

# Academic Navel-Gazing

## *Debating Globalization as the Planet Burns*

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### ABSTRACT

Since the 1990s, scholars in the Euro-American academy have debated and analyzed the causes and consequences of globalization. However, in the dominant and most cited literature, scholars have rarely engaged with globalization's relationship to nature and the resulting process of global warming, environmental degradation, mass extinction of biodiversity, and related climate injustices. If scholars do refer to the environment at all, it is usually in vague terms of "sustainability" needed to maintain the neoliberal logics of the status quo. This essay engages with the lack of serious attention in the literature on globalization with ecological devastation leading to our current era of imminent planetary collapse. I reflect on why this has been the case and ask what the silence on nature suggests in terms of the politics of scholarly production. I argue that scholars of globalization predominantly reflect a Eurocentric and anthropocentric perspective informed by Enlightenment thought that includes a human/nature binary and the logics of progress, modernity, and resource extractivism. This blinkered worldview both assumes the dominance of Western-based scholarship and precludes an urgent need to think more holistically about humanity's deeply entangled global futures with more-than-human worlds. I conclude that this dominant northern worldview and its embedded limitations herald the looming irrelevancy of globalization theory produced within the Euro-American academy.

### KEYWORDS

climate change, environment, human/nature binary, knowledge production, more-than-human worlds

In the summer of 2021, I had the great fortune to travel to Greece for ten days, though sweltered under record-breaking summer temperatures while dodging catastrophic wildfires consuming towns north of Athens. As parts of Greece and Turkey blazed, I returned to California to be greeted with news of the Dixie Fire, another out-of-control bushfire consuming large swaths of land north of Sacramento. In fact, across Europe, North and South America, Africa, and into the Siberian hinterland, catastrophic fires were ablaze on an unprecedented scale. As markers of extreme climate crisis, these fires represent the culmination of centuries of extractive capitalism and more recent decades of neoliberal policy that has enabled the largely unregulated global economic exploitation of natural and human resources (Malm, 2016).

While in Greece, I received from leading globalization scholars the wonderful invitation to contribute to a special volume titled *Globalization: Past, Present, Future*. In the call for essays, the editors suggested engaging with topics such as global governance, populism, digitization, new economic systems, new forms of democracy, and theoretical and methodological models to better understand globalization and its reconfiguration in the twenty-first century. They urged contributors to engage with what they call the “Great Unsettling” and the current conditions of insecurity, uncertainty, and dislocation that mark the present moment. And they called for, among other things, evaluations of globalization dynamics from Indigenous, Southern, postcolonial, or intersectional perspectives that disrupt the dominant narratives in the Euro-American academy. Notably, what was not mentioned at all in the list of today’s “serious disintegrative threats to the social cohesion and stability of familiar lifeworlds” was the destruction of the environment and biodiversity unfolding on a global scale and related climate crises and injustices impacting the world.

In this essay I argue that the relationship between globalization—however defined—and imminent ecological collapse is central to any conversation about the past, present, and future of global processes and related theories of globalization. Environmental degradation has a long history, related to colonial expansion, imperialism, capitalism, and the looting of resources in Africa, the Middle East, and the New World by European powers. Extreme environmental degradation marks our current era, enabled through neoliberal and neocolonial logics and unregulated processes of extractivism in both the Global South and Global North. Future predictions of environmental degradation and the disruption of atmospheric, oceanic, and biological earth systems suggest we are facing imminent collapse of all we take for granted (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2022). In the words of the French philosopher Bruno Latour, earth is turning back on itself, and the land that we so confidently occupied in the past is now actively occupying us (Latour, 2018; see also Chakrabaty, 2021). We are facing a great unsettling indeed!!

My central argument is that our collective future is one of climate-driven globalization. By this I mean that the climate crisis has necessarily become the

broad context in which all discussions of globalization must be analyzed. Nature's destruction by humans is not one competing narrative about globalization and its winners and losers, as some would argue (Roberts & Lamp, 2021). Nature's destruction is the dominant and central narrative because it ultimately informs our collective final story. If the forests burn, the oceans rise, and the waters dry up, Mother Nature's loss is ultimately the loss of humanity itself. So, we can debate all day long: Is globalization market-driven, as many Western scholars would have it? Or does politics play a greater role? What about cultural, religious, or civilizational conflict? My point is that the modernist construct of nature as something distinct from the human, as an arena to be idealized, managed, or exploited, has blinded us from seeing the ecological calamity unfolding before us (Cronon, 1996). We have entered a new anthropocentric era in which the planetary earth system is decentering human agency itself (Chakrabaty, 2021). What this means for scholars is that the causes and consequences of human-driven climate change should frame and inform all global concerns, be these pandemics, political polarization, mass migrations, infrastructure, famine, economic instability, nuclear warfare, failure of global governance mechanisms, and so on.<sup>2</sup>

The climate crisis is why I decided to accept the invitation to contribute to this volume. I don't wish to disrespect my colleagues for what I consider their blinkered thinking, but rather to insist that we can't go on theorizing about globalization and its causes and consequences, winners and losers, without also foregrounding long histories involving the violent destruction of dehumanized peoples, animals, and fragile ecosystems, particularly in the Global South (Shiva, 2013; Angus, 2016; Malm, 2016). This essay is an urgent plea for scholars in the Global North to "look up" from their computers and privileged Eurocentric worldviews and take seriously ecological collapse and our increasingly fragile collective futures. If we are to slow the climate crisis, we need to overcome a dominant human/nature binary and renew a consciousness about the relationality between humans and more-than-human worlds. This consciousness has been eclipsed for centuries in knowledge emanating from the Euro-American academy and is tellingly absent in most of today's theorizing in the Global North about globalization.

