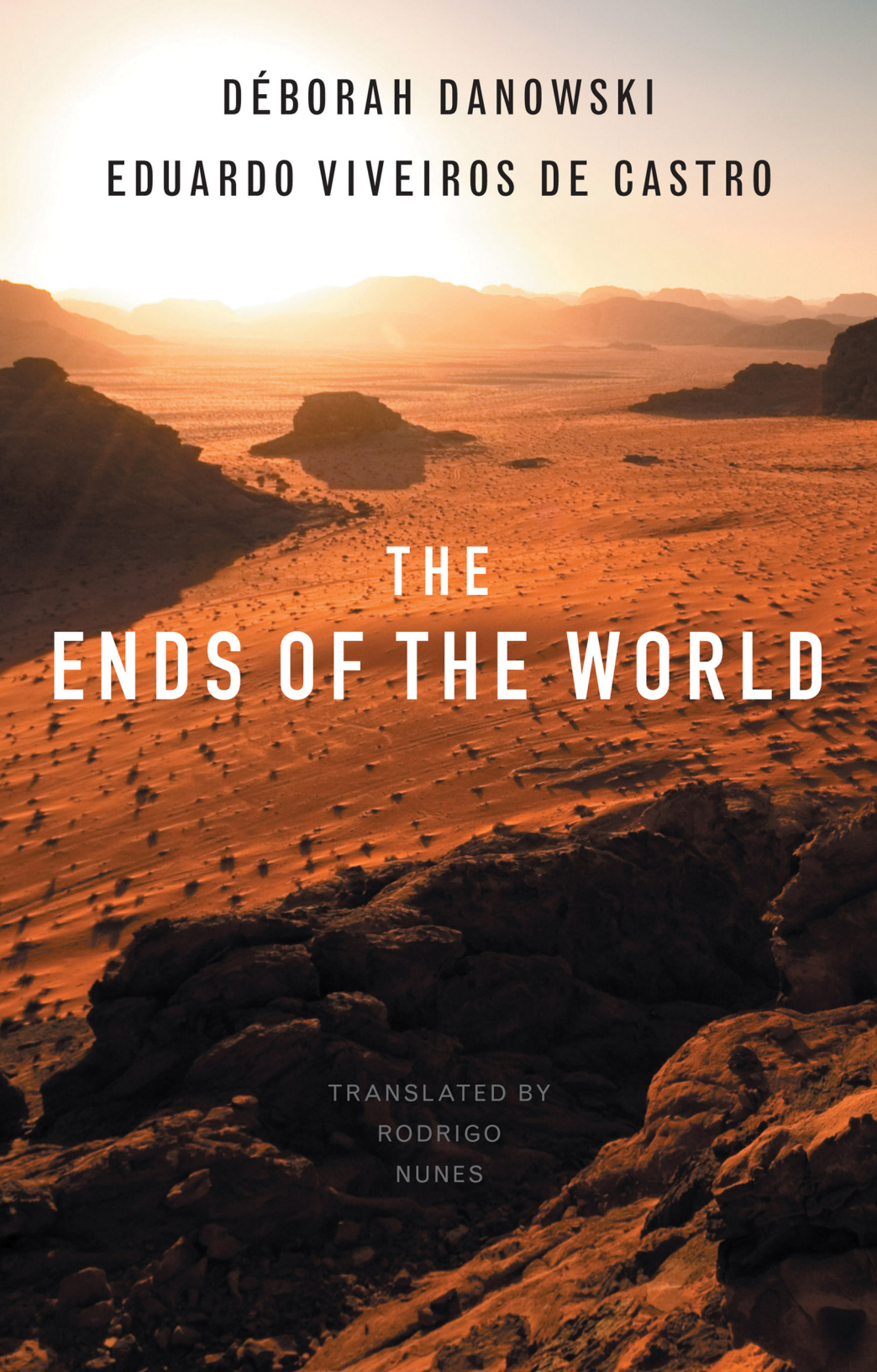




DÉBORAH DANOWSKI
EDUARDO VIVEIROS DE CASTRO

THE
ENDS OF THE WORLD

TRANSLATED BY
RODRIGO
NUNES

The Ends of the World

To Irene, a Terran of the world to come

The Ends of the World

Déborah Danowski and
Eduardo Viveiros de Castro

Translated by Rodrigo Nunes

polity

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Foreword by Bruno Latour

What Isabelle Stengers calls *the intrusion of Gaia* is something that makes us lose all our bearings. Yes, Gaia is an intruder in the sense that nothing had been prepared, thought, planned, predicted, instituted for life under its sign. Nothing, at least, during that historical period which we can no longer call modernity. There was Nature, to be sure, that cold, eternal, distant figure which could dictate its laws to all human actions – including economic law. But this deity strikes us today as too outdated, too naive in its anthropocentrism. In any case, it too was eventually secularized. How can we then become familiar with Gaia, the intruder? This is where the two authors of this essay in mythocosmology step in: an anthropologist with philosophical leanings, a philosopher with an ecological bent. And they do not start from the beginning, of course (as if one had to go from the Big Bang, via Lucy, Lascaux, and so on, to get to the ecological crisis), but from the only place from which it is possible to start, namely, the end. Not the end of times, like Saint John, but the *suspension* of the ways in which time used to pass. The essay sallies forth in an inventory-like manner, a guided tour across the cabinet of curiosities of present philosophical and literary monstrosities, some of them quite fashionable, others not as well known, but all of them symptomatic of the present state of alarm. It then moves on to anthropology, to

those indigenous worlds that never needed to give themselves either a Nature or a Culture. The tone changes because the worlds change. Finally, it is necessary to go into politics. It is with politics and through it that the book draws to an end, evoking the febrile mobilization of all collectives that know that time is no longer on their side. And thus it all starts again – or will start, leaving behind much of what we had grown used to believing in. This book must be read the way one takes a cold shower. So we get used to it. So we prepare. Expecting the worst.

But if we, who are kings of nature, shall have no fear,
who shall?

Clarice Lispector

Unlike us, white people are not afraid of being crushed
by the falling sky. But one day they may fear that as
much as we do!

Davi Kopenawa

Prefatory note

“Things are changing so fast that it is hard to keep track,” says Bruno Latour in a text that we cite right at the start of this book’s second chapter. This applies perfectly to *The Ends of the World*. The book that now stands before the reader’s eyes is the translation of the Portuguese edition, published in October 2014 by Cultura e Barbárie and Instituto Socioambiental, under the title *Há Mundo Por Vir? Ensaio sobre os medos e os fins*.