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Environmental apocalypse and space: the lost dimension of the end of the world

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ABSTRACT
Apocalyptic discourses continue to be central to environmental movements, media representations and even establishment accounts of environmental politics. At the same time, ecological thinkers increasingly argue that the apocalypse is already here: We are already living at the end of the world. My aim is to problematise predominant notions of time and space in these discourses and, in doing so, to begin to chart the contribution of postcolonial theology to environmental political thought. I argue that conceptions of environmental apocalypse remain wedded to a particular modern, Western interpretation of the Christian apocalyptic tradition that privileges a linear notion of time over spatial analysis. Recovering space as the lost dimension of the end of the world contests received notions of environmental apocalypse and it calls for challenging the social, political, and material relations of power that constitute its place, thereby contributing to more equal and just environmental politics.

KEYWORDS Environmental apocalypse; eschatology; postcolonial theology; space; time

Introduction

> It is 2050. Beyond the emissions reductions registered in 2015, no further efforts were made to control emissions. We are heading for a world that will be more than 3 degrees Celsius warmer by 2100. [. . .] Recently, coastal cities in Bangladesh, Mexico, the United States and elsewhere have suffered brutal infrastructure destruction and extreme flooding, killing many thousands and displacing millions. This happens with increasing frequency now. [. . .] Mass migrations to less hot rural areas are beset by a host of refugee problems, civil unrest and bloodshed over diminished water availability. [. . .] The demise of the human species is being discussed more and more. For many, the only uncertainty is how long we'll last, how many more generations will see the light of day. (Figueres and Rivett-Carnac 2020, pp. 21-31)

In a recent book *The Future We Choose* (2020), the architects of the Paris climate agreement, Christiana Figueres and Tom Rivett-Carnac envision the state of the world in 2050 presuming that humanity fails to meet the

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objectives of the Paris accords. Their 'worst case scenario' exemplifies those environmentalist discourses that envision catastrophic storms, droughts, and the depletion of natural resources, leading to environmental disasters, mass migration, conflict, and, eventually, the destruction of the human species. The concept of 'environmental apocalypse' (see, e.g., Buell 2010) denotes parallels between this discourse and the Christian biblical tradition of depicting the unfolding of the end times. This imagery has become familiar through popular culture, establishment discourse, and the media. The past two decades have seen 'Apocalypse Now' become 'the cliché climate-change headline' (Edelstein 2009) and movements such as Extinction Rebellion (2020) have foregrounded apocalyptic imagery in conveying the 'climate emergency' to publics.

At the same time, ecological thinkers like Timothy Morton and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing challenge and revise environmental apocalypse discourses. They argue that the apocalypse is already here, that we already inhabit the end of the world, and ought to explore new ways of living 'after' apocalypse. Such apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic forms of thought, and critiques thereof, pervade environmental politics to the extent that it has been argued that 'what matters above all for green politics in the twenty-first century is the type of apocalypticism that becomes dominant' (McNeish 2017, p. 1049). It is for this reason that this article engages with postcolonial theology, a field of thought concerned with the intersections of Christian religious thought and various systems of domination (Taylor 2004, Yountae 2018), thus far unheeded in debates on environmental apocalypse. I argue that postcolonial theology offers a critical and emancipatory account of 'the end of the world' that can contribute to more equal and just environmental politics.

Initially the widespread portrayal of environmental issues through apocalyptic frames led to debates that were primarily focused on whether this depiction is alarmist and thus counter-productive (e.g. Feinberg and Willer 2011, Lilley *et al.* 2012, Giddens 2015) or whether it might mobilise people to take necessary political action to address environmental degradation (e.g. Thompson 2009, Buell 2010, Globus Veldman 2012). Subsequently, others have highlighted how apocalyptic imaginaries contribute to 'post-political' and 'post-democratic' governance (e.g. Swyngedouw 2010) as well as the ways in which environmental apocalypse discourses are typically based on fears of racialised others (e.g. Gergan *et al.* 2018) and concerns for protecting the future of whiteness (e.g. Mitchell and Chaudhury 2020). Some critics of environmental apocalypse discourses have also argued that Indigenous peoples have already gone through the end of their world several centuries ago as a consequence of colonisation and, therefore, 'end of the world' should be understood in the plural, as something that has already happened (e.g. Danowksi and Viveiros de Castro 2017, Davis and Todd 2017, Whyte 2018).