#### LESSONS FROM ANCIENT TIMES

As Manfred B. Steger, one of the leading theorists of globalization reminds us, third-century-bce Greek astronomers were some of the earliest to introduce the notion of Earth as a rounded orb or ball (Steger, 2021). Ancient Greeks imagined access to the core of this spherical Earth to exist at Delphi, north of Athens, where the Oracle of Apollo was consulted by kings, military leaders, and elites from all over the world desiring to know the future. While Apollo was the god of the sun, the word *apollo* means stone. According to Greek mythology, Chronos, god of the heavens, and his wife Rhea, daughter of the earth goddess Gaia, had children. But Chronos believed a prophecy that one of his children would take away his



FIGURE 14.1. The navel or *omphalos* stone. Delphi, Greece, 2021. Author's photograph.

throne, and to stave off this possibility he devoured each child at birth. Rhea was so distressed that she gave birth to her last child, infant Zeus, in a cave on the island of Crete, substituting for the child a stone wrapped in swaddling clothes (the *omphalos*), which Chronos devoured (Johnson, 1982).

In a related myth, Zeus sent two eagles to opposite ends of the world (east and west) to search for his “Grandmother Earth” or Gaia. They flew around the world and crossed paths at Delphi. Zeus then declared Delphi to be the center of the Earth where the *omphalos*, or navel/womb of Gaia was found, and placed a monumental stone there. Travelers seeking the Oracle entered the scared Delphi precinct where they were greeted by the navel stone atop a pillar, flanked by eagle sculptures. It must have been an awe-inspiring vista for the traveler looking down from the Delphi sanctuary, across other temples and sacred sites, into the sweeping Pleistos River Valley below. Today the original marble monument can be seen in the nearby Delphi Archeological Museum, and outside in the precinct a simplified stone version marks the spot where the monument was originally installed (figure 14.1).

Another ancient tale involving the navel or *omphalos* surrounds the monks of Mount Atos, a mountain and peninsula in northeastern Greece. The mountain is known as the Holy Mountain and was the home of early Greek and Christian monks since 200 ce. While Christianity was a new religion at this time, it slowly gained strength across the region, and by 312 ce the Roman Emperor Constantine had become a supporter for political and financial reasons, securing the religion's prominence. Constantine believed that a religion based on the worship of a single god, in contrast to the multitude of gods worshipped by Greeks, would be a better mechanism for holding the vast Roman Empire together (Cameron, 1994; Ehrman, 2018). In 313 ce Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, which legalized Christianity across his vast lands, and so began the slow decline of Hellenic



FIGURE 14.2. *Satyres en atlante*. Four statues depicting *omphaloskepsis*. 2nd Century. Roman, Marble. Louvre Museum. Wikimedia Commons.

religious rituals that were increasingly deemed pagan and outlawed. Numerous Christian monasteries were built on Mount Atos, correlating to a decline in Greek devotion to the Olympian gods and the power of Delphi and the Oracle. In 393 ce, Emperor Theodosius ordered the closing of all pagan sanctuaries including Delphi, which was taken over by Christians and finally abandoned in the seventh century (Scott, 2015; Beaton, 2021).

While information is scarce, it is evident that Christian monks living in the monasteries on Mount Atos practiced social isolation, especially from women. They also engaged in forms of rapture to aid their spiritual mediation with God that included gazing at one's navel. According to John G. Millingen, a surgeon serving in the British army in the early nineteenth century, the monks were *omphalopsychians*, or navel-gazers; Millingen writes that they “pretended or fancied that they experienced celestial joys when gazing on their umbilical region, in converse with the Deity” (1839: 40). This form of unique mediation is visualized in a large Roman marble sculpture dating from the second century, housed in the Louvre Museum (figure 14.2). Today, the expression *navel-gazing* refers to someone who is self-absorbed, has lost perspective, and has limited desire to move, change, or relate to their surrounding world.

These Greek and Roman histories from ancient times make an interesting contrast and represent different modes of human imaginary. Delphi's navel as the



outward-facing gateway of the world underscores connections between east and west, animals and humans, as well as across space and time. At Delphi the world was the focus of the gaze, and the navel the entry point to an inclusive sphere that included relations between women and men, animals, nature, deities, as well as the stars, sun, and moon. In contrast, the imaginary of Mount Atos's navel-gazers was inward-looking, exclusive, self-absorbed, and anthropocentric. In the statue, male humans are the central gazers looking back at themselves in awe, their very bodies the channel through which the male divinity is received. In this exclusionary Christian worldview, eclipsed, if not forgotten, was the expansive and much more holistic imaginary of Hellenism.

