

## Literature and the Planetary: Into the Firestorm

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In January 2024, at the recent MLA convention in Philadelphia, Amitav Ghosh spoke in reference to his 2016 non-fiction book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, on how travel and a range of examples from different cities around the world were needed to visualize “travel as a representation of the loss of meaning.” Setting aside the novel form, Amitav Ghosh opts for the interlocking of diverse non-fiction forms to discuss and bring to light his perspective on climate change, which he does first in *The Great Derangement* and more recently in his 2021 book *The Nutmeg’s Curse*. For Ghosh, the modern novel form is not sufficient to represent the concept of climate change and planetary time because the novel’s scales of time and space tend to be human bound and confined within the human mind; primarily narrating time in tens or hundreds of years, and spaces occupied by humans. Thus, if the novel form is not enough, perhaps, we may wonder, neither is the purely academic form.

“The three needed components of fire are fuel, heat, and air (oxygen).” As per National Fire Protection Association, 2024.

Attempting to render a natural phenomenon into form, this four-part multigenre text follows the four stages of fire: ignition, growth, fully-developed, decay.

Into the Firestorm

### IGNITION

*In the beginning, we were not. Everything was without us.*

The first time I heard of the term “Anthropocene” was in the voice of Wai Chee Dimock. It was summer, July of 2013, at the lecture hall adjacent to Dana-Palmer’s

building, currently housing the Comparative Literature Department, which originally housed Harvard's first astronomical observatory. I have only learned about the stargazing history of this location since writing this piece: a curious physical instantiation of the connection between literature and the planetary, I thought.

Dimock, Yale Professor and researcher at the Harvard University Center for the Environment, spoke of the human impact on the planet and the transition into a new time or epoch - the anthropocene. Yet, could we unquestionably use the terminology of geological epochs, of categorizations created by humans? Weren't we (again) just vain? Dimock, who in 2020 published *Weak Planet: Literature and Assisted Survival*, brings to bear the question of what can literature teach us against the frightening realities of climate change. Through the study of Native American language and histories intertwined with environmental humanities, she points to finding hope in steady teamwork, in humility and in the gradual work of the collective when confronted with a lack of sustainability for humans. Dipesh Chakrabarty in *One Planet, Many Worlds* (2023) acknowledges hope's potential yet offers a different calibration. Explaining how Robin Wall Kimmerer in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013) demonstrates that there could be kin-making between the science of botany and Indigenous knowledge of the country, he writes "this is the politics of "being with" in the face of the gathering emergency of climate change." Chakrabarty centers on the useful differentiation between "the planetary" and "the global" to aid in seeing, as he puts it, "the problem of the one and the many" (x), and raises the question of how and from where we see, and how we view from different points, whether or not it is a star or our future.

The emphasis of movement

Text as mechanisms of nature

The cyclone, and the storm taking form in the writing, *being* the writing.

Spark and Oxygen

*What originates the flame? the first flame, grown by air?*

“What is vital to my various projects [is] to rebuild and understand ... knowing and how we know, and the structures through which knowledge, story, practice, were passed on. [...] Pitfalls of colonial and capitalist tendencies trending toward extraction and consumption, and so I approach ...with my desire to do what my kupuna [elders] did, to ward knowledge (kapu)” (Arista par 2-3).

“Navigation in ‘heavy weather’ like the one characterizing postnormal times demands virtues such as humility, modesty, and accountability for the present but also for the future.” (Frameaux par 6)

*I ka wā ma mua, ka wā ma hope* (The future is secured in the past).

In Hawaiian language the concepts of future and past are conveyed by words for movement; forward: “mua,” for future, and backward: “hope,” for past. The stars led the first Polynesian navigators in their exploration of the Pacific, fifteen hundred years ago, over two thousand miles across the ocean, in their double hulled canoes. When they encountered Hawaii they created places of worship for their Gods – these sacred places are called Heiaus.

On the East side of Kauai island, near the mouth of the Wailua river, three Heiaus were erected. This was an area with rich resources and the sacred sites rested on the river’s path to the summit of Mt. Waialeale. The Kukui Heiau at the Alakukui Point is considered a healing Heiau, and a navigator’s reference point (Ku’uleialoha Weaver par 20.) From the shore, kukui (coconut) nut oil would burn in candles leading the navigator’s home, as they followed the burning flame.

## GROWTH

*Heat*

“Grasping the analytical distinction between “the globe” and “the planet” may give us a handle on this historical experience of disorientation” (Chakrabarty, 17)

Parallax: A play

*The Sun, My Sun:* [A] historical experience of disorientation

(The Global: Technology. Engineered by man)

A1: I can't see (,) the Sun.

B1: You can't see?

A1: I can't see, the Sun does not let me see my screen.

B1: Suns don't have agency. Glare is the screen's issue not the Sun's issue.

A1: Who made the screens? We did.

B1: We did?

A1: Humans did.

B1: So we create our issues.

A1: It seems that way.

B1: What about the planet?

A1: We did not create the planet.

B1: I see.

A1: No, you can't.

This is when we only see the “Earth System Science” (or “the globe” of “globalization” “an entity at the most 500 years old brought into being by humans and their technologies of transport and communication”) (Chakrabarty, 3).

In this view we see the "Earth system" (the term Chakrabarty (4) uses for the planet and not the globe) as an obstacle to the achievements of humans.

(The Planetary: Comparative analysis emerging from the human attempts to answer questions)

A2: I can't see the Sun.

B2: You can't see the Sun? Nobody can look at the Sun.

A2: I know it is there but I just cannot see it.

B2: How do you know?

A2: I see the sunlight. I see what comes from the source.

