a pandemic has changed. This valuing of life would probably be the foremost practical outcome of this. There have been discourses like "it is only the elderly who die." In the US, there has been this narrative, "they are prepared to sacrifice their lives for the sake of economy." They are not. In contrast, we have started to pay attention to saving lives, preserving life, and recognizing the vulnerability of some lives. The pandemic in the US has exposed massive racial inequity in terms of who dies, who gets exposed, who gets bailed out. This exposure of inequity is not going unnoticed. For me, that is one of the positive things. There is not much to feel positive about in Trump's America, but the fact that racial inequity is being exposed is one such thing. It is like the 1960s all over again. Things have gone incredibly bad, but by the same token, things have become incredibly apparent, and thus, now, it is a political issue.

Acknowledgment. The author would like to express his deepest appreciation to Prof Claire Colebrook for agreeing to be a part of this exhaustive exchange, and profoundly engaging with such pressing issues.

References

Colebrook, Claire. 2014a. *Death of the posthuman: Essays on extinction*, vol. 1. Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press.

Colebrook, Claire. 2014b. *Sex after life: Essays on extinction*, vol. 2. Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press.

Weinstein, Jami, and Clare Colebrook, ed. 2017. *Posthumous life: Theorizing beyond the posthuman*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Zylinska, Joanna. 2014. Minimal ethics of the Anthropocene. Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press.

Asijit Datta works as an Assistant Professor (II) at SRM University-AP (India) and heads the Department of Media Studies there. He has recently joined the Editorial Board of the journal, *Studies in the Fantastic* (published by the University of Tampa Press). In July 2021, he was appointed Assistant Editor by the *Journal of Posthumanism* (Transnational Press, London). His academic interests include posthumanism, Beckett Studies, zombie studies, modern European theatre, world cinema, and psychoanalysis. For the last four years, he has been maintaining an independent academic channel for students, academicians, and teachers (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCzxb2hTWGNNCOBfcXSgFb2g). He has also received critical acclaim and multiple awards for stage direction and scriptwriting.

Cite this article: Datta A 2025. "A Conversation on "Ecology, Extinction, and Posthumanism" with Claire Colebrook." *Hypatia* **40**, 731–745. https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.82

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.82 Published online by Cambridge University Press