The latter contributions provide important problematisations of the universalising tendencies of 'environmental apocalypse,' asking critical questions about what is expected to end and for whom. Nevertheless, Skrimshire (2014) points out that apocalyptic discourse in environmental politics has usually been studied with only superficial engagement with the theological underpinnings of apocalypticism. While present-day apocalyptic environmentalism is informed by diverse sources, Christian motifs are central to it. Therefore, several authors (e.g. Buell 2010, Methmann and Rothe 2012, Skrimshire 2014, McNeish 2017, Rothe 2020) have identified the ways in which apocalyptic environmentalism is both embedded in and revises key motifs of Christian eschatological thought; thought that is concerned with 'the last things' (see Walls 2007). Still, Skrimshire's theologically and philosophically grounded reading of apocalyptic environmentalism remains embedded in the Western theological tradition.[1] Rothe (2020) examines the Western theological roots of the environmental apocalypse, but does not identify alternatives to this tradition. Thus, the authors engaging with the historical and conceptual grounds of 'environmental apocalypse' typically take the Western eschatological tradition as a given. 'Apocalypse' then refers to 'the cataclysmic end of the earth and human history' as well as the revelation of truth; the disclosure of what is ultimate in the world (Phillips 2015, p. 289). Environmental apocalypse is primarily conceived as the point in *time* when the world comes to an end. Even when the literal meaning of apocalypse as revelation and disclosure is discussed, the meaning of revelation is primarily interpreted in relation to time. In these debates, consideration of the last things is conducted from a temporal perspective and the politics of environmental apocalypse is conceived predominantly as a politics of time (see also Pellizzoni 2020).

Hence, I problematise the political implications of this privileging of time and interrogate the role of space in environmental apocalypse discourses. Problematisation entails examining the specific way in which a phenomenon comes to be understood and taken as given (Foucault 2000). How has it become possible to conceive of 'environmental apocalypse' in specifically temporal terms? What is taken as given in such discourses and what is left unseen by this givenness? What are the political implications of the ways in which time and space are conceived in these discourses? To address these questions, I first problematise the role of time and space in environmental apocalypse by interrogating how public discourse and popular literature such as Figueres and Rivett-Carnac's *The Future We Choose* conceive 'the end' in futural and planetary terms. I argue that such accounts of environmental apocalypse disregard the spatial dimension of the apocalypse and thereby implicitly treat space as a mere background or container for the unfolding of the end times. Secondly, I show that this futural conception of time and neglect of space are rooted in the historical development of apocalypticism in

Christian theology and its philosophical secularisation through modern conceptions of history. Third, I demonstrate that even critics of futural notions of the apocalypse like Morton and Tsing remain ambiguous when it comes to attempts to critically transcend present apocalyptic worlds. Finally, I show that postcolonial theology allows for formulating alternative environmental eschatologies that contest received notions of environmental apocalypse and call for challenging the social, political, and material relations of power that constitute its place. Postcolonial theology is particularly suited to this task as it brings a spatial sensitivity characteristic of postcolonial approaches to the study of theological forms of thought. The conclusion further fleshes out potential implications of such alternative eschatologies for the field of environmental politics.

Futural time and planetary space in environmental apocalypse

> 'Apocalypse now closest for 60 years' (Keats 2015).
>
> 'Climate apocalypse stares mankind in the face' (Sarkar 2018).
>
> 'We are running out of time' (Figueres and Rivett-Carnac 2020).