Notable in the rise of the Roman Empire over the Greek world was the instrumental relationship between Christianity, imperialism, and trade. Often overlooked is that Christianity was put into the service of the Roman Empire hundreds of years before it would be put into the service of Europeans, extending their imperial reach into the Middle East, Africa, and the New World. This territorial reach was justified through the Pope's Doctrine of Discovery (1493) and substantiated through the concept of *terra nullius*, which legally justified the western possession of lands and founding of capitalist trading networks (Charles & Rah, 2019). Putting this differently, in the modern era Christianity (both Catholic and then Protestant denominations) served as an institutional frame and moral justification for the conquering of lands, slaughter of Indigenous and dark-skinned peoples, and extraction of natural resources to trade for profit back home in the European motherlands.

#### PARADIGM WARS

Differences in how humans imagined their place in the ancient world—between Delphi as the navel opening out to the world on the one hand, and the exclusionary monk navel-gazers on the other—percolate across the centuries to reemerge today in what scholars have called the paradigm wars. This phrase refers to competing ideals of how people should live and be in the world and is often used to superficially describe the differences between European and non-European societies—what today is often referred to as the contrast between a Global North worldview, informed by modernist thinking, and a Global South worldview, which relates to a wide spectrum of cosmologies and different kinds of knowledge that was historically considered (by the West) to be primitive or premodern and thus inferior.

Of course, there is no such thing as a homogenous Global North worldview, just as there is no such southern counterpart. Wherever one is in the world, there are always alternative thinkers, philosophers, and belief systems that work against dominant epistemological and conceptual frameworks. Still, in the era of post-Enlightenment Europe, the power/knowledge nexus and the institutions through which it was practiced “allowed” certain ideas to flourish and others to be ignored,

marginalized, silenced, or even erased (Foucault, 1995). In late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe and the United States, and across a wide range of colonies, there emerged a shared set of dominant values, experiences, and discourses woven together through state and social institutions, extractive capitalistic logics, and cultural hierarchies of white Christian racial superiority (Said, 1979). This imaginary was not static or fixed and was heavily influenced by encounters with Others in colonial territories in the Americas, Africa, Middle East, Asia, and the Pacific (Memmi, [1965] 1991; Fanon, 1968; Lowe, 2015). Nonetheless, it can be argued, a Western worldview had become consolidated by the late nineteenth century, reinforced in international law and scientific knowledge, and intimately connected to the expansion of a global political economy centered on European industrialization and promotion of world trade (Hobsbawm, 1987; Ferro, 1997). This worldview was sufficiently cohesive that those associated with Pan-Africanism in the post-World War II decolonial period pushed explicitly for an alternative set of values and “worldmaking” (see Getachew, 2019).

A recent iteration of this differentiation between European and non-European perspectives appears in the edited volume *Paradigm Wars: Indigenous Peoples' Resistance to Globalization*. This publication was an important intervention emerging out of the conversations among Indigenous communities shaping the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples that was adopted by the General Assembly in 2007. As Jerry Mander writes in the volume's introduction, while there are many Indigenous communities around the world, often very different from each other, they typically have “shared primary values as reciprocal relationships with nature, economies of limits and balance, the central importance of community values and collective ownership, and their integration into and equality with the natural world” (Mander, 2006: 4). Indigenous peoples' complex cosmologies, mythologies, and holistic appreciation of humans' relationality with more-than-human worlds echo some key elements in the cultural values of the denigrated “paganism” of Ancient Greece.

The opposing paradigm, according to Mander, reflects a modernist Western perspective that has deep roots in the logics of European colonialism and extractive capitalism and dominates today's global political economy (Mander, 2006). This paradigm is centered around ideologies of economic growth, progress, and individualism. And it is infused with a human/nature binary that is deeply racialized and gendered, ranking certain people (i.e., white, male) above all other biological life while simultaneously disconnecting all humans from the environments they inhabit (Haraway, 1990). As William Cronon noted in his highly influential essay “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” Western intellectual thought constructed a particular image of what constitutes nature. In his words: “The place where we are is the place where nature is not” (Cronon, 1996). Ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood takes this line of thinking a step further in her important book *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, calling the

human/nature binary “the foundational delusion of the West” and arguing that it is a “dangerous doctrine, strongly implicated in today’s environmental crisis.” Plumwood states that this binary is reinforced by a set of “interrelated and mutually reinforcing dualisms . . . that forms a fault-line which runs through its [Western culture’s] entire conceptual system” (Plumwood, 1993: 42). Some of the more obvious of these include male/female, mind/body, master/slave, civilized/primitive, lawful/lawless, and Christian/pagan.

