ALIENOCENE – THEORY/FICTION

# _____HOW THE PLANET DISAPPEARED__

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**From *Blue Marble* to *Black Marble***

In 1972, astronaut Jack Schmitt took his famous *Blue Marble* photograph from onboard Apollo 17 and the world received its first image of planet Earth entirely bathed in sunlight. Though previous images--especially 1968's *Earthrise*—had already laid the groundwork for constructing a popular conception of what the Earth looks like from space, *Blue Marble* was "unique in showing the planet fully illuminated" (Mirzoeff 2). Because Schmitt managed to shoot the photograph while hovering directly between the sun and the Earth, *Blue Marble* lifted the shroud of darkness that had previously covered at least part of Earth's surface in all earlier planetary portraits. With its swirling weather, vast oceans, and rigid continents all visibly contributing to an interlocking and dynamic system, *Blue Marble* became the staple of an emerging discourse that sought to imagine planet Earth as "a lived and living whole" (Mirzoeff 2). The image is frequently cited, among other contexts, alongside James Lovelock's "Gaia hypothesis"—the idea that Earth is a "self-regulating superorganism" (Lazier 617).

Yet, the decades since Apollo 17 have borne witness to a historically unprecedented confluence of social and economic factors that have drastically reorganized how we literally and figuratively see planet Earth in the contemporary world. Cultural, artistic, and scientific discourses of the "whole-Earth" have produced a new exhibition of texts and images that challenge historically established ways of thinking about planetary organicism and terrestrial life. In 2012, NASA drew the world's attention to this visual turn in whole-Earth imagery with the release of a video project that immediately signals its historical attachment to Schmitt's photograph through its very title: *Black Marble*.

Equal parts callback and comprehensive revision, *Black Marble* reinvents *Blue Marble* in two key respects. First, while *Blue Marble* depicts the Earth illuminated by sunlight, *Black Marble* depicts the Earth shadowed by the darkness of night, its interlocking contours of ocean and continent rendered visible only by the secondhand illumination of humanity's infrastructural crawl across Earth's planetary surface. Second—a direct consequence of this first point—while *Blue Marble* gathers much of its visual gravity by depicting the planet from a scale on which the size of Earth's geographic features veil any underlying "human activity or presence," *Black Marble* inverts this gesture through a visual formula in which Earth's surface is only visible *because* of human activity (Mirzoeff 2). If there is any remaining sense in which Earth is a "lived and living whole," then this sense emerges not from the Earth's geological surface but from the electronic glow of human population centers and communication networks. *Black Marble* accordingly displaces conceptions of vitalism from Earth's geological surface onto its human inhabitants—rather than thinking of "Superorganism Earth," we instead think of "Superorganism Humanity."

Of course, these differences highlight the inauspicious fact that *Black Marble's* emendations to *Blue Marble* largely coincides with what is perhaps the most significant discursive turn of the twenty-first century: the historical moment of the "Anthropocene." The transition from *Blue Marble* to *Black Marble* stakes out many of the most prominent cultural, economic, technological, and philosophical forces distending the idea that humanity has become Earth's primary geological agent: especially a) an increased faith that "geopower" and an unprecedented ability to reshape the Earth's surface through processes of environmental (mis)management will save humanity from planetary degradation (Neyrat), b) the sense that Earth has become a "domesticated planet" subject to the yoke of human will (Crist 130), and c) the idea that contemporary global capitalism has inherited and intensified pre-existing modes of "organizing the relations between work, reproduction, and the conditions of life" such that capitalism can now

complete a historical project of "putting the whole of nature to work for capital" (Moore 86). By representing human infrastructure as a totalizing and unifying presence that spreads across all Earth's continental geography, *Black Marble* certainly draws connections to the ways in which each of these ideas ask us to view the Anthropocene as a moment that materializes alongside fantasies of human mastery over the Earth as a planetary body.

