De-colonising Ecomedia
Sean Cubitt

At the height of the Napoleonic imperial moment, the entrepreneur Joseph Dufour commissioned Jean Gabriel Charvet to produce a block-printed wallpaper for the very wealthy, a tropical paradise based on reports of the Pacific voyages of Cook and Bougainville. Fifteen years after the French Revolution and half a century after Diderot and d'Alembert began work on the *Encyclopédie*, Charvet's wallpaper is a rationalist's utopia, an arcadia of bare-breasted islanders in physical harmony with abundant nature. It is guileless colonialism, confusing the traditions of different islands and adding flora of the French Antilles, half a world away, an area already cleared of its indigenous inhabitants. It is a paradoxical utopia, because it depicts the paradise of an indigenous world prior to the arrival of the Europeans, an innocence for which they long, but which definitionally is impossible for them to inhabit. As if to clinch the impossibility, and in a curious display of its own confusion of history and utopia, in the distant background of panel Eight can be descried the death of Captain Cook on Hawai'i, portrayed according to the much-debated Gore and King accounts of the third and final voyage.

The tragedy of the *Sauvages,* its yearning for a colonial idyll made impossible by colonialism, haunts much ecocritical discourse. This longing for a beauty that contact destroys is not only analogous, but integral to the imagining of ecotopia. Proposing technological solutions to the problems of previous technologies suggests that we are not done with this emotional contradiction at the heart of Western rationalism. Like Charvet, ecotopian technocrats imagine a world without the dire consequences of scientific exploration, and present the advanced media technologies of their respective epochs, chromolithography and digital media, as consumer solutions to political problems. Like much cultural critique, they see digital technologies only as perceived from the point of consumption in the over-developed, technologised, nominally 'industrial' world. But the industries that fabricate and dispose of such technologies are not sited in the Global North. The purity of Jonathan Ives designs belies the dark materiality externalized to the Global South.

Ecocritical work on media has developed from a genre criticism of nature-themed films to address cinema, TV and media arts more broadly as articulations of the human-natural relation and its mediation through technologies. The 'material turn' in media and communications has encouraged work by Maxwell and Miller (2012), Gabrys (2010), Feilhauer and Zehle (2009) and Parikka (2011) and others embracing the environmental impacts of product life-cycles from materials extraction and industrial production to energy use and recycling, opening the field of textual-aesthetic criticism to political-economic concerns. These advances in ecocriticism have however only just begun to address

the differential experiences of affected populations (for example Rossiter 2011). The dissociation of consumption from environmental impact repeats the central structure of coloniality, which Mignolo (2011: 2) defines as 'the underlying logic of the foundation and unfolding of Western civilization from the Renaissance to today of which historical colonialisms have been a constitutive, although downplayed, dimension'.

Decolonising eco-criticism therefore requires first a recognition of the skewed environmental impact of consumption in the North on conditions in the South. This is the burden of the 'environmentalism of the poor' movement which, since the 1980s, has contested the idea that environmentalism is a benefit that can only be addressed once abundant wealth has been achieved. On the contrary, activists in the movement argue, the cheap materials and zero-cost dumping of waste are 'not a sign of abundance but a result of a given distribution of property rights, power and income' (Martinez-Allier 2002: 3). At the same time, as Quijano argues, mindsets intrinsic to modernity/coloniality must also be opened and contested:

> we have also to do with a colonization of the other cultures, albeit in differing
> intensities and depths. This relationship consists, in the first place, of a
> colonization of the imagination of the dominated; that is, it acts in the interior
> of that imagination, in a sense, it is a part of it . . . Cultural Europeanisation was
> transformed into an aspiration. It was a way of participating and later to reach
> the same material benefits and the same power as the Europeans: viz, to
> conquer nature – in short for 'development' (Quijano 2007: 169).