¹ Since then, the stubborn march of global warming, on the one hand, and the ever growing accumulation of discourses (in the broad sense) on the “end of the world” and the Anthropocene, as well as the cloud of themes that the latter term so conveniently and polemically summarizes, on the other hand, has been of such magnitude that any attempt to update the arguments formulated only a couple of years ago would be a nigh impossible task. Let us just recall a few important milestones that have since occurred, which would no doubt impact various passages of this book: the international colloquium, “The Thousand Names of Gaia: From the Anthropocene to the Age of the Earth” (Rio de Janeiro, September 2014), organized by the two authors of *The Ends of the World*, among others, and bringing together several fundamental thinkers working on its subject; the appearance of the papal encyclical *Laudato Si’*, which marked the Vatican’s properly spectacular entrance in the debate; the

apparition (we choose the word advisedly) of *An Ecomodernist Manifesto*, a document whose production was led by the Breakthrough Institute and which was undersigned by many a pro-capitalist celebrity, radicalizing even further the positions defended by that think tank which this book discusses; various texts engaging with *Laudato Si'* as well as many others lambasting *An Ecomodernist Manifesto*, some of which were penned by authors also discussed in our book; the publication of Jason Moore's *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*, which develops an exhaustive narrative of a historical materialist bent on the Anthropocene (rechristened "Capitalocene"); the veritable explosion of events, texts, and manifestos of the "accelerationist" current, which seems to have come of age somewhat – an impression reinforced by the way in which water has progressively been added to its originally thick Promethean wine; and, it goes without saying, the Paris Agreement, a document produced at the COP21 that took place in December 2015, a conference which, perhaps more than any of the other previous 20, managed to instill in environmentalists and scientists an equal combination of hope and disappointment, by dint of managing to produce a consensus among members regarding the need to limit the rise of global temperature to 2°C, 1.5°C if possible, all the while failing to name a single concrete measure that would render that target realistic, or at least likely – thus generating the bitter suspicion that a supposed inevitability of the "Plan B" of geo-engineering is the ghost that animates its machine.²

From a point of view that we could call dialogical rather than critical, however, the most important fact to produce a virtual modification of the context of reception of the present book was the publication of Bruno Latour's *Face à Gaïa* (2015). The latter is an extensively and intensively revamped version of *Facing Gaïa*, the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion presented by the author in Edinburgh in 2013, and which have served as a sort of underlying narrative thread for *The Ends of the World*. *Face à Gaïa* was written taking into account, among several other texts, our own "L'Arrêt de Monde." To incorporate Latour's book into ours would effectively entail writing a different book altogether. All we can therefore do is suggest that *The Ends of the World* be read

alongside *Face à Gaïa* (forthcoming in English translation as *Facing Gaia*, Polity Press, 2017), so that readers can draw their own conclusions.