Popular representations of climate change frequently conjure images of a quickly unfolding catastrophe approaching humankind. 'Environmental apocalypse' is constituted by the cumulation of various environmental threats coalescing to put humanity on a linear trajectory towards its end. Such discourses echo post-World War II concerns about a possible nuclear apocalypse. While the nuclear apocalypse was already framed as one of human rather than divine history, the centrality of human agency became even more prominent from the 1960s onwards when apocalyptic imagery shifted to environmental issues (Buell 2010, p. 13). Canonical environmentalist literature, from Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) to Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1968) to the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth* report (Meadows *et al.* 1972), contains strong apocalyptic overtones. While in the 1960s and 1970s they belonged mainly to the toolbox of environmental activists, apocalyptic scenarios have more recently become part of mainstream politics. Most notably, Al Gore *et al.* (2006) has revealed the 'inconvenient truth' that humanity is emitting carbon dioxide at rates that will bring about a catastrophic future unless 'we' act now. In the United States, media coverage of climate change is permeated by apocalyptic motifs, the most significant of which is 'a linear temporality emphasizing a catastrophic end-point' (Foust and O'Shannon Murphy 2009, p. 151).

This linear temporality is illustrated by the Doomsday Clock administered by the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, which separates the 'now' from the so-called doomsday. Although the Doomsday Clock was created to highlight

the danger of nuclear war, its creators have subsequently expanded its realm to include the possibility of environmental or climate catastrophe. When the Doomsday Clock moves closer to midnight, as it did in 2020, 2018, and 2017, humans take one step closer to apocalypse. In 2020, humanity was 'closer to apocalypse than ever,' closer than at the height of the Cold War (Bulletin of Atomic Scientists 2020). Accounts like this, premised on a temporal separation of the present and the end, emphasise the imminence of disaster and urgency of action.

In contemporary perceptions, the futural sensibility of environmental apocalypse has also become mixed with a sense of permanent crisis. Buell (2010, p. 30) identifies a shift in the depiction of environmental apocalypse from a 'rush to doom' to an 'immersion in uncertainty and rising risk.'[2] Risk-management has become a way of deferring apocalypse. This shift, however, does not fundamentally change apocalyptic discourses' underlying futural temporality. *The Future We Choose* exemplifies that pervasive risk and linear time can converge. According to Figueres and Rivett-Carnac (2020, pp. 1–12), 'we' are inhabiting a critical time where action is urgent and 'soon it will be too late.' The emphasis on urgency does not directly explicate that the world is about to end, yet it expresses a temporal device that is central to apocalyptic discourses where processes of change accelerate as the end comes nearer. Accordingly, Fagan (2017) identifies current environmental apocalyptic scenarios as relating specifically to treatments of time: Time is directed toward an event that marks a definitive end and the apocalyptic era presents an accelerating development toward that end. The environmental apocalypse is constituted by slowly unfolding processes which, nevertheless, accelerate as the end gets nearer.

Alongside this linear, futural temporality, a key feature of environmental apocalypse is its planetary character. According to Figueres and Rivett-Carnac (2020, p. 43; 73), 'everyone understands that we are all in this together' because 'we all win or lose together.' This sentiment is shared by Gore for whom, 'we all live on the same planet. [. . .] We all face the same dangers and opportunities, we share the same responsibility for charting our course into the future' (Gore in Meyer 2015). This emphasis on a shared threat reflects how environmental politics shifted in the twentieth century from addressing geographically delimited problems to focusing on climate change as a planetary issue. Consequently, space implicitly appears as an undifferentiated background for climate change progressing. Such planetary representations fail to account for the unequal effects of climate change and environmental degradation. Challenging the notion of one global climate by asking how the climate will change from place to place would provide a more accurate account of climate change (Stott and Thorne 2010, p. 158), and of its differentiated social, economic, and political impacts. Instead, the discourses of Figueres and Rivett-Carnac and Gore represent climate change as