B2: But not the source?

A2: Nobody can see or go to the source.

B2: Why do you compare humans with stars?

A2: So we can find sustainable life for humans.

B2: Can we?

A2: You want to see beyond ourselves but you can only see with human eyes.

B2: So do you.

A2: Precisely. Even if we genuinely want to see the Sun, you are limited to

human seeing. B2: But I know you want to see the source of life, our source of heat.

A2: From here...are we at the center of the firestorm?

A2: No, we are just lost in it.

(This is when we see oneness and the "Earth System", the planet, as one. Still anthropocentric yet aware.)

## DEVELOPED

In the cyclone,

In the twister,

In the firestorm

### *Fuel*

"When we are faced with planetary "fury"-such as a tsunami, an earthquake, a firestorm [...] our politics is reduced to the politics of survival" (Chakrabarty, 6)

Latch

Heat builds

Behind real doors

Bunker's arrogance shaken

Not a political decision to discuss

Just the burning wind left outside

A growing doubt, as inconsequential as humans,

higher every day, "until over the mast at noon"

at earshot of the shards, flames, rubble, whistles and sighs

up, torn, fueled, uncontrolled like beauty, circling in the unleashing of heat at

one revolution at a time... not a social movement, but a geologized social

-unmanned a nanosecond in planetary time accounts for the vastness of  
humankind cooling now, oxygen deprived, go.... Lower... lower still.... below  
16 per cent reds, blues, and greens grow, as the fire morphs and slows  
in the arresting storm, as human fear remains locked  
in its many worlds, behind all doors  
until we believe silence and safety  
to be the same, and that there is  
no "we", forgotten again,  
just a planet  
one

## DECAY

Cycle back to the first question.

Looking at once at the large and the small.

Planetary Time: *Micromégas* revisited

"En sortant de Jupiter, ils traversèrent un espace d'environ cent millions de lieues,  
et ils côtoyèrent la planète de Mars, qui, comme on sait, est cinq fois plus petite  
que notre petit globe ... Enfin ils aperçurent une petite lueur, c'était la terre"

(*Micromégas* ch. III, par 3)

('After leaving Jupiter they crossed a distance of approximately one hundred million  
leagues, passing close by the planet Mars, which, as we know, is five times smaller than

our little globe....At last they made out a small gleam of light: it was the Earth')  
(*Micromégas*, 23-24)

Voltaire wrote the tale *Micromégas* in 1752, as both a form of philosophical parable and science fiction novella. Using satire, irony, some historical facts and a dream-like quality, the story questions and explores the place of humans in the universe. He creates two imaginary characters from the star Sirius, *Micromégas* and his companion, who are explorers, great in size and knowledge, from a more developed world both technologically and intellectually. A story between the real and the imaginary, it zooms into the lives of humans on Earth, seen through the eyes of giants who see us, just by chance, when a diamond turns out to be a magnifying glass through which they discover that we populate the tiny Earth.

Time in *Micromégas* is what we could call deep time, a time beyond the existence of humankind or what Chakrabarty might call planetary time. A story of proportions and perspectives, it starts with a time unimaginable to us, the deep time of stars. The explorers come from a planet orbiting the star Sirius in Orion, the brightest star in our Earthly sky, just 8.6 light years away, and twenty-six times brighter than our Sun (Britannica, par 1). Sirius is a tiny remnant of a blasting star that runs out of fuel. The system of Sirius (A, the bright star and B, a hotter but fainter star part of the system) is 250 million years old and was once an ordinary star like our Sun. Destined to cool forever, stars and firestorms.

With *Micromégas*, scientific yet fantastic, Voltaire is looking both at the small and the large, the future and the past. A relativizing perspective from "des personnages d'Ailleurs" ('those from afar') is the starting point to discuss our place, of "des Individus petits" ('small creatures'), in the universe. The lesson of the tale is twofold; there is hope in the discovery by *Micromégas* that humans can reason (even if poorly), yet their pride and vanity are their demise. Upon leaving the Earth, *Micromégas* leaves a parting gift.

"[*Micromégas*] leur promet de leur faire un beau livre de philosophie, écrit fort menu pour leur usage, et que, dans ce livre, ils verraient le bout des choses. Effectivement,



il leur donna ce volume avant son départ [...]

quand le vieux secrétaire l'eut ouvert, il ne vit rien qu'un livre tout blanc: « Ah! dit-il, je m'en étais bien douté.»”

(Micromegas ch. VII, par 6)

(“He promised to write a fine work of philosophy for them, in suitable tiny script, in which they would discover the nature of things. True to his word, he gave them the volume before leaving [...]

When the Secretary opened it, he found nothing but blank pages. ‘Aha,’ said he, ‘I suspected as much.’”) (Micromégas, 35)

a blank page

If Dimock and Chakrabarty found the resonances of hope in the weakness of humankind and not its arrogance then, I, as well, resonating with Anne Fremaux in *After the Anthropocene* (2019), find it in the embrace of “ontological indeterminacy” (Fremaux par 3) and an era of “unknown unknowns” (Ravetz qtd. in Fremaux par, 3) rather than the thrust of our modern narrative of progress, based on control and the belief in human mastery by techno-optimists and ecomodernists. If we don’t “love our monsters” (referencing Latour) and instead, with Chakrabarty, contest notions such as “our negative impact helps us to understand the world” (Crutzen qtd. in Chakrabarty, 101), then we side with loving our vulnerability, and *l’idée que tout tourne autour de l’homme est bouleversée* (‘the idea that everything revolves around humans is superseded’) and, as Micromégas, the only lesson at the end of the tale is a lesson against vanity.

The unwritten.

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