The modern Western paradigm reflects a self-absorbed, individualistic, and profit-driven understanding of the world. As part of the commodification process of capitalism, Europeans regarded the natural environment as an object and resource to be used for human purposes and financial gain. The paradigm was justified through the creation of a racialized hierarchy in which white societies were considered superior over “uncivilized” darker peoples and the natural environments they inhabited. Conveniently, this racial hierarchy enabled exploitative relations between colonizers and colonized and created a worldview in which the elements of nature (including Indigenous peoples and African slaves who were typically not considered human) were widely regarded as resources to be possessed, plundered, bred, killed, mined, deforested, burned, polluted, and so on. This interlinked system of colonialism, capitalism, and slavery—what Cedric Robinson called “racial capitalism”—persists within our contemporary world.<sup>3</sup> It maintains the power of a global capitalist elite and continues to inform extractive capitalist practices that are dramatically warming the planet, creating disposable communities, destroying biodiversity and fragile ecosystems, and driving planetary collapse.

As we all know, extractive capitalism disproportionately impacts the poorer countries and more vulnerable peoples who live primarily in the Global South. Rob Nixon has eloquently argued that those in the Global North often cannot see the “slow violence” affecting those living in the Global South, “a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous but instead incremental, whose calamitous repercussions are postponed for years or decades or centuries” (Nixon, 2011). Many people living in wealthy industrialized societies live a life that responds to what is immediate and obvious, exemplified by the fast-paced corporate news cycles. One result is that our political and emotional responses are inadequate to comprehending the quiet oozing of toxins into rivers, the drip . . . drip . . . drip . . . of melting glaciers, or the silence of birdsong or reduced humming of bees (Carson, [1962] 2002). Nor do we see mining contractors shooting Indigenous land protectors deep in the Amazonian rainforest or mercenaries hired by Monsanto, the multinational seed company, poisoning small farmers who refuse to plant its genetically modified seeds. Nixon goes on, “To confront slow violence is to take up, in all its temporal complexity, the politics of the visible and the invisible” (Nixon, 2011).

The paradigm wars suggest elements of what may be missing in our dominant theories of globalization. Most theorists of globalization sit squarely on one side of



the divide, and their scholarship reflects a modernist Euro-American perspective. But taking opposing paradigms seriously suggests a multiplicity of ways of thinking and knowing, other perspectives that narrate countertraditions, histories and storytelling, and importantly, alternative modes of living with nature.

#### MORE-THAN-HUMAN WORLDS

Against a global economic system of extractivism and racial capitalism, I argue that we need to open our eyes, look up, and think *with* and *through* the natural world to overcome the human/nature binary that prevails in the dominant thinking of the Global North (Darian-Smith, 2022). This means relearning understandings of relationality between humans and the places where people live and ultimately depend upon for survival. Of course, I am not alone in this argument, and growing numbers of scholars in the Euro-American academy are pushing for the widening of theoretical, analytical, and methodological approaches that take seriously the coconstitutive relations between people and nature. This includes a wide range of scholars associated with ecofeminism, new materialism, socioecological thought, decolonialism, posthuman and nonhuman literatures (i.e., Warren, 2000; Shiva and Mies, 2014; Grusin, 2015; Mignolo and Walsh, 2018; Davies, 2022). And perhaps most importantly, it includes the work of Indigenous scholars who are helping scholars who are non-Indigenous understand the limits of their theoretical models in the light of the unfolding climate crisis (Wildcat, 2009; Kimmerer, 2013; Gilio-Whitaker, 2019).

What do I mean by more-than-human worlds? Often referred to as other-than-human worlds or the nature-culture-nexus, the concept is quite simple. The expression refers to a world that includes and exceeds humans, underscoring the complex interdependencies between all biological life on the planet. It fundamentally seeks to disrupt the dominant human/nature binary and refutes the perspective that sees humans as superior in the belief that they can control nature. This means thinking of humans as living within and being part of nature—what Donna Haraway calls *naturecultures* (Haraway, 2008; Merrick, 2017).

The term “more-than-human-world” is often associated with the deep insights and knowledge held by First Nations and Indigenous communities who see kinship and intimate relations existing between all biological things. In the context of the climate emergency, the term has been taken up by scholars and activists to highlight our relational dependencies on forests, rivers, oceans, and clean air for basic human survival (Kohn, 2013). In the more-than-human framework, people are not understood as autonomous entities distinct from the natural world. Rather, according to anthropologists Tim Ingold and Gisli Palsson, humans are “fluid beings, with flexible, porous boundaries; they are necessarily embedded in relations, neither purely biological nor purely social, and their essence is best rendered as something constantly in the making and not as a fixed, context-independent species-being” (Ingold & Palsson, 2013: 39). This mode of relational thinking

aligns with many Indigenous scholars. For instance, Jack Forbes, a leading Indigenous scholar and founder of one of the first Native American Studies programs at the University of California, Davis, writes:

I can lose my hands and still live. I can lose my legs and still live. I can lose my eyes and still live . . . But if I lose the air I die. If I lose the sun I die. If I lose the earth I die. If I lose the water I die. If I lose the plants and animals I die. All of these things are more a part of me, more essential to my every breath, than is my so-called body. (Forbes, 2001)