In short, if we have chosen to publish *Há Mundo Por Vir?* without taking into due account all these subsequent developments, it is because we strongly believe that the observations contained herein, the positions that are contested as well as defended, do not require any correction or elaboration that would modify this book's analyses or central theses.

Finally, we would like to add a couple of technical notes. Firstly: the symbol § indicates passages that are digressions from the main argument, but are intended to add depth of explanation to the text in the same way that an extended footnote would. Secondly: in the Gifford Lectures, Latour renders the French *Terriens* as "Earthlings" or, more frequently, as "Earthbound people," playing on the adjective's multiple connotations: the people who are *destined to* the Earth, who are *tied to* the Earth, who are *under the spell of* the Earth... We have chosen the name "Terrans" to designate this demos, which, as shall be seen, Latour opposes to "Humans" and/or "Moderns," taken as synonymous ways of referring to the same people, namely, "us". *Who* these "Terrans" are is one of the central problems in our book.

Acknowledgments

The first draft of this text was an oral presentation made on December 21, 2012 (the day of the end of the world according to a supposedly “Mayan” calendar), at the Université de Toulouse-Le Mirail, at the behest of the *Equipe de Recherche sur les Rationalités Philosophiques et les Savoirs* [Philosophical Rationalities and Knowledges Research Team] (ERRAPHIS); and, a few weeks later, in a seminar in the *Expérimentation Arts et Politiques* [Experimentation in Art and Politics] (SPEAP) program at the Institute of Political Studies (Sciences Po) in Paris. We thank Jean-Christophe Goddard and Bruno Latour respectively for the invitations, as well as those who attended the lectures for their welcome and comments. Jean-Christophe, Gwen-Elen, and Jeanne Goddard hosted us in Toulouse with a warmth that was nothing less than moving. Bruno Latour, old friend that he is, deserves special thanks for being not only our greatest motivator but also, as shall become obvious, our main interlocutor.

We would also like to thank our brave fellow Terran people of #ATOA, Alexandre Nodari, Flávia Cera, Marcos de Almeida Matos, and Rondinely Gomes de Medeiros, who have been with us from the start, and most especially since the “anthropolemic” event *terrAterra*, which took place as part of the People’s Summit parallel to the Rio+20 Climate Conference, in 2012; to Idelber Avelar, who first pointed us

in the direction of Dipesh Chakrabarty's article, and for his ever generous support to the Terran cause; to Rodrigo Nunes, for several indications regarding speculative realism, accelerationism, and their surroundings; to Felipe Sússekind, Alyne de Castro Costa, Juliana Fausto, Marco Antônio Valentim, Cecilia Cavalieri, José Marcio Fragoso, André Vallias, and Moysés Pinto Neto, for their complicity and decisive support in more than one skirmish in the ongoing war of the worlds. We shall win.

The Ends of the World is an updated, expanded version of the essay "L'Arrêt de monde," translated from Portuguese into French by Oiara Bonilla (whom we thank for her patience) and published in June 2014 in the book *De l'Univers Clos au Monde Infini* (Hache 2014). We are grateful to Émilie Hache, who invited us to contribute to that collection, for her kind decision to publish the text in its entirety and her valuable editorial suggestions (a gratitude we also extend to our friend Élie Kongs). It falls to Michael Houseman, finally, who dedicated a cold afternoon in 2013 to comment on one of the first oral versions of the text and who has, with Marika Moisseff, hosted us so many times in the course of so many years with unconditional and infinitely graceful friendship, to close a list of acknowledgments that should have extended much farther.

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- Chapter 2, p. 1: Thom Yorke. From the song "Idiotheque" by Thomas Edward Yorke (author of lyrics), Philip James Selway, Edward John O'Brien, Colin Charles Greenwood, Jonathan Greenwood, Richard Guy and Paul Lansky, on the album *Kid A* (2000) by Radiohead. Warner/Chappell Music Ltd and Warner/Chappell Music Publishing Ltd.
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1

What rough beast...

The end of the world is a seemingly interminable topic – at least, of course, until it happens. The ethnographic record documents a variety of ways in which human cultures have imagined the disarticulation of the spatio-temporal frameworks of history. Some of these imaginings have had a new lease of life since the 1990s, when scientific consensus became established regarding the ongoing changes in the planet's thermodynamic regime. Information on the (anthropic) causes and (catastrophic) consequences of the planetary "crisis" have accumulated at a speedy rate, mobilizing popular perception as well as academic reflection.

