Enlightenment and Ecocatastrophe:
How Eighteenth-Century Colonialism Is Destroying Our Planet

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The European colonial project, fueled by Enlightenment views of stadial progress, can ultimately be seen as an attempt to organize and discipline colonized nature and reform it into an image of Europe itself. Ian Baucom, for one, has emphasized the importance of material spaces in the creation and transmission of Europeanness. Baucom describes the symbolic meanings spaces take in the colonization process, writing how Englishness in its global form manifests itself "*as* a Gothic cathedral, the Victoria Terminus, the Residency at Lucknow, a cricket field, a ruined country house, and a zone of riot." Baucom argues that Englishness imprints itself on physical locales and orders and organizes physical objects to reflect and maintain its shared fiction.[1] Indeed, the organizing and ordering of space and things in space was one of the first things European colonizers did when settling into foreign lands. Colonized regions in the Americas, the Caribbean, and Australasia were envisioned as unruly and savage, in need of the correcting influence of European civilization.[2] For example, a late seventeenth-century writer called the British colony of Jamaica "The Dunghill of the Universe" and "a shapeless pile of Rubbish confus'ly jumbl'd into an Emblem of the *Chaos*, neglected by Omnipotence when he form'd the World into its admirable Order." The colonies were usually located in the torrid zone, which made their climate and nature drastically different from temperate Europe. Indigenous peoples were racialistically troped as savages who occupied the lowest orders of the stadial system of societal progress—wild and rather more a part of the ungovernable nature than civilized human beings.

A direct indication of the lacking advancement of colonized spaces was their poor infrastructure. A good example of this was the appearance of Port Royal in the 1690s, where the houses were "low, little, and irregular; and if I compare the Best of their Streets in *Port Royal*, to the Fag-End of *Kent-street*, where the *Broom-men* Live, I do them more than Justice."[3] The ability to create material infrastructure and thereby conquer nature played a central role in Scottish Enlightenment configurations of racial categories and stages of

civilization; for example, it marked Amerindians as a lower species to Europeans, since they had not progressed beyond the hunting stage despite their benevolent climate—as Lord Kames put it, they were a "defective humanity, virtually incapable of dominating nature."[4] Similarly, Kames specifically used Jamaican blacks as an example of a "rude" people, a quality reflected by the simplicity of their houses.[5] Matthew Mulcahy argues that "construction of houses, fences, and farms charted movement over time from 'wilderness' to 'civilization'" and served as "material markers of their increasing sense of domination over the natural world and as physical manifestations of their efforts to bring order to the chaotic environment of America."[6] Taking control of one's material surroundings and planting European customs and infrastructure to foreign soils was a way to try to resist the notoriously national character-changing influence of the tropical climate.[7] Accordingly, during the long eighteenth century, colonized landscapes around the globe changed radically as European colonizers worked to tame their wild surroundings and to create them into the image of a tropical little Europe.

By organizing the physical and material space around them, European colonizers aimed at extending their culture, civilization, and supremacy over what they considered wild, savage, and subordinate regions. Impenetrable forests were to be cut down to fields and plantations, and unhealthy swamps turned into polite towns with spaces for genteel sociability. The colonizers brought their natural historians to take epistemological control of the indigenous flora and fauna by collecting and cataloguing it. This was a white supremacist Enlightenment project of organizing, classifying, and overcoming nature to make way for the rational coming of culture; its goal was not only symbolically, epistemologically, and scientifically to subjugate the West Indian colonial tropics, but also to physically impose a European civilization there. The progress of this endeavor in the Caribbean is visible in James Hakewill's *Picturesque Tour* from 1825 where he chose to display Jamaica as a neatly ordered, cultivated European-influenced paradise (*Image 1*). In the same year, the genteel traveller and author Henry Coleridge compared his favorite Caribbean islands to Italy, Greece, or even England, taking pleasure in the aesthetic aspects that could be contained, reigned in, and classified within the European system of taste; they were manageable as long as they could be classified as pastoral rather than wild, or Arcadian rather than savage. Of an especially fine view in Grenada he wrote how the "view from Government House, which is situated on a ridge at the end of Hospital Hill, is the Bay of Naples on one side, and a poet's Arcadia on the other."[8] The West Indies had thus been transformed—at least discursively—

from "that cursed Country" of the early 1700s into an earthly Arcadia, where nature was reigned in to produce sugar and wealth to the commercial advancement of the metropole.[9]

Image 1 James Hakewill, 'Montpelier Estate, St James', in *A Picturesque Tour of the Island of Jamaica* (London: Hurst & Robinson, 1825). The British Library, London.

This paradise-like transformation was, of course, true only for the European colonizers, while for the Indigenous and the enslaved, the global civilization process appeared in the form of systematic violence, destruction of entire cultures, communities, and social systems, and, in many places, downright genocide. Moreover, as several scholars have recently pointed out, settler colonialism also resulted in large-scale ecocide, as it left a legacy of repeated destruction of non-human life forms and ecosystems in colonized spaces.[10] In the process, the majority of local and indigenous natural knowledge was permanently lost—knowledge that was generally based on sustainable uses of nature's resources. This localized knowledge was replaced by a strive towards global universalism, which always implies violence, and the ideology of conquering, exploiting, and transforming for maximum immediate economic benefit.[11] In fact, this process of organizing nature spelled the beginning of what has now escalated into an ecocatastrophe with accelerating climate change and mass extinction of species. WWF's 2020 *Living Planet Report* just revealed an alarming 68% drop in wildlife populations since 1970. Our modern ecology is fundamentally based on an Enlightenment

ideology of forcing civilized space onto natural locales and overwriting local ecosystems and traditional knowledge with Western "reason." Thus, in many ways, the current climate disaster and impeding sixth extinction are the logical result of the imperialist ethos of the Enlightenment.