The dominant thinking in the Global North that has prevailed for centuries is that economies, societies, and ecological systems are distinct yet overlapping arenas. In contrast, a more-than-human worldview visualizes these relations as synergistic and mutually constitutive but ultimately framed by ecological systems, or what is often called the web of life. These relational entities are not monolithic (diverse natures, diverse societies, diverse economies, diverse laws, and so on). Moreover, in the more-than-human worldview, if the human species, like those of dinosaurs, becomes extinct the web of life will adapt and regenerate without human presence. This means that contrary to mainstream Western thinking, humans (e.g., Elon Musk) are not in the driver's seat and able—through technology, scientific knowledge, and entrepreneurial innovation—to manage and exploit nature indefinitely. The arrogance of such anthropocentric thinking is precisely what has led to the ecological emergency we are all facing today, albeit poor, marginalized, and Indigenous peoples are disproportionately impacted by it.

My point is that political and economic elites are invested in silencing alternative perspectives such as more-than-human worldviews because global asymmetries of structural power require it. This is why, notes the Indian writer Amitav Ghosh in his book *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (2021), global elites understand climate change as a “techno-economic” concern, but:

for the have-nots of the world, in rich and poor countries alike, it is primarily a matter of justice, rooted in histories of race, class, and geopolitics. From this perspective, climate negotiations are not just about emissions and greenhouse gases; they hinge precisely on issues that are not, and can never be, discussed—issues that are ultimately related to the global distribution of power. (Ghosh, 2021: 158–59; see also Gilio-Whitaker, 2019)

## BLINKERED GLOBALIZATION THEORY

Unfortunately, most theorists of globalization in the Global North remain largely unaffected by emerging conversations about more-than-human worlds and the call to rethink human relations with nature, which are particularly pertinent given the looming climate emergency. Putting this differently, these theorists have not engaged with what is going on in a wide range of critical scholarship and innovative social theory across the humanities and social sciences. And beyond

the academy, these theorists seem impervious to an escalating climate crisis and related social and environmental justice movements that are hard to ignore. It should be remembered that 2019 marked a milestone in terms of global protests about the climate emergency. In September of that year, the Global Climate Strike saw protests taking place across 4,500 locations in 150 countries with an estimated participation of over six million people including many school students, activists, scientists, and community leaders in what has been called the largest climate strike in world history.

The lack of scholarly engagement in both pioneering intellectual conversations and widespread social protests forces us to consider the production of globalization theory and ask fundamental questions. I ask, along with Steger, to what degree do globalization theories reflect Eurocentric values, priorities, and modes of thinking (Steger, 2021)? More specifically, I question to what degree globalization theories implicitly endorse dualisms such as the human/nature binary, “which runs through [Western culture’s] entire conceptual system.” What does this say about the relevance of our work, removed from cutting-edge Western and non-Western scholarship and the realities of billions of people’s degraded lives? These questions are significant, speaking to the core of the work we do, the power relations we unconsciously endorse, the cultural and ethical values we reflect, and the privileged positionality we take for granted as scholars in the Global North.

In 2015 I wrote an essay about the new field of global studies, which takes seriously theories of globalization. The title of the essay posed a question: “Global Studies—Handmaiden to Neoliberalism?” It was based on a paper I presented on a panel attempting to define the field of global studies, comprised of five senior white men, myself as the only woman, and no scholar of color in sight. In the paper I argued:

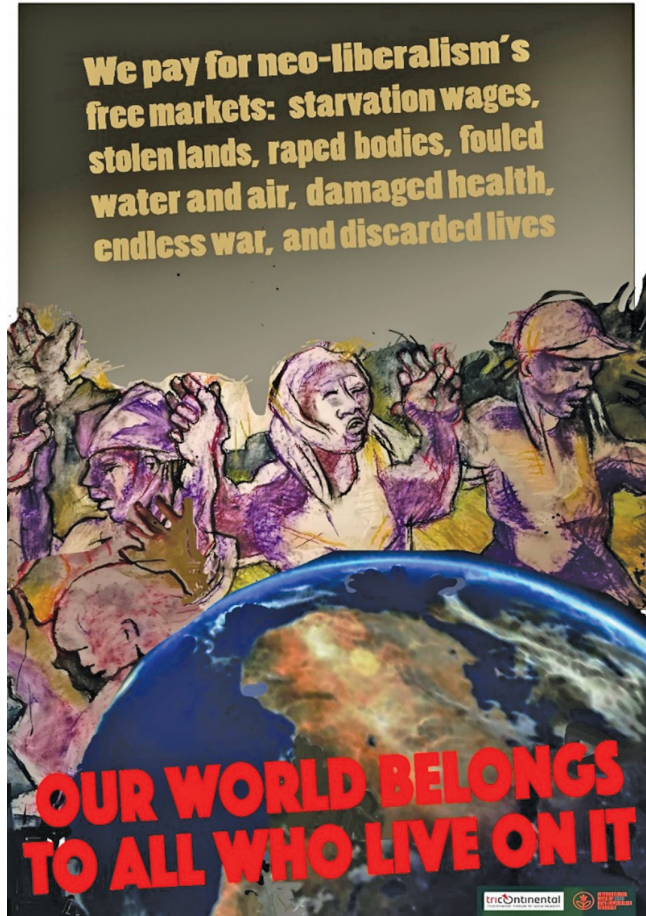
Scholars involved in global studies may want to think about how to decolonize this new field of inquiry and be more inclusive of pluralistic perspectives and subject positions within our global research. This would require us first acknowledging the current power biases within the field of global studies, and then actively seeking conversations and collaborations with colleagues from across the global south, east, and north. It would require us to move past macro structural frames and analyses that many of us hide behind, and engage with the local, the particular, the unpredictable, and the personal. It would require us to be open to new, perhaps counter-intuitive, concepts, and narratives. And it would force us to interrogate our own deeply embedded and historically informed ethnocentric Western assumptions. I am not suggesting that this could happen overnight, or that it will even happen any time soon. But I do think it is important to talk about. Otherwise, global studies may end up being a white man’s club. Worse still, future historians may call the field of global studies the “handmaiden of neoliberalism” (Darian-Smith, 2015: 166; Darian-Smith, 2019).

