



Between Gaia and Ground: Four Axioms of Existence and the Ancestral Catastrophe of Late Liberalism

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Between Gaia and Ground: Four Axioms of Existence and the Ancestral

Catastrophe of Late Liberalism, by Elizabeth A. Povinelli, Durham, Duke University Press, 2021, 183 + xii pp., \$24.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-4780-1457-7; \$94.95 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-4780-1364-8

Between Gaia and Ground, by Elizabeth Povinelli, deploys a *meta-critical* analysis of contemporary perspectives in social sciences and humanities. Specifically, the author focuses on a 'significant section of critical theory' (p. 1) particularly popular since 2000 – including approaches such as the *ontological turn*, *new materialisms*, and *posthumanism*; Judith Butler's ideas regarding vulnerability as a human condition; positions that 'stress the quasi, micro-, and slow nature of political power' (p. 19); and Denise Ferreira da Silva's insights with respect to the way in which colonial racism shapes the present. This 'significant section' is characterized by 'recurrent strains' (p. 15) that may be condensed into *four axioms of existence*: (1) the entanglement of existence – or the relational nature of all life, (2) the various ways in which these entanglements are affected by power, (3) disintegration of largescale transformative political events of a revolutionary nature, and (4) the influence of Western ontology and epistemology on colonialism and slavery. A crucial purpose of the book is 'to show that the first axiom has no political relevance in and of itself, indeed, that it may well function as an antipolitical diversion if we begin our approach to social power with it' (p. 2).

Social tense and *ancestral catastrophe* are key concepts in the book. *Social tense* indicates the way in which theory is narrated, for example, where the beginning of a phenomenon is located and its implications for analysis in research. *Ancestral catastrophe* takes into account *social tense* in order to comprehend the current multi-dimensional crisis – often referred to as the *Anthropocene*. If we start from the fourth axiom, we may comprehend this crisis as an *ancestral catastrophe* resulting from violent historic processes which have formed the present. By contrast, as the author indicates, if the first axiom guides the first step in research, we are guided to seek an eventual resolution of the *catastrophe* through a return to humanity's initial condition. Furthermore, if we analyze the *catastrophe* from the first axiom, a compulsive maneuver is expressed and reinforced within late liberalism – the dominant regime deployed since the 1950s. In this maneuver, 'the different toxic accumulations of racial and colonial catastrophes are refigured as a *coming catastrophe* for humanity that can be solved only by returning to a set of first condition – to ontology' (p. 16), namely, the first axiom. In short, the book focuses on the political implications of the tasks of theorization and conceptualization to contribute to critical analysis of colonialism and neoliberalism, as well as to epistemology. Establishing a dialogue based on pragmatism (particularly W. James), as well as on the thought of Deleuze, Guattari, and Martinican poet E. Glissant, Povinelli understands concepts as 'a form of gathering from and rearticulating actual worlds, regions of existence, and the actual ways these worlds and regions are entangled' (p. 130).

The body of the book consists of two sections. The first focuses on the four axioms, explicitly displaying the analytical and political consequences of their order (1–4 vs. 4–1), and explores the *toxicity* of liberalism. The second section presents three illustrative cases: the Eurocentric ideas of Hannah Arendt from the 1950s context of potential atomic annihilation confronted with ideas deployed from Black Atlantic and Indigenous worlds which ‘she saw only as a transit lounge’ (p. 76); the analysis and practices involved in indigenous existence – particularly with respect to the earth and property issues – as compared with the perspective of Gregory Bateson regarding an extended abstract *mind* with biospheric scope as a means to avoiding the environmental debacle during the 60s and 70s; and recent debates regarding the extension of humans’ status toward elements of nature, as well as notions such as *solidarity* (Berardi) and *precariousness* (Butler), proposing a series of concepts that transcend Western imaginaries. In each case, a counterpoint is presented between the ideas of Euro-North American authors – who expand the *catastrophe* toward the horizon, reproducing and/or reinforcing the liberal point of view, and marginalized authors and groups – predominantly from the *Global South* – who highlight the present of the *catastrophe* and its rootedness in the past.

One of the book’s greatest contributions is that it generates dialogue between a significant part of prevailing critical theory and the issue of power. This is achieved through detailed attention to the implications of the task of analysis and development of concepts for understanding social processes and seeking transformations to situations of violence and injustice. This could be useful not only in academic contexts, but also in struggles in which indigenous peoples, Afro-Americans, and other excluded groups participate.

Interestingly, two important issues arise around the social tense of the author herself. First, in relation to the composition of the book, although Povinelli argues the political relevance of working from the ground up (axiom 4), the book is structured according to the typical order, beginning with a general, abstract theoretical-conceptual section (*Gaia*), and following this presenting concrete cases (the *ground*). Nevertheless, the author has produced a wide variety of works which transcend conventional formats, including the graphic novel (Povinelli, 2021), as well as audiovisual work as a member of the Karrabing Film Collective, and the book is nourished by eloquent description of scenes from these films.

Second, with respect to the scope of the theoretical narration – which is principally framed within a North American academic context – although crucial ideas addressed in the book have been equally emphasized in several lines of research, they do not find echo in Povinelli’s book. For example, the content of *ancestral catastrophe* is one of the principal theses sustained by certain scholars of the *Global South* (Quijano 2007; Segato, 2015). Meanwhile, in relation to the importance of the labor of conceptualization, the connection between ideas and power has been explicitly addressed throughout the history of a variety of research-oriented disciplines, including in the works of Marx (1970 [1843-44]), for whom ideas are material forces that struggle among each other and are capable of confronting domination. I mention just two of the diverse authors and schools that have addressed these topics, given their potential contribution to exploring central points of the book. Thus, topics indicated by authors of the *Global South* – as well as the ideas of Marx – should be further explored, particularly with respect to *social tense* between colonialism and capitalism, and subsequent strategies should be developed and implemented rather than simply addressed from a theoretical-conceptual perspective.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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