



Ginn, F. (2022). Planetary Vegetal Thought. *Dialogues in Human Geography*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20438206221077151>

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

License (if available):  
CC BY

Link to published version (if available):  
[10.1177/20438206221077151](https://doi.org/10.1177/20438206221077151)

[Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research](#)  
PDF-document

This is the final published version of the article (version of record). It first appeared online via Sage at <https://doi.org/10.1177/20438206221077151>. Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

## University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research

### General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available: <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/red/research-policy/pure/user-guides/ebr-terms/>

## Book review forum

Dialogues in Human Geography  
1–5

© The Author(s) 2022



Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)[journals.sagepub.com/home/dhg](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/dhg)

Nigel Clark and Bronislaw Szerszynski, *Planetary Social Thought: The Anthropocene Challenge to the Social Sciences*. UK: Polity, 2020. ISBN 1509526358.

### Portmanteau planetarity

**Reviewed by:** Cecilia Åsberg, *Linköping University, Sweden*

DOI: 10.1177/20438206221077151

How relevant is the geological strata or ecological entanglements to contemporary climate activism and society? And to theory at large? Hotly so, if we look to the Anthropocene exposures presented by Nigel Clark and Bronislaw Szerszynski in their new book *Planetary Social Thought: The Anthropocene Challenges to the Social Sciences*. They take the reader on a terra-forming journey through modern European industrial history, peels layers of its geo-political repercussions for multiple peoples, and educate readers on the oeuvres of more-than-human thinking in social theory, continental philosophy, feminist science studies, geology, history and multi-species studies. To me, this book offers a forceful and compelling (set of) case(s) for the relevance of social theory and planetary thinking to all kinds of critical and creative thinkers and doers (tinkerers) in the many registers of academic (and extra-academic) education and scholarship. And wasn't it about time that the popularity experienced by environmental humanities found a social science-shaped outlet? In this roundabout review (walking like a cat around a hot plate of something yummy), I contend that social thought is indeed steaming! It is a rallying cry, vibrating with indignation over the particularities

and absurdities of the human-climate challenges of the Anthropocene – and with thoughts on what we can do about it. Here, I would also like to take the chance to argue that there is no longer any need to uphold a difference between environmental social science and environmental humanities. If there ever were such need, with regard to societal urgency, relevance and, what I would like to call, the action-ability of theory (how it makes us think and do things differently), it can now all be channelled through effervescent, multi-sourced, planetary thinking.

The separation, humanities versus social sciences, appears obsolete already if we look at the multiple versions of the more-than-human humanities, feminist posthumanities, or posthuman- and geohumanities that have inflected and propelled the environmental humanities. Especially those forms of environmental humanities that have simmered at the northern edges have always been with a societal twist of relevance. In my corner of the world, the Swedish emergence of environmental humanities a decade ago was even dominated more by social science research than by postdisciplinary humanities, theory or art research for the environment. Perhaps there never really was such a divide to begin with, as I might testify to myself as a gender studies scholar (doing more-than-gender research) between postdisciplinary humanities, social sciences, art and natural science for two decades. However, for a few scared humanities scholars seeing Environmental Humanities as a beacon of hope for the humanities and arts to showcase their societal relevance and prowess in putting theory to practice – social climate science inspired both awe and fear with its mercilessness in academia. Regardless, planetary social thought seems welcome to me, and like another name for that critical creativity of making art/s meet science for a multifarious

political project: learning to not just survive but thrive (re-learn conviviality) within the planet's boundaries. So, planetarity has always already been about the social, that which is shared by many and about a sense of belonging within the world, whether its people's sociality or more-than-human relationality, about the multispecies alliances, bonds and communities that can be forged inside and outside academia when thinking/studying/doing social change. Because, there is no way around it – the human species, while we are distinctly power differentiated as a species, has the power to act as natural force on Earth. Social life and the everyday practices of civic society has become the most powerful component of the whole planet's dynamics. The changes to Earth that put all planetary creatures at risk now, whether they are climatic, geological or bio-ecological, exhibit the world-transforming powers of human social life. Clark and Szerszynski showcase this. However, they add a crucial layer of thinking and theory to this insight on the sociality of the Anthropocene: that all of the social, and the thinking, in itself is a product of the inhuman powers of the Earth, a planet self-organizing dynamically over the scales of deep time.