Since 2015 a few global studies departments in the United States have become increasingly diverse in terms of faculty experiences, training, perspectives, and worldviews. And some scholars in these programs take seriously the need to decolonize the epistemological assumptions built into Western knowledge production (Santos, 2007; Mignolo, 2010; paperson, 2017; Bhabra and Nisancioglu, 2018).<sup>4</sup> But, as Steger has noted, only a small number of globalization theorists have challenged the biases of Eurocentrism (Steger, 2021: 34). This accords with most departments in the social sciences and humanities that have shifted very little, if at all, in their intellectual orientation, research priorities, and positionality despite the bombardment of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) rhetoric by university administrators. This is particularly true in political science, sociology, and economics departments, where most of the dominant globalization theorists reside (Darian-Smith, 2017).

Why is this the case? What are the structural, institutional, and ideological limitations that impact the willingness of mainstream globalization theorists to engage the realities of a global system that involves pluralist cultures, communities, and perspectives? Relatedly, why are globalization theorists not engaged with the global politics of knowledge production and their privileged positionality within that sphere? Why are they apparently unwilling to concede—judging from the literatures cited in their scholarship—that globalization may seem very different to a scholar born in the Global South and, importantly, that they could learn much from that person? Here I am thinking about the overlooked work of scholars such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, a comparative literature scholar born in Kenya, who provocatively theorizes about globalization in his book *Globalectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing* (2014).

This raises another series of questions: Why have mainstream theorists of globalization failed to engage the enduring legacies of environmental degradation implemented over long histories of European colonialism and economies of extractive capitalism? Why, when analyzing such things as the interconnectivity enabled by technology and financialization, and ongoing security and trade conflicts over oil and natural resources, is there a failure to “see” the environmental degradation and injustices concurrently at play? Or when analyzing today’s sources of extreme-Right populist discontent, how it is possible to ignore that people’s anxieties about growing inequality are connected to the negative impacts of the climate crisis that harm people’s jobs, lands, and livelihoods and create grave environmental injustices in the Global North and Global South (e.g., Axford, 2021; Pieterse, 2021)? It seems that one would have to be deliberately myopic to overlook what the majority of poor people living in the Global North and Global South confront daily in terms of land-grabbing, toxic mining, mega-dam building, food insecurity, pollution, deforestation, drought, heatwaves, rising oceans, and catastrophic fires and floods (figure 14.3). Importantly, not just the poor and marginalized are affected

FIGURE 14.3.  
Judy Seidman,  
South Africa.  
2020. “Our world  
belongs to all who  
live on it” is based  
upon the state-  
ment of South  
Africa’s 1956  
Freedom Charter  
(the founding  
document of the  
anti-apartheid  
struggle): “South  
Africa belongs to  
all who live in it.”



by the climate crisis—a fact that most globalization scholars in the Global North seem to overlook. As noted by the journalist Matthew Taylor, “As the climate crisis escalates it will have an impact on most aspects of our lives wherever we are living, from security to the cost of living, from where and how we live and move around, to our diets and even our jobs” (Taylor, 2022).

Below I list what I see as some of the reasons for blinkered thinking among mainstream theorists of globalization in the Euro-American academy, though I am sure others could contribute additional points:

1. Globalization theory in the Global North, though it analyzes global processes, has historically emerged out of a comparative state-centric analysis. This reflects the dominant training of mainstream globalization theorists within social science disciplines such as political science, international relations, sociology, law, and economics (Darian-Smith, 2017).