a spatially undifferentiated, uniform global catastrophe. Furthermore, they often do not explicate what exactly is in danger of ending. The subject is typically a seemingly all-encompassing 'we.' Figueres and Rivett-Carnac (2021, xxiv) acknowledge that 'The planet will survive. [...] The question is whether we will be here to witness it.' In their book, the 'we' usually refers to 'humanity' (Figueres and Rivett-Carnac 2020, p. 33). Yet, as Mitchell and Chaudhury (2020) show, the concern with the extinction of 'humanity' in apocalyptic discourses is usually a concern for the continuation of existing power structures and (white) privileges. The spatial account of environmental apocalypse developed in the final part of this article dispenses with the universalism of the planetary apocalypse and interrogates the power structures that futural conceptions of environmental apocalypse tend to obscure.

Overall, the environmental apocalypse is thus depicted by Figueres and Rivett-Carnac and others in futural and planetary terms. Politically, this implies disregard for social, economic, and political differentiation in addressing environmental problems. The next section offers a historical argument for why contemporary environmental apocalypse is conceived in terms of time and, particularly, in terms of the future. This historical discussion also serves to show how contemporary environmental apocalypticism repeats the shortcomings of its predecessors by neglecting space.

Time and space in the apocalyptic tradition

The previously outlined apocalyptic discourses reproduce elements of the Christian apocalyptic tradition, which is mainly shaped by the Book of Revelation where the signs of the end times include famine, disease, earthquakes, and war, and the apocalypse appears as a future catastrophic event that leads to God's final judgment of humanity.[3] Environmental apocalypse discourses, such as Figueres and Rivett-Carnac's worst case scenario for 2050, depict the unfolding of catastrophe in similar ways.

The Christian tradition has articulated the idea of apocalypse in various ways. While the imminent arrival of apocalypse has signified hope for the end of earthly suffering, the institutionalised Church has often sought to contain people's apocalyptic expectation (Hall 2009, pp. 25–35). Most notably, St. Augustine's figurative interpretation of the Book of Revelation led believers to respect Church authority rather than expecting the imminent coming of the end (Cohn 1970, p. 29). Such interpretation expects Christ to return at some future point but otherwise interprets the apocalypse symbolically, locating the Kingdom of God in the hearts of believers (Wojcik 1997, p. 34). This implies a personalistic, ahistorical view of salvation that postpones the end to an undefined future. Such pacification of the apocalypse has been challenged by, for example, different Protestant sects that have argued for building God's community on earth while waiting for Christ's future

return. While the futural character of the apocalypse is clearest in the expectation of an imminent end of time, it remains central to all these interpretations. The apocalypse is characterised by temporal distinctiveness.

Although eschatology – the doctrine of the last things, the final events that bring history to an end – is typically perceived as a religious mode of reasoning, its structure has travelled to modern political thought as a way of perceiving the direction and form of historical and epistemological progress (Wolfe 2017). In modern eschatological thinking, the Christian expectation of a final consummation is transferred into the historical process (Löwith 1949). The end of things becomes the culmination of a historical development instead of an exit from the world. Most notably, Hegel transforms eschatological thought by making the end immanent to history. In Hegel's (1988, p. 12; 19) work, the purpose of the world is conceived as the unfolding of reason in time, 'in the theater of world history', not in a realm beyond the world. This makes 'the end' immanent to the world while maintaining Christian eschatology's future-oriented temporality (see also Westhelle 2012, pp. 40–41). The emphasis on temporal distinctiveness thus characterises both Christian and secularised modern eschatologies, and the secularisation of futural eschatology emerging from Hegel's work underpins the futural logic of contemporary notions of environmental apocalypse, as examined above.