### Portmanteau planetarity

Consider Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's understanding of "planetarity". To me, it seems to inspire so much of the feminist, queer, environmental, posthuman, decolonial and more-than-human humanities of today (Spivak, 2003). It calls for an end to the division of the planet through what she calls a cartographer's gaze, aiming to divide and control all at once through simple categorizations such as national borders, disciplinary borders, or human differences in the derogatory social power registers of race, gender, nationality, etc. In *The Death of a Discipline*, Spivak broadens the scope for her argument on the annihilation of the borders between fields of academic study, say, that the sciences do nature and the humanities do culture (and social science do society), to the entire humanist mindset. From such a decolonial vantage point, there is no "one-world" view to be had, no all-seeing eye,

despite the best efforts of satellite technologies, iconic NASA imagery and some totalizing Anthropocene discourse. There are only partial perspectives to be had. However, it would also, I argue, contain the postdisciplinary possibility of a *portmanteau planetarity* for the sake of the Earth's many and diverse inhabitants, peoples and ecologies. A portmanteau planetarity in the veins of Nigel Clarke and Bronislaw Szerszynski, brings in the Earth into materialist and social thought, at large, while refusing an all-encompassing one-world view and acknowledging intermingling perspectives.

Donna J. Haraway would famously refer to such illusions of a one-world view as "god tricks," Haraway (1991) the hubris perspective of a totalizing view, omnipresent and god-like. Haraway's feminist target of critique was (in her famous piece on Situated Knowledges) objectivity seen as something universalizing (and without its local formatting). Her notion of "situated knowledge" was an epistemological counter-weight to a scientific epistemology imagined as neutral, omnipresent, powerful and yet innocent. Haraway charged both the epistemologies of relativism and totalizing positivism with being "god tricks" and suggested instead "situated knowledges," while Spivak's argument scales this up considerably for academic practice. The totalizing one-world view, argues Spivak, allow for a detrimental compound of colonization, globalization, and consumerism. The "pale blue dot" figuration of Carl Sagan, or the Earth image from space, can be used for many political purposes, yet it often hides the economic, social, and technological apparatuses behind the image. It leaves that omitted which gave it shape, substance, local flavour and envired insight. The alternative mindset for Spivak is instead "planetarity," in which we consider our involvement on Earth as first and foremost being planetary creatures amongst others, and we embrace – not exhaust – the innumerable differences that have the potential to separate us Spivak (2003:77). A kindred analysis to the decolonizing insights of Spivak and Haraway can be found with queer feminist technoscience scholars-couple Mette Bryld and Nina Lykke (2000). They argued for how the expensive and high-tech photography, shot from space of the "pale

blue planet,” indulged the cannibalistic imaginary of consumption as much as the idea of the planet as vulnerable, defenseless, and in need of our human stewardship in times of climate change. One possible planetary view is that Earth is neither a passive background/resource for humanistic extractivism nor defenseless damsel in distress. In the words of one of my favourite stoics, Douglas Adams, author of *Last Chance to See* and *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*: “We don’t have to save the world. The world is big enough to look after itself. What we have to be concerned about is whether or not the world we live in will be capable of sustaining us in it.”

Now, Clarke and Szerszynski (2021) recalls both continental philosophy, geography/geology and feminist (and other) technoscience studies for their portmanteau planetarity, but theirs is one with a distinct element of philosophy-activism to it that I cannot help but admire and emulate for my practices of (feminist) posthumanities. It is in the case studies depicted, the careful and pedagogical wording, the generous but precise use of literature, and in the subversive shifts in perspective, that they generate a truly social theory of the planetary. As they write: “We would insist upon the creativity and invention inherent in physical worlds themselves – at every scale from the microscopic to the cosmic.” (p 86) Clarke and Szerszynski thus joins the ranks of many bold, contemporary interdisciplinarians insisting on doing situated work through incomplete information, as there is not totality to be had. Only deconstructions upon deconstructions. And such can make for good world-changing stories to live by. The two key concepts that run through their book, planetary multiplicity and earthly multitudes, are heavily inspired by thinkers like George Bataille, DeLanda, Deleuze and Guattari, but for the ethico-political issues of vulnerability, loss and suffering that comes with the territory of planetary transitions, as they write, they turn to feminist, post-colonial, and I would like to add, queer theory. My only unease with this division (feminist thought for misery, male name philosophers for pronouncement) is perhaps more of a hope for the future, that we could turn to these intermingling theory domains also for more affirmative approaches, or for their creativity or their collaborative ingenuity.

Like, to pick an example from the book, in how Vicki Kirby’s notion of the Earth as a self-sensing machine leads to the question if Earth’s partaking in its own inquiry could be considered a first instance form of “geo-logy”. Regardless, the affirmative ethos of this book sits in how, despite well we learn to die and endure suffering from the planetary changes, the Earth will never cease to surprise us. That’s a kind of geophilia worthy of our times.