2. State-centered scholarship is by the nature of its modernist theories, analytical concepts, and methods blind to—perhaps even dismissive of—knowledge and epistemologies not grounded in state territorial assumptions. Put simply, humans’ coconstitutive relations with the natural world don’t fit into established models, literatures, and scholarly imaginaries within the Global North. This is particularly problematic in the case of the looming climate emergency, which calls for a rethinking of our core assumptions about what constitutes the “social” that may not neatly correlate with societies contained by national borders.
3. Disciplines such as political science, sociology, law, and economics pride themselves on the production of “empirical” knowledge, implying they produce “objective” social-scientific data and apolitical analysis. More disturbingly, there is an assumption that this data has universal application. Such objectivity veils an intellectual conservatism that resists engaging with issues of power, privilege, and Eurocentrism and avoids thinking about—let alone fostering—social or political change. Drawing upon the insights of Rob Nixon, globalization theorists have simply been unable to “see” the environmentalism of the poor (Nixon, 2011).
4. Relatedly, even among interdisciplinary scholars, there is a tendency to be critical but not constructive. By this I mean that it is easy to critique a given system and structure of power, but both difficult and risky to create a new conceptual framework that can be dismissed by mainstream scholars as irrelevant. Perhaps this accounts for the lack of scholarship that effectively embraces transdisciplinarity within the Euro-America academy (Esser & Mittleman, 2017; Darian-Smith & McCarty, 2017; Steger, 2019). With respect to the study of the climate emergency, transdisciplinarity suggests the need to engage a wide range of knowledge produced within the social sciences and humanities, as well as knowledge produced by earth-systems scholars, biologists, geologists, and climatologists to gain a more holistic approach to analyzing the complexity of the problem. This requires much effort and is difficult, though it can be done. An outstanding example of this kind of transdisciplinary scholarship is Kathryn Yusoff’s book *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (2019). But this kind of pioneering work is not always supported by funding agencies and professional scholarly associations, nor given the recognition it deserves in university guidelines on faculty merits and promotions.
5. If scholars within the Euro-American academy do bump up against environmental degradation, it has historically been in former colonies and poorer countries of the Global South. In other words, until very recently climate change was perceived as a problem for people over “there,” and not a real concern for the people of rich countries in the Global North. This geopolitical spatial disconnect has helped profile the environment as not a very sexy, fundable, or relevant research topic. Thankfully, however, this is changing.



6. Today's dominant globalization theories emerged in the 1990s, focusing on the causes and consequences of neoliberal processes that were, and continue to be, primarily understood as driven by a global political economy. In this market-based narrative, nature continues to be seen as a resource and object of commodification, reinforcing the centuries-old human/nature binary and (neo)colonial basis of capital accumulation. So, it is not surprising that much globalization theory has overlooked the impact of neoliberalism on the environment (and related disproportionate impacts on women, poor, Indigenous, and racially marginalized communities). This silence suggests, at best, ignorance and privilege, and at worst racism, sexism, and complicity in reproducing the exploitative logics of late capitalism.
7. Perhaps most profoundly, there is yet no agreed-upon discourse among scholars in the Global North for transcending the human/nature binary that would allow us to think relationally *with* and *through* nature. This would involve, as Margaret Davies has noted, "upending everything we thought we knew and creating with, and working with, new concepts" (private conversation). Not all scholars are capable of this or prepared to take on this demanding work, even in the unlikely event that many agree it is an appropriate path forward.

#### CONCLUSION: CLIMATE-DRIVEN GLOBALIZATION

Not unlike the Roman monks on Mount Atos from ancient times, most scholars in the Global North sit in exclusive office-cells perched high in the ivory tower of universities, gazing out at the people below, seeking knowledge through individualized worldviews as if these represent all of humanity. This scholarly purview is premised—literally, structurally, and epistemologically—on the colonization, possession, and exploitation of lands and peoples.

However, taking a cue from the Greeks at Delphi who held a very different attitude to the world than the Romans, it is possible to imagine a world based on openness and receptiveness between humans and more-than-humans, rather than a world of bounded projections of racialized and gendered individual control. Drawing on the insights of ancient Greece, today's global studies scholars can play a vital role in resisting the elite positionality of the Euro-American academy by highlighting and promoting the diversity of perspectives and worldviews that inform our collective futures. Understanding the bottom-up entangled connections of global processes, global studies scholars are uniquely positioned to underscore the politics of knowledge production that have historically silenced alternative understandings of being in the world. Specifically, in this essay I have argued that this means transcending the human/nature binary and embracing the complex relations people have with nature that have for centuries been marginalized in Western thinking. The more-than-human framework that is currently

gaining traction across the academy provides a theoretical and epistemological lens through which to relearn humanity's interconnections with the planet. The stakes could not be higher. In the context of imminent ecological collapse, revitalizing knowledge about the centrality of nature is integral to long-term human survival.

But relearning one's interconnected place in the world is never going to be easy, no matter how necessary or important it may be. Manfred Steger acknowledges this difficulty. In an opening bid to "decolonize globalization theory by cutting it loose from its Euro-American moorings," he calls for the integration of four relevant keywords into contemporary theorizing about globalization—Eurocentrism, epistemicide, Anthropocene, and ecocide (Steger, 2021: 35). I am hopeful that scholars will take this call seriously, but I am also skeptical of its efficacy. As Ghosh reminds us in *The Great Derangement*, the climate emergency presents a crisis of cultural imagination (Ghosh, 2016). It is extremely difficult, and maybe even impossible, for people to cut loose from existing systems of language, imagery, ideology, and myth that inform a common "background" enabling people to communicate (Hekman, 1999). Embracing a vocabulary that underscores asymmetries of global power and the devastating impacts of globalization on peoples, animals, and environments may be a good first step. But it is unlikely to generate alternative ways of thinking and the "epistemic disobedience" required to overcome the narrow-mindedness of scholars in the Global North (Mignolo, 2010).