At the bottom of this ethos is the hierarchical dichotomy between "nature" and "culture," or human and non-human, which Enlightenment intellectual tradition has made the pervasive tenet of modernism. This tradition of privileging of culture over nature not only sustains ecologically unsustainable practices but also feeds into a subset of other violent hierarchies, such as the universal white male versus women, colored and indigenous, queers, or animals.[12] As Cecilia Åsberg and Rosi Braidotti write, at the "brink of mass extinctions, including our own, we need to change our ways—or die trying." What these feminist posthumanist writers call for is ethical research practices and epistemologies that "dare step out of disciplinary comfort zones" while promoting local accountability and natureculture complicity.[13] In other words, we need to radically rethink our inherently violent and colonizing Enlightenment epistemologies of conquerable nature and enter a feminist Anthropocene. The fact that it still seems impossible to globally impose immediate strategies to avert the impeding ecocatastrophe (by, for example, quitting CO_2 emissions or drastically reducing traffic very much in the way we did due to Covid-19) is because we are all still trapped in an Enlightenment episteme. To escape, it is not enough to take cosmetic action like corporate greenwashing or national sanctions. What is required is a complete epistemological revolution from humanism to posthumanism. To achieve this, it is crucial to critically examine the eighteenth-century origins of modern Western humanism and to replace its violent colonizing epistemology with feminist, posthumanist, and Indigenous approaches which see nature and culture as fundamentally entangled, not dichotomously opposed.

NOTES

[1] Ian Baucom, *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of Identity* (Princeton University Press, 1999), 7, 4–6.

[2] See e.g. William Robertson, *The History of America*. 10th ed. (London: A. Strahan, 1803), Vol. 4, 310-11. See also Margaret Kohn and Daniel I. O'Neill, 'A Tale of Two Indias: Burke and Mill on Empire and Slavery in the West Indies and America', *Political Theory* 34:2 (2006), 192-228.

[3] Edward Ward, *A Trip to Jamaica: With a True Character of the People and Island*. 3rd ed. (London: [s.n.], 1698), 14-15.

[4] Silvia Sebastiani, *The Scottish Enlightenment: Race, Gender, and the Limits of Progress* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 74; Nathaniel Wolloch, *History and Nature in the Enlightenment: Praise of the Mastery of Nature in Eighteenth-Century Historical Literature* (Routledge, 2011), 82; Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Sketches of the*

History of Man. New ed. (Edinburgh: William Creech, 1813), Vol. 1, 129. On David Hume's similar views of Jamaican black people, see Sebastiani, *Scottish Enlightenment*, 34-5.

[5] Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Sketches of the History of Man*. New ed. in 3 vols. (Edinburgh: William Creech, 1813), vol. 1, 129.

[6] Matthew Mulcahy, *Hurricanes and Society in the British Greater Caribbean, 1624–1783* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 27.

[7] Karen Ordahl Kupperman, 'Climate and Mastery of the Wilderness in Seventeenth-Century New England', in *Seventeenth-Century New England*, ed. David D. Hall & David Grayson Allen (The Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1984), 3-37; Karen Ordahl Kupperman, 'Fear of Hot Climates in the Anglo-American Colonial Experience', *The William and Mary Quarterly* 41:2 (1984), 213-40.

[8] Henry Nelson Coleridge, *Six months in the West Indies, in 1825* (London: J. Murray, 1826), 107; also e.g. 112, 242, 245. See also e.g. Janet Schaw, *Journal of a Lady of Quality: Being the Narrative of a Journey from Scotland to the West Indies ... in the years 1774 to 1776*, ed. Evangeline Walker Andrews & Charles McLean Andrews (Yale University Press & Oxford University Press, 1921), 91.

[9] [W. P.], *The Jamaica Lady: or, the Life of Bavia* (London: Tho. Bickerton, 1720), 10.

[10] Martin Crook, Damien Short, and Nigel South, 'Ecocide, Genocide, Capitalism and Colonialism: Consequences for Indigenous Peoples and Glocal Ecosystems Environments', *Theoretical Criminology* 22:3 (2018), 298–317; Damien Short, *Redefining Genocide: Settler Colonialism, Social Death and Ecocide* (Zed Books, 2016).

[11] E.g. David Wade Chambers and Richard Gillespie, 'Locality in the History of Science: Colonial Science, Technoscience, and Indigenous Knowledge,' *Osiris* 15 (2000): 221-240; Raymond Pierotti, *Indigenous Knowledge, Ecology, and Evolutionary Biology* (Routledge 2011), 9.

[12] Cesilia Åsberg and Rosi Braidotti, 'Feminst Posthumanities: An Introduction', in *A feminist Companion to the Posthumanities*, ed. Cecilia Åsberg and Rosi Braidotti (Springer, 2018), 1-22, on 2.

[13] Ibid.