As the gravity and irreversibility of the present environmental and civilizational crisis become more and more evident,¹ there has been a growing proliferation of new and old variations on a theme that we shall call, for the sake of a simplicity that this essay intends to complicate somewhat, "the end of the world." There have been blockbusters of the fantasy genre,² History Channel docufictions, scientific popularization books of varying complexity, videogames, art and music pieces, blogs of all shades across the ideological spectrum, academic journals and specialized networks, reports and pronouncements issued by world organizations of all kinds, unerringly frustrating global climate conferences (like the COPs), theology symposia and papal pronouncements,

philosophical tracts, New Age and neo-pagan ceremonies, an exponentially rising number of political manifestos – in short, texts, contexts, vehicles, speakers, and audiences of all kinds. The presence of this theme in contemporary culture has increased as much and as rapidly as what it refers to – namely, the intensifying changes in the terrestrial macro-environment.

This veritable disphoric efflorescence goes against the grain of the “humanist” optimism that was predominant in the last three or four centuries of Western history. It is a har-binger, if not already a reflection, of something that seemed excluded from the horizon of history qua the saga of Spirit: the ruin of our global civilization as a consequence of its very hegemony. A fall that may drag with it a sizeable portion of human population, obviously beginning with the destitute masses that inhabit the ghettos and garbage dumps of the world system; but the nature of the oncoming catastrophe is such that it will hit us all in one way or another. Therefore, it is not only the dominant, Western, Christian, capitalist civilizational matrix, but the human species as a whole, and the very idea of a human species, that is being interpellated by this crisis. Above all (and for good reason), those peoples, cultures, and societies who are not responsible for said crisis, not to mention several thousand other lineages of living beings who are under threat of extinction or who have already disappeared from the face of the earth thanks to the environmental modifications brought about by “human” actions.³

Such a demographic and civilizational disaster is sometimes imagined as the result of a “global” event, a sudden extinction of all human or terrestrial life resulting from either an “act of God” (a lethal supervirus, a massive volcanic explosion, a collision with a celestial body, a giant solar storm), the cumulative effect of anthropic interventions on the Earth System⁴ (as in Roland Emmerich’s 2004 film *The Day After Tomorrow*), or finally a good old-style nuclear war. On other occasions, the disaster tends to be more realistically depicted, in line with the successive scenarios proposed by the so-called climate sciences, as a *process*. A relentless, extremely intense, already ongoing, increasingly accelerating and in many respects irreversible process, a deterioration of the environmental conditions that presided over human life

during the Holocene,⁵ in which droughts follow hurricanes and floods, human and animal pandemics follow colossal crop losses, and genocidal wars take place against the background of extinctions that affect whole genera, families, and even phyla. All of which would act back on each other in perverse feedback loops that would slowly but inexorably push our species, in a process of “slow violence” (Nixon 2011) that appears to become less and less slow, toward a materially and politically sordid existence – what Isabelle Stengers (2015) has dubbed “the coming barbarism,” and which will be all the more barbaric if the dominant techno-economic system (which we could call, with a nod to Félix Guattari, Integrated World Capitalism) is allowed to continue its headlong flight forward from itself unchecked.

It is not only the natural sciences, and the mass culture feeding off them, which have been registering the world’s drift. Even metaphysics, notoriously the most ethereal of philosophical fields, has begun to echo the generalized disquiet. The last years have seen, for example, the elaboration of new and sophisticated conceptual arguments that propose to “end the world” in their own way:⁶ be it to end the world conceived as being inescapably a world-for-man, so as to justify full epistemic access to a “world-without-us” which would articulate itself absolutely prior to the legislative intervention of the Understanding; be it to end the world-as-meaning, so as to determine Being as pure indifferent exteriority – as if the “real” world, in its radical contingency and purposelessness, had to be “realized” *against* Reason and Meaning.

It is true that many of these metaphysical ends-of-the-world have only an indirect motivational relationship to the physical event of planetary catastrophe; but that does not make them any less expressive of it, offering as they do an outlet for the vertiginous sensation of incompatibility – perhaps even impossibility – between the human and the world. Few areas of contemporary imagination have failed to be affected by the violent re-entry of the Western noosphere into the Earth’s atmosphere, in a veritable and unique process of “transcendence.” We once believed ourselves destined to a vast sidereal ocean, now we find ourselves thrown back at the harbor whence we started...