Development agendas espoused since Rostow's 'forms of industrial development' model of 1960 (Rostow 1960; see Pieterse 2001) have only paid lip-service to a concept of sustainability which is premised on an unquestioned growth model of the global economy. Bundled with that development model, the conquest of nature is exported to the ruling classes of developing nations with the promise that a fundamentally Hegelian overcoming of nature will provide the benefits of not only European wealth and but scientific knowledge and the power associated with it. The optimism of this imagined promise is one of the key contrasts between the exo-colonialism of development and the endo-colonialism of that increasingly places subaltern populations of the metropolitan centers in positions of environmental as well as economic degradation. To prepare the grounds for an adequate analysis of the implication of environmental and colonial politics with one another, it is important to heal one of the great scars in scientific discourse, the one left by the migration of economics away from its place in political economy. A political understanding of economic crisis is the necessary first step to understanding the stakes in the export of environmental costs to the global poor, and a politics that exceeds the limitations of a consumer strike.

The present global financial crisis (GFC) has lasted for six years already, stretching the definition of 'crisis' to the point where the state of emergency becomes normal. In Marazzi's (2011) analysis, all financial crises are based on the principle of making the future pay for the present: the resolution of one crisis is the genesis of the next. Our GFC is the result of the crisis of the 1970s, which was resolved through offshoring, precarisation, and automation; by the vast investment in what Bifo (Berardi 2009) calls semiocapitalism, whose major form of production is no longer of goods but of symbols; including self-financing (GM's soft credit for purchasers for example) and supplementing surplus-value derived from production with surpluses derived from securitisation: debts bundled and sold on with the original debtor as effective guarantor.

The GFC arose on the back of over-trading in future incomes that will never be realized precisely because of the still unresolved falling rate of profit that started the 1970s crisis, together with the crushing of wages that accompanied its stabilization. Effectively the GFC spends today these future earnings, in order to replace the lost surplus value of the decaying productive sector. The rendering of accounts is always deferred into the future whenever the present cannot produce an adequate return to fulfil the missing 3% growth per annum (Harvey 2010) which is to capital what velocity through water is to a shark. There is a fundamental irrationality to this trading (completely opposite to the perfectly informed and rational trader of economic fiction) that underpins the structural irrationality of an unstable and unpredictable market, which in turn changes the mode of the future from the closure of debt to the openness of emergence, a condition that drives the markets to further self-immolation.

The GFC response, as in crises dating back centuries, is to externalize the costs of production. This was the rationale for the enclosures and colonialism that created the modern distinction between population and environment. The same rationale drove the Industrial Revolution that enclosed the commons of everyday skills to ossify them as the 'dead labour' of the factory, which became the alien environment of the new working class (Marx 1973: 690-711). In our times, it is knowledge that has been enclosed, alienated, and converted to an environment of databases and databanks from which we, the population, are excluded. Capital persists through the privatization of the commons, shadowed by charging rents on circulation, including interest on credit. The common good is sold back as private debt. The suffering poor and denuded ecologies are external to accounts, in every sense of the phrase.

The artificial inflation of debt in order to finance the consumption of excess product denies Say's Law (the supposed magical fit between supply and demand). The current response is to externalize the costs of production, so that the market need only account for the costs of distribution and consumption. A large part of those costs are to be born by the free labour of creation (Fuchs 2009) – quite possibly a finite resource – employed by the major online enterprises and increasingly in other prosumer-based industries, notably in design. The rest is born by writing-off unwanted stock and dumping it in the form of waste into what, by virtue precisely of its exclusion from the economic cycle, must be called the environment. Such costs are effectively deferred to another generation, and another crisis, in which, the market devoutly hopes, through mechanisms like carbon credit trading, it can find new sources of

profit to secure against its failure to stabilise – let alone produce common good – in the present. The problem lies in the demand for immediate profit, to be paid for in an unforeseeable future whose earnings, environment and social well-being have already been mortgaged to pay dividends this year.

Solving the crisis of Fordism in the 1970s resulted in intensified globalization, energy bonanzas and, not unconnected with either, the telecoms revolution. These produced new media for consumer spend, a new surge of built-in obsolescence, and a mobilization of the desire not only to consume but to create. What we desire from the work of creation is connection, community and education, precisely those goods which capital destroyed in their previous manifestation as commons. Semiocapitalism harnesses these once social desires to the treadmill of instant profit, with their costs both externalized and deferred. Typical here is the externalization of the transaction costs of electronic data transfer in cloud services, with their massive energy demands, and the move from sales to rent in e-commodities. On the one hand, this creates the conditions for the emergence of peer-to-peer economies, based on a revitalised sense of the commons (Bauwens 2010). On the other, it produces the 'bad' globalisation of indigenous revolt, as in the Maghrebi hostage-slaying at BP's remote Algerian field in January 2013, combining the twin faces of global trade: oil and arms.