Even though some research traces similarities between environmental apocalypse discourses and this apocalyptic tradition (see, especially, Skrimshire 2014), what it leaves unseen is rarely explored. In this tradition, eschatological thinking is understood to concern the end of *time*, remaining rather oblivious to spatial questions. However, space is not fully absent from these accounts. For example, Lefebvre (1991, pp. 21–22) argues that in Hegelian philosophy, historical time constitutes an immobile space for the realisation of reason. Space becomes a residue of historical time. History, then, is directed at an ultimate purpose with space figuring as the homogenous background where progress inscribes itself. Giddens (1991, p. 16) identifies the separation of time and space as characteristic of modernity. Yet, this separation – or the privileging of time – does not mean that space disappears. Rather, space becomes organised without reference to the particularities of place (Giddens 1991, p. 17). Human social organisation is thus detached from spatial specificity. In environmental apocalypse discourses, this manifests in the predominance of linear time over differentiated space, producing a planetary articulation of climate change and the universalising, threatened 'we'. Put differently, the previously problematised environmental apocalypse discourses reproduce a modern secularised eschatology that combines the linear temporality of Christian apocalypse with a characteristically modern subordination of space to time.

Recently, the linear temporality of environmental apocalypse, rooted in the tradition of secularised Western modernity, has received critique from ecological thinkers who argue that we are already living at the end of the world, even beyond it. In the next section, I problematise the political implications of the ways in which such critics conceptualise the spatiality of the end of the world.

The nonlocal and patchy end of the world

Futural apocalyptic environmentalism is critiqued by authors like Morton and Tsing who are influential voices within increasingly important approaches to environmental politics, such as new materialism, posthumanism, and object-oriented ontology (e.g. Celermajer *et al*. 2021). As their book titles demonstrate, Morton and Tsing concur on the assertion that 'we' already live at, or even after, the end of the world. Because the end of the world has already happened, both denialism and apocalyptic environmentalism have arguably become obsolete (Morton 2013, p. 2). In *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (2013), Morton discusses the end of the world as the loss of the phenomenological 'lifeworld' that used to be always already out there, grounding human experience. Although this notion of 'world' and its end appear quite different from how the end of the world is understood in mainstream environmentalism, Morton considers them closely intertwined, and emphasises his contribution to ecological thought. According to him, the world as a particular sphere of meaning and significance – a lifeworld – no longer makes sense because the new planetary reality challenges the notion that there are different groups of people partitioned according to different lifeworlds (Morton 2013, p. 103). Hence, the world has already ended.

Morton (2013, p. 1) credits the end of the world to 'hyperobjects': 'things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans.' His examples of hyperobjects include plastic bags, Styrofoam, plutonium, the Florida Everglades, the machinery of capitalism, and the Earth itself, which, he argues, are characterised particularly by their 'nonlocality.' According to Morton (2013, pp. 16–18), recognising that the end of the world has already happened effects a 'shuddering of temporality' and a loss of the 'there.' Temporality is shaken because the impact of hyperobjects is radically present now, rather than postponed to some abstract future. While Morton thereby draws attention to the need to rethink existence in the present, this rethinking is to be conducted in nonlocalised, de-spatialised terms. Morton's revision of the apocalyptic tradition in *Hyperobjects* is thus achieved with an emphasis on non-locality, the decreasing relevance of spatial differentiation.[4]

Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (2015) offers a temporal framing similar to Morton's: We

need 'to look around rather than ahead' (Tsing 2015, p. 22). Tsing provides a detailed account of Matsutake mushroom trade as a window into life at the end of the world. Based on ethnographic research, Tsing (2015, p. 6) argues that we are living in a 'global state of precarity' which we need to embrace as a fundamental condition of existence. Yet, Tsing's conception does not imply an indifference to spatial particularity. Instead, she develops the concept of the 'patchy Anthropocene' to draw attention to 'uneven conditions of more-than-human livability in landscapes increasingly dominated by industrial forms' (Tsing *et al.* 2019, p. 186), suggesting a spatially sensitive notion of precarity at the end of the world. 'Patchiness' incorporates anthropological insights about differences and inequalities to challenge the idea of a unified and homogenous Anthropocene (Tsing *et al.* 2019, p. 194). Tsing (2018) intends 'not to deny that climate change requires a planetary perspective, but rather to consider how it simultaneously affects particular places in specific ways'. The particular places, that is to say, are not homogenous. Yet, they remain tied to the ontology of precarity underpinning Tsing's work. 'Patchiness' does not counteract her initial call for conceiving of precarity as 'an earthwide condition' (Tsing 2015, pp. 4–6). Therefore, for Tsing, it is possible to creatively accommodate the precarity characteristic of the post-apocalyptic present, but she remains relatively silent when it comes to the possibility of challenging structural conditions productive of precarity as such. Thus, 'patchiness' has ambiguous implications for the possibility of transformative environmental politics.