So, what are we to do? In this essay I have argued that debating globalization and trying to frame and analyze what is going on in the world by adopting a new vocabulary is simply inadequate. What is needed is far more difficult: we must critically understand our political and ethical engagement with all biological life and, in turn, ask, how do we relate to being in the world *together*? This will require scholars not necessarily cutting loose but rather teasing out the alternative perspectives and marginalized approaches within our existing Eurocentric theories. So, it is not a matter of arguing that non-Western perspectives are better, superior, or more truthful than Western perspectives, as some involved in the paradigm wars discussed above would argue. Rather, a more productive stance would draw on existing discourse to shift the conversation and create new meaning to suit new purposes. This new intellectual background would then be—hopefully—more responsive to non-Western theories and approaches. The feminist scholar Susan Hekman wrote about this strategy decades ago in her efforts to insert feminist perspectives into a male-dominated academy, arguing "that shifting the riverbed of thought requires not just changing the meaning of words but also telling a different story. It must be a story that is intelligible in terms of the story we have been told but one that also illuminates its strangeness [and unfamiliarity]. What is required, in short, is the construction of a new narrative" (Hekman, 1999).

How would we, for example, create a new narrative that takes seriously the implementation of what Vandana Shiva, the renowned environmental activist, calls "earth democracy" (Shiva, 2015)? Or how could we rethink the human subject more

holistically, not as the hierarchical owner of property and nature but as a cohabitant with the environment embedded within a *natureculture* continuum—what the critical sociolegal scholar Jana Norman calls the “cosmic person” (Norman, 2021)? Notably, in what ways do these interventions shift dominant meanings of nationalism, citizenship, identity, territory, economy, and governance that underpin most theorizing of globalization? I want to be clear that these kinds of questions are not a superficial mental exercise but are driven by immense urgency and relevance. The third report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change says the world is at a “crossroads” and we have about eight years to slow down greenhouse-gas emissions to “secure a liveable future” (IPCC, 2022). The escalating intensity and scale of catastrophic fires and floods experienced around the world in the past few years is a dark omen of things to come (Darian-Smith, 2022).

My central argument is that our collective future is one of climate-driven globalization. Given this reality, theorists of globalization need to rethink their subjects and objects of study and create a new narrative of their coconstitutive association. They need to open their eyes, hearts, and minds to what many may find an unfamiliar and uncomfortable terrain of inclusive relationality between human and more-than-human worlds. This will require relearning, reimagining, and retelling people’s place in the world across nonlinear time and space—across intergenerational pasts and futures, across entangled histories of colonialism and racism, and across spheres of kinship that include women, men, animals, forests, oceans, soils, atmospheres, and the sun (Haraway, 2008; Winter, 2021). Putting this differently, scholars must first come to terms with planetary agency that merges human subjectivity with nonhuman forces if our scholarly discussions are going to remain relevant to unfolding real-world crises and contexts (Clark & Szerszynski, 2020). On this note, the prescient words written decades ago by William Cronon come to mind:

It means looking at the part of nature we intend to turn toward our own ends and asking whether we can use it again and again and again—sustainably—without its being diminished in the process. It means never imagining that we can flee into a mythical wilderness to escape history and the obligation to take responsibility for our own actions that history inescapably entails. Most of all, it means practicing remembrance and gratitude, for thanksgiving is the simplest and most basic of ways for us to recollect the nature, the culture, and the history that have come together to make the world as we know it. If wildness can stop being (just) out there and start being (also) in here, if it can start being as humane as it is natural, then perhaps we can get on with the unending task of struggling to live rightly in the world—not just in the garden, not just in the wilderness, but in the home that encompasses them both. (Cronon, 1996: 25)

## NOTES

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1. Writes Latour, "How can we say where we are if the place 'on' or 'in' which we are located begins to react to our actions, turns against us, encloses us, dominates us, demands something of us and carries us along in its path? How are we to distinguish between physical geography and human geography? . . . How do we occupy a land if it is this land itself that is occupying us? (Latour, 2018: 41–42).
2. Nuclear warfare presents a more immediate threat to life than human-driven climate change. But unlike nuclear war, the scale of climate change is planetary and irreversible in terms of it transforming entire earth systems that point to the extinction of the world's human population.
3. *Racial capitalism* refers to a process in which white individuals and institutions use nonwhite people to acquire social and economic value. The term was first coined by Cedric Robinson, who argued that racism was already apparent in feudal times and formed the basis for modern capitalism and its systems of racialized oppression and exploitation that endure into the contemporary era. See Robinson (1983).
4. In terms of my own experience, I am thinking about the Department of Global and International Studies at the University of California, Irvine that I helped launch in 2018 and makes decolonizing the Euro-American academy its stated mission, as well as some of the faculty in the Department of Global Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, which I formerly chaired.

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