Players in the economy are neither totally informed nor rational, and that not accidentally but systemically. If they were rational and informed, they would have realized that the poor are too numerous to fail, that a social wage and debt moratorium would resolve the crisis; that buying toxic debt at source, from those driven to squalor by aggressive credit selling, is better than replacing the lost revenue streams of the wealthy, and less likely to lead to the hyperinflation stalking debt-rich economies like the US and the UK. But this is not the case. The falling rate of profit that drove the 1970s crisis resulted in a new biopolitics, displacing the body at work to a broader activity of reproduction (the service sector boom of the 1980s) and distribution, guided by statistical models of risk first developed to manage the balance of bad debts against disciplined repayments. But *Théorie Communiste* (2011) are wrong to argue that the working class is no longer working and therefore has no identity, no economic purpose, and thus no politics. The old working class has become the affectless, disenchanted class of consumers whose work is to consume the devalued 'goods' produced by over-production's attempt to escape the falling rate of profit. The new work is required to destroy that overproduction in pursuit of growth that otherwise generates crisis. The precariat generated by offshoring, the end of welfarism and the destruction of working-class organization in the 1980s still has two final functions: to borrow, and to use its loans to consume. This purposeless cycle, whose misery was performed by rioters for the surveillance cameras of London in August 2011, belongs to the new condition of capital, where the metropolitan precariat's task is to work in the disciplined mode of destruction. The carnival of destructive riot is only a breakdown of discipline and of debt, its primary enforcement mechanism, as sabotage is a refusal of factory discipline. As factory sabotage fails to confront the mode of production, consumer riots fail to challenge the mode of destruction.

Semiocapitalism divides its derivation of wealth from handling symbols into two sectors. One sector operates through international regimes of patents, copyrights, trademarks and designs, the other through finance, which today is not only entirely electronic, but in rapidly increasing degrees automated in algorithmic ('algo') trading. Those who are not privileged to sit at the centre of intellectual and finance capital produce a diminishing amount of the exchange value in each commodity. Those who can, or are forced to, work, and are treated like the victims of the Bangladeshi factory collapse of April 2013: supernumerary, unregarded, a repressed that returns only momentarily as news item. Those who cannot are

abandoned to civil war, famine and disease: conditions that, in the case of the Congolese war, have persisted for over a decade as the unconscious of metropolitan consumption (United Nations 2002). Meanwhile metropolitan lumpenproletariat populations superfluous to both intellectual work and offshore industry are pushed further into ghettos, with diminishing health, education and social resources, prey to drugs and guns, that increasingly resemble the reservations set aside for indigenous peoples in the genocidal heyday of settler expansion. With the abdication of vision common to parliamentary parties of the industrialized and in many instances the industrializing world, the only organic intellectuals left are the gangs, building alternative economies and confronting the police in an ethnoclass war to secure human status (Wynter 2003). Between civil war and gang war, the trajectory of the mode of destruction instigated by consumerism would appear to lead to the auto-destruction of the consumer class.

Waste is not an unfortunate by-product of consumerism. Without waste, there can be no consumer capital. We are all Batailleans now. Waste takes the form not only of garbage, or of waste electrical and electronic equipment (WEEE) but of populations excluded from the centers of capital. Productive labour of the old proletarian kind still persists, but downgraded and exported: it is in countries where productive labour remains significant that we still find a recognizably working-class mode of politics, as in Tunisia and Egypt in January and February 2011, Turkey since the 28th of May 2013 and the June 2013 protests in Brazil, even though mass protests and direct action are promptly painted in the colors of social media by Western news media. The protest against corruption is in part a protest against a systemic waste of common wealth and popular energies by the ruling kleptocracy. That nothing similar has happened in the UK or Russia has everything to do with the move from material to symbolic production, and a residual politics conducted through the same mobilization of symbols as semiocapital. Neo-colonial production likewise is founded on the systemic waste to which it contributes in the cycles of fashion and consumption. The undoubted catastrophe of WEEE, and the consistently colonial structure of the recycling industry (Gabrys 2010, Grossman 2007) can no longer be seen as curable aberrations: we live in the age of integral waste.