Consequently, both Tsing's and Morton's accounts of the end remain ambiguous when it comes to how spatial differentiation is entangled with asymmetrical power relations and how they could be challenged. In Morton, collapsing the spatial dimension into nonlocality is an expression of 'flat' ontology (e.g. Bryant 2011)[5] that proclaims the ontological equality of all objects, including humans. Adhering to such flat ontology, *Hyperobjects* is vulnerable to critiques directed also at other new materialist and object-oriented authors like Latour and Harman. The crux of these critiques is that 'if we do not know which actors are more important than others, then we deny ourselves the ability to intervene in the hope of altering the existing balance of forces. Indeed, more than simply leaving us without the resources to analyse and resist asymmetrical power relations, in its emphasis on relations of becoming, contingency, change, openness and suppleness, new materialism tends to obscure the very existence of enduring or rigid structures of power and the reproduction of relations of domination and exploitation' (Choat 2018, p. 1036). As such, Morton's insistence on nonlocality expresses a general problem of flat ontologies, namely, the fact that 'an ontology of general equivalence [is] thoroughly consistent with capitalism' (Neyrat 2018, p. 7). Flat ontologies parallel capitalism's equalisation of all things through the ideas of market and value, similarly bracketing questions

of power and inequality. Morton assumes 'the massive distribution' of hyperobjects, while granting less attention to the unequal ways in which (human) beings are impacted by these. By emphasising the nonlocality of hyperobjects, Morton de-emphasises their unequal distribution and the ways in which this expresses and affects social and historical relations of power.

Tsing (2015, p. 20), in turn, explicitly proposes affirming diversity, contingency, precarity, and surprise as challenges to capitalism, suggesting that 'Precarious living is always an adventure.' Yet, this arguably reproduces a conception of life that is compatible with, indeed, promoted by the operations of neoliberal capitalism.[6] Neoliberal capitalism is based on the proliferation and optimisation of difference (Foucault 2010, p. 259). It is predicated on a constitutive openness to uncertainty and the accidental (Massumi 2009, pp. 176–180). This openness is exactly what Tsing suggests as having disruptive potential. And yet, in the contemporary political economy, embracing precarity and the uncertainty of life risks over-emphasising an affirmative way of relating to the status quo, thereby reinforcing rather than challenging it.[7]

Tsing and Morton's books exemplify the so-called 'affirmative turn' (see Thiele 2017) in social theory that suggests embracing the catastrophic present to see new possibilities that already exist within it. Therefore, Tsing and Morton reject apocalyptic environmentalism that articulates a future catastrophe that needs to be averted. Yet, the conclusions of the affirmative turn are not the only possible ones to be drawn from the insight that the end is already here. Swyngedouw (2013), who argues that 'many people in many places of the world already live in the socio-ecological catastrophe', similarly rejects the futural character of environmental apocalypticism, but draws different conclusions. His critique of apocalyptic environmentalism argues that it functions as a depoliticising force through its reliance on a politics of fear that is accompanied by a set of techno-managerial fixes to the climate crisis (Swyngedouw 2010, 2013). According to Swyngedouw (2010, p. 12; 15), apocalyptic imaginaries are 'an integral and vital part of the new cultural politics of capitalism' and, therefore, 'the revelatory promise of the apocalyptic narrative has to be fully rejected.' Put differently, for Swyngedouw, apocalyptic discourse is so