**A Disappearing Planet**

But it's at this word—the invocation of the "planetary"—that we encounter theoretical difficulty. Through these reorganizations of "the conditions of life," the Anthropocene manages to call into question the very idea of what it means to live on "planet" Earth--or on any "planet," for that matter. In *Death of a Discipline*, a book that largely precedes but nonetheless anticipates many contemporary debates on how cultural studies ought to respond to the demands of the Anthropocene, Gayatri Spivak cleaves a crucial distinction between "the planetary" and "the global." For Spivak, the "planetary" (or the condition of "planetarity," as she also calls it), poses a "species of alterity" to the human—it belongs "to another system" beyond that of human work, economics, or political interests (72). In a recent article published in *Critical Inquiry*, Dipesh Chakrabarty follows the terms of this distinction when he clarifies that "We cannot place [the planet] in a communicative relationship to humans" (3-4). We might think of the "planetary" in terms of weather and climate, interconnected ecological systems, and tectonic movements—in short, all the topographical features of Earth that *Black Marble* renders visually obscure or even entirely inaccessible. Thus, as Chakrabarty describes, "To encounter the planet is to encounter something that is the condition of human existence and yet profoundly indifferent to that existence" (4). The "globe," on the other hand, exists "in the gridwork of electronic

capital"—a phrase that precisely describes the latticed network of illuminated information exchange that graticulizes Earth's surface in *Black Marble* (Spivak 72). Even more simply, as Chakrabarty adds, the globe encapsulates all components of contemporary life that are "created by human institutions and technology" (3). We might say, in other words, that while *Blue Marble* offers an image of the planet, *Black Marble* offers an image of the globe.

But the stakes of this visual turn run well beyond the capacity to clarify a semantic distinction. In *Death of a Discipline,* Spivak concludes "The globe is on our computers. No one lives there." The globe, for Spivak, exists only in an immaterial sense. It's a service mechanism rather than the space of a lived environment. Here we begin to see how *Black Marble* challenges a central premise of the globe/planet distinction: *Black Marble*, as I will argue, is broadly representative of an emerging cultural fantasy—one that is inseparable from the Anthropocene—in which the globe replaces the planet as a site of human habitation. As *Black Marble* demonstrates, the philosophical foundations of the Anthropocene produce an ideological condition that seeks to obscure the terms of any human relation to the "planet" and instead emphasize only relations to the "global" system of information exchange in which so much contemporary human life, labor, and identity-formation currently takes place. By depicting the physical structure of our contemporary "electronic gridwork of capital," *Black Marble* provides insight into a burgeoning imaginary in which the globe permeates beyond the computer screen (the image of Samara crawling out of a TV set in *The Ring* comes to mind) and becomes a real space of physical inhabitation.

*Black Marble* highlights this idea through its very production process: here it's important to remember that *Black Marble* isn't a single image or photograph but a composite animation stitched together from individual images taken over the course of 312 satellite orbits around the planet. As NASA explains, "This new data was then mapped over existing Blue Marble imagery of Earth [here referring to programs that use satellite data to map the Earth's surface, not to the 1972

photograph] to provide a realistic view of the planet." The process of assembling *Black Marble* satellite data into a cohesive image asks us to digitally stage the historical process of humanity overwriting Earth's geographic features through the spread and development of continental life. *Black Marble* is in this sense a deeply literal representation of the idea that, contrary to Spivak's position, we *do* in fact live on the globe, and the planet has been reduced to a kind of buried substrate, an underlying—but ultimately passive—"condition of human existence" that provides an organically inert foundation on which a new drama of interconnected human vitalism has begun to unfold. In *Black Marble's* visual inversion of *Blue Marble*, we discover the central, quintessential fantasy of the Anthropocene: we might translate this visual inversion into the linguistic inversion of Spivak's "The globe is on our computers. No one lives there" to the Anthropocene's radical insistence that "The globe *has sprung forth* from our computers. *Everyone* lives there, *and the planet as such has ceased to exist.*"