This is not only the waste produced by the built-in obsolescence required to generate new debt for new sales of new equipment, but the endemic structural waste produced by typical structures of capital such as electricity generation and transmission. Even prior to the privatization of national energy grids, energy industries have been built in order to waste power. The process goes as far back as the enclosures, when peasants were forbidden to collect firewood from the old common land. A division of labour between suppliers and consumers of energy structured the development of coal mining, and later of huge generating projects, too big to allow competitors to enter the market. The centralization and scale implied distance from the end-users, with the rare exception of companies like Ford who built their own generating plants next to their factories. With the move to electrical power, the distances increased, especially from geothermal, hydroelectric and nuclear sources. Coal and gas plants were built far from population centers, joined by long transmission lines. There is a formula in electrical engineering to the effect that for every kilometer of transmission, there is a corresponding loss of energy, converted to heat, waste magnetic fields and noise. This wastage has become integral to the management of the electrical industries which, we should recall, were at the heart of the first Enron scandal, the Californian electricity crisis of 2001 (Weare 2003). Beyond the scandalous market-fixing (Cubitt 2014), and indeed the tendency of complex large-scale energy networks and real-time spot markets in electric power to go into periodic chaotic cycles (Bennet 2010), the inbuilt waste inherent in a centralized system guarantees that corporations are paid for energy that cannot be consumed; while the environmental impact is dissipated even beyond the reach of carbon trading, since the heat is released not at the point of production, but over the network as a whole. Since the same engineering law holds good for the 'smart' electricity handled over wire telecom systems, the principle of waste is also built into the structures of cloud computing, where massively centralized sever farms form the hubs of increasingly networked interactions, even with ones own files.

This integral waste functions environmentally in both senses: it is dispersed into the remains of the commons, and it can be treated as an economic externality. This concerns not only climate change but the reduction of superfluous populations to externalities condemned, as in the case of recycling villages of West Africa and Southern China (Basel Action Network 2002, 2005), to bear the brunt of the waste inherent in resolving crises of over-production. To pursue the case of energy extraction, consider the geopolitical history of mining. The mining of Andean silver, for example, so crucial to the development of photography and cinematography, was both the backbone of Spanish imperialism, and the ground of the epic struggles of Bolivian and other miners at the heart of national liberation narratives in the Andes. The extraction of precious metals needed to build telecommunications infrastructures and devices runs parallel to the extraction of energy sources, including oil, uranium and in many instances hydroelectric schemes, all of which have tended to cluster in regions previously thought desolate enough to be turned into reservations for the unwanted indigenous populations of settler colonialism (Wolfe 1999). Protests against the proposed Alaskan pipeline focus on wildlife rather than on the native Inuit and Dene peoples. Even less observed are the recent revelations of catastrophic oil pollution in the headwaters of the Peruvian Andes on Quechua and Achuar lands on the Ecuadorean border, the removal of Suomi from their traditional reindeer herding territories in favour of oil drilling in the now-thawing Arctic, or the repeated protests of Koara and other traditional peoples against displacement, sickness and permanent damage to country by uranium miners in Western and South Australia.

Many Green activists turn to indigenous knowledge as a way of restoring to contemporary consumer capital some of the values of traditional societies. The problems with this are manifold. Firstly, they presume that distinction between modernity and tradition which is at the heart of coloniality. Second, they presume that values other than economic can be rendered compatible with the exclusively economic value system of neo-liberalism. And third, they believe in a bounded and appropriable mode of knowledge on the Western model. As Anishinaabe researcher Leanne Simpson notes of an instance from the 1990s when researchers flocked to indigenous Canadians seeking traditional ecological knowledge, 'outside researchers were not interested in all kinds of knowledge, and they remain specifically interested in knowledge that parallels the western scientific discipline of ecology or the "environment", and they are often looking specifically for information that presents solutions to their own pending ecological crises' (Simpson 2001: 138-9). Linda Tuhiwai Smith makes the case that this divorce of indigenous knowledge from the people to whom it is proper (but not property) is not only an abuse of power, but undertaken, with whatever motives on the part of well-meaning anthropologists, in the frame of a globalization of Western economic values:

> the people and their culture, the material and the spiritual, the exotic and the
> fantastic, became not just the stuff of dreams and imagination, or stereotypes
> and eroticism, but of the first truly global commercial enterprise: *trading the*
> *Other.* . . . It is concerned more with ideas, languages, knowledge, images,
> beliefs and fantasies than any other industry. Trading the Other deeply,
> intimately, defines Western thinking and identity. As a trade, it has no concern
> for the peoples who originally produced the ideas or images . . . Trading the
> Other is big business. For indigenous peoples trading ourselves is not on the
> agenda (Smith 2012: 92-3)

Tracing this trade back to pre-Enlightenment accounts of imperial voyages, Smith points towards a further aspect of the coloniality/modernity pair: the origins of semiocapitalism in the abstraction and

theft of knowledge from indigenous peoples. The heart of this trade is the erroneous re-imagining of knowledge as data, as tradable commodity, a process that would not be applied to metropolitan populations until the 20th century.

Peter Wolfe distinguishes two forms of colonization: franchise or dependent colonies where a settler minority depends on the labour of a majority of colonized natives, and settler colonies, grounded in immigration, who have no economic need for the indigenous people. The former gives rise to the forms of coloniality to which Fanon responded; and breed the fear of the oppressed that returns today in the 'ambient fears' (Papastergiadis 2012: 19-35) of 'homeland security' and immigration paranoia. In the second form, 'Settler colonies were (are) premised on the elimination of the native societies. The split tensing reflects a determinate feature of settler colonization. The colonizers come to stay— invasion is a structure not an event' (Wolfe 1999: 2). In such colonies, notably in the Americas, Australia and New Zealand, the colonized are no longer feared. Instead, after the genocide, they become major ideological tokens. In some cases the colonizers charge themselves with 'smoothing the pillow of a dying race' (Stafford and Williams 2005: 110 ff); in others, as Simpson and Smith argue, indigeneity becomes a living link to land always experienced as alien by those whose ongoing invasion ensures its alienation. In this protracted attempt to 'return' to indigenous values, which become 'traditional' only when assaulted by modernity, the processes of environmentalisation which characterise capitalist modernity repeat themselves: land reappraised wherever it has remained common, once mineral and energy sources have been identified; skills and knowledges expropriated from the indigenous commons to become commodity technologies; even indigenous DNA mined for the biotech industries. In settler colonialism we should recognize the prototype of (1) the endocolonisation of the metropolitan commons, (2) the export of integral waste into the now externalized environment of land at the expense of (3) populations which are themselves deemed supernumerary to modernity, external to the operation of capital, and therefore also merely environments, and (4) the expropriation of common creativity in the new social media economy.

There is a common self-designation among indigenous peoples, expressed in Te Reo Maori as *tangata whenua*, people of the land. A particular aspect of the as it were posthumous cult of indigenous ecological knowledge is nostalgia for place, for environmental belonging. What is lacking from this nostalgia, which powers so much North American environmentalism from Thoreau to Leopold, is an understanding of the process whereby land becomes environment: how land environs the increasingly economically defined human domain, only because it has been progressively, meticulously and methodically excluded from the narrowing field of what counts for human. It is not only, as Ursula K Heise (2008: 55) has it, that we are no longer dependent on our knowledge of the local to survive. It is also that in the context of the experience of mobility now common in global capital, from commuters

to migrants, that 'the environmentalist call for a reconnection with the local can be understood as one form of "reterritorialization," an attempt to realign culture with place' (Heise 2008: 53). But this project is hedged round with problems: a green, self-sustaining lifestyle is simply not an option for the majority; the local itself is permeated by global trade and traffic; and the very means of perception and imagination with which we try to reconnect with our immediate locality are shaped by mediated comparisons and experiences of travel. It is in these circumstances that the nostalgia for place becomes a nostalgia for indigeniety, an indigeneity which not only have we Westerners never experienced, but which is in any case a Western imaginary. The ethnographic attempt to arrive at the truth of indigenous culture is only a way of structuring indigenous experience as Western knowledge.