Now, let me return to social sciences and the human arts, and their dissolving divide in the light of climatic and ecological changes to our planet. Because I think this book is a case of this too. It presents with care how important it is to be able to keep both the specificities and politics of a site, time and how it was encountered (by whom), *and* the “bigger picture” of cosmic nihilism in mind – at almost the same time. In fact, this type of thinking – against purities of disciplines, borders or modern nature-or-culture divisions of labour, can help, as can large doses of humour, to keep us mentally sane in settings (national or disciplinary) that are less so. In the end, it will all pass. So, if the humanities were to be defined by its concern with the understanding and self-reflection of the human species, planetary social theory, like feminist posthumanities and other forms of the more-than-human humanities, aims to attend to the relationship of human-planet interactions, where humans and their social life are keenly dependant on the planet’s inhuman resources and forces. The planet does not depend on us, albeit a great numbers of its other species and kin does. Feminist posthumanities would have a (shameless) wider scope, tending not just the geo-cultural but also to biopolitical differences entangled with environmental justice, information technologies, AI, synthetic biology, surveillance systems, species extinction, and drastic ecological and climate change. Such more-than-human humanities faces many urgent societal challenges of today’s world. And for sure, it is neither pure humanities (even if it aims to defend and rework some humanities niches in the neoliberal funding schemes of academia) nor pure social science. Posthumanities like planetary social thought basically latched on where cultural studies left off, with the concerns for the geological, biological,

ecological and technological. Such efforts labels (differently) a widespread and growing effort to rework the role of the humanities and the social sciences, and their relation to science, technology, art, other species, the planet and to contemporary society. After the decades of “studies”, admixing humanities and social science insight, we have in the recent decennia seem various bubbly forms of ‘new’ humanities: for instance, environmental humanities, geohumanities, multispecies humanities, and of course, “golden oldies” like digital and medical humanities. Yes, “planetary humanities” has indeed also already been suggested by several different sources. Yet, one wonderful way of getting rid of the pompousness, prestige and individualism inherent in defenses of the humanities, is to simply call it social theory. Or posthumanities, or more-than-human humanities and planetary social thought (Clarke and Szerszynski, 2021), or something else. There is no one correct label here, but the job needs doing.

The story is well-known by now. The classical humanities, grounded in Euro- and andro-centric traditions, and built upon the normative figure of the Universal Man, have failed to adequately address urgent social, cultural, environmental, ethical and political problems. They have often exacerbated these issues further and extended them into the 21st century. Traditionally, the humanities and the social sciences have approached the climate, environment, nonhuman species, technologies, and even society as ‘mere’ objects for human use. Yet, such an approach fails to take into account the dynamics of forces that escape the control, or even grasp, of both humans and the humanities. Planetary social thought, like its multi-creative queer sister, feminist posthumanities, refers instead to emerging inter-, post- or even extra-disciplinary approaches that dramatically challenge a human-centered view of the universe. It invites us to carefully and curiously consider humans – in their different positions to power – as always already entangled in relationships with the planet and with a multitude of other beings (animal, vegetal, digital and geological) and the ways they affect one another. By doing so, such more-than-human social research expands our all-too-narrow anthropocentric social imagination and zooms in on the interconnectedness of all

beings, human and nonhuman (see eg Adams, 2001), as well as on understanding the specificities of each situated entwinement of relations that make or break, enable or disable lives in co-existence.

This focus on interconnectivity, bonds made and unmade by sexism, racism, capitalism and colonialism, has allowed an upsurge of creative and critical approaches unearthing the complexity of specific problems that we are currently facing. The homogenization of humanity into the universal figure of Man, denying diversity and other social differentiations, along the intersecting lines of race, gender, sexuality, ability, age and other identity-shaping norms, have long been a pinnacle of feminist critique. Right from the outset, practitioners of feminist science studies (for instance) have insisted on the importance of attending to the reciprocal and asymmetrical constitution of subjects and objects, nature and culture, humans and nonhumans, and planet and society. Feminist theory-practices at large mark thus a particularly salient and versatile form of the more-than-human humanities and planetary social sciences pivoting around the critically imploding concept of the Anthropocene (Crist, 2013; Haraway, 2018). Still, in the midst of doing and thinking this worldliness, most feminist thinkers shun holism for partiality, for the situated knowledge and local view to a planetarity that per definition never can be a mapped-out terrain and never finished, only something minoritarian in the middle of more things going on than you can ever know or pretend to be able to cover. That would be a situated planetary practice, but it would not be possible without the vision of a portmanteau planetary to go.

### **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**References**

- Adams D (2001) "Parrots, the Universe and Everything", speech at The University of California, videoed by UCTV (May 2001). Available at YouTube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_ZG8HBuDjgc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ZG8HBuDjgc).
- Bryld M and Lykke N (2000) *Cosmodolphins: Feminist Cultural Studies of Technology, Animals and the Sacred*. London: Zed Books.
- Clarke N and Szerszynski B (2021) *Planetary Social Thought. The Anthropocene Challenge to the Social Sciences*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Crist E (2013) On the poverty of our nomenclature. *Environmental Humanities* 3: 129–147.
- Haraway D (2018) Staying with the trouble for multispecies environmental justice. *Dialogues in Human Geography* 8(1): 102–105.
- Haraway DJ (1991) *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. London, New York: Routledge. See chapter 9 "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective".
- Spivak GC (2003) *The Death of a Discipline*. New York: Columbia University Press.