As this pronouncement implies, it's worth considering how the globe's digitally and technologically decentralized assertion of itself as a site of human habitation operates through an ontologically annihilative subsumption of the planet. Simultaneously thinking through Spivak and Heidegger (who similarly differentiates between terms like "planet," "Earth," and "world"), Chakrabarty suggests that "[T]he harder we work the earth in our increasing quest for profit and power, the more we encounter the planet" (3). But if the planet necessarily exists outside any relation to human use-value or financial systematization—as Spivak, Chakrabarty, and Heidegger all agree—then we ought to revise Chakrabarty's statements to instead say that "the harder we work the earth in our increasing quest for profit and power, the more we *convert the planetary into the global*." By thrusting terrestrial matter into relation with human financial networks and the project of extracting surplus capital, the Anthropocene gestures towards its investment in a program of environmental practices that, by attempting to conscript all of Earth into a process of monetary exchange,

fundamentally rejects the existential ground of the planetary as such. Or, as Frédéric Neyrat suggests, "With the arrival of a geo-constructivist hypermodernity, it is precisely *the idea of nature itself* that disappears within the aftermath of the substitution of nature by artificial entities whose objective is to integrate, digest, and reprogram all natural alterity" (5, original emphasis). As for Spivak, the word "alterity" is particularly significant here, emphasizing that what the Anthropocene puts at stake is the desire to eliminate the very possibility of Earthly matter that exists outside any relation to the human. If the planet is indeed "in the species of alterity" to humanity or is categorically "not susceptible to the subject's grasp," then there is no site in which we "encounter" the planet, only sites in which the planet disappears as the globe annexes whatever space it previously occupied. Spivak suggests that the planet "is not really amenable to a neat contrast with the globe," but here we see that the conditions of the Anthropocene have increasingly pushed the two into a state of mutually exclusive, zero-sum tension with one another (72). The relation between the globe and the planet is equivalent to that between heat and snow: wherever the former appears, the latter necessarily recedes. At the expense of the planet, the globe promises to become *all there is*.

But for all this, if we take *Black Marble* as an indicator of progress then it would appear the Anthropocene's fantasy of completing an absolute, terminal conversion of the planet into the globe stands unfulfilled. *Black Marble* is remarkable not just in what we see but also in what we don't see. Contrasting the densely illuminated nodes and networks of North America, coastal China, northern India, Europe, and other heavily industrialized regions, large swathes of Africa, South America, Australia, central Asia, and of course virtually all the space of Earth's oceans and poles remain stunningly empty. We might understand the Anthropocene's project as an attempt to fill these caliginous vacancies—to construct a dazzling tapestry of interconnected networks that blindingly whites out any potential indication of an underlying planetary surface. The aim,

ostensibly, is to draw closer to the arrival of a future moment in which, when we look back at Earth from space, we will see only the realized power of a species that has transformed a planet of nonhuman life into an object of human creation.

**God Created Humans, But What Have Humans Created?**

In its religious implications, the word "creation" is, of course, worth stressing here. Referring to Marx as a "protothinker of the Anthropocene," for instance, Neyrat notes that Marx "offered in his *1844 Manuscripts* a way to theoretically gather the origin and the ground of the Anthropocene" by proposing that "Like a well-equipped deity, the human being will enjoy the power 'to contemplate himself in a world that he has created'" (Antigones 45). Even more explicitly centering the Anthropocene as a moment entwined in discourses of an apparent human deification, Chakrabarty asks "Are humans now a 'God Species'?" (31).

I will put this question aside for a simpler one: man learns to "contemplate himself in a world that he has created"—but what, exactly, does he see? From the vantage point of *Black Marble*, perhaps we learn that the central operation of human expansion across the Earth's surface is not, after all, "to transform what is other into the same," bur rather *to transform what is the same into what is other* (Antigones 37). In the pointilated coordinates of Earth's cities, we see a planetary body that has made itself an image of the infinite otherness of cosmic space. Rather than looking away from Earth to see the constellations of an ancestral past, we look toward Earth to see constellations that we have created ourselves, linked not by starlight but by the pulsing digital circulations of our own cities. We have installed ourselves as the heroes of our own mythology. In this sense, the Anthropocene's transition from planet to globe stages the messianic deliverance of humanity to itself.

But unlike God, we have not performed our work from scratch. The better comparison, perhaps, is therefore not to God but others who have aspired to take the place of God. Like Dr. Frankenstein, we have learned to create a new kind of living assemblage out of severed components: we, too, shout our delirious "It's alive! It's alive!" into a dark night of frenetic electricity that we have channeled through our own instruments and plunged into the heart of a ravaged body (Karloff). We hope that our creation will fare better for us, but if we have indeed brought the Earth to life, then it is not the face of Gaia that stares back at us from the operating table.

The planet may be dying, but the fingers of the globe have just begun to twitch.

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