To understand this gap, it suffices to contrast the easily consumed indigeneity imagined in James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) with the difficulty presented to Western audiences by Zacharias Kunuk's *Atanarjuat* (2001). Comparing the paternalism and sexual fantasy of Cameron's film with armed Maoist defense of tribal peoples in Orissa at the time of its release, Slavoj Zizek asks

> So where is Cameron's film here? Nowhere: in Orissa, there are no noble princesses waiting for white heroes to seduce them and help their people, just the Maoists organising the starving farmers. The film enables us to practise a typical ideological division: sympathising with the idealised aborigines while rejecting their actual struggle. The same people who enjoy the film and admire its aboriginal rebels would in all probability turn away in horror from the Naxalites, dismissing them as murderous terrorists (Zizek 2010).

'What lurks behind the compassion for the poor is their vampiric exploitation', Zizek adds. By contrast, consider the comments of a *Boston Globe* reviewer of *Atanarjuat*:

> these are not so much real men and women as they are symbols of ancient myth and lore. In this sense, *The Fast Runner* might have been just as effective as a pure documentary, rather than as a narrative bolstered by its documentary style. The characters are often indistinguishable from one another, psychologically and physically (cited in Bessire 2003)

The lack of interest in both the mode of telling and the communitarian ethos of the film escapes the reviewer, who delights elsewhere in the exotic locations and filmic style, in blank incomprehension of what is at stake in a movie, which for precisely those qualities, became an international festival success. *Avatar*'s 'vampiric' orientalism is matched by the failure of Western audiences to see in *Atanarjuat* anything but documentary: a Western mode of knowledge that converts the Other into trade. In the reception of *Atanarjuat*, the location stands only as the alien and removed. With *Avatar* we encounter instead peculiar phenomenon of '*Avatar* Blues', widely reported cases of depression among audience members whose enjoyment of the film, and especially of the imaginary planet Pandora and its indigenous inhabitants was so intense that it left them deeply unsatisfied with the reality to which they returned afterwards (Cubitt 2012).

Nonetheless, there is a residual utopianism in the attractions of both films. We must be wary both of displacing the burden of that utopia onto the colonized and endo-colonized, and of mistaking the necessary fantasy of a life well-lived for an immaterial pipe-dream. The media required to produce and consume these fantasies are immensely material, as are the energy sources required to build and power them, and those materials are intensely implicated in the ongoing processes both of coloniality and of utopianism. The political task of building a new eco-cosmopolitanism based on a new form of common wealth (Verzola 2008) needs its temporary autonomous zones of utopian fantasy, including the fantasy of reterritorialised locality. There is however no innocent way to do this.

In 2012 Maori artist Lisa Reihana exhibited the first panels of her reinterpretation of Charvet's *Sauvages de la mer Pacifique*, a confident, exquisitely wrought CGI environment in which performers from different Polynesian islands present their songs, rituals and dances. Few of the performances are authentic, in the sense of the purest traditional forms preserved from before contact with Cook and Bougainville; many are recent evolutions, and some, like the Samoan breakdancers, belong to the new world of the Polynesian Pacific. Transgressing both European ideals of historical accuracy and indigenous ideals of authenticity, Reihana's piece, *in Pursuit of Venus*, both expresses the tragic loss of authentic tradition and singular truth, and, through the sheer beauty of the work, instigates a new potential imaginary, a Polynesian utopia which is no longer couched in the past, but presented in the virtual mode, as immanent possibility. The disjuncture between CGI landscape and live-action performers attests to the unfinished dialectic of a new, indigenous and decolonizing, ecopolitical aesthetic, that includes not only beasts, forests and oceans but the humans who suffer most from exploitation of and as environments, and who have most to gain from re-politicizing Green politics. We cannot rescind Cook's expedition; we cannot undo the tragedy of the enclosures; but we can reconceptualise, as Reihana begins to do, what a commons might be and how it might operate in the field of contradictions that we must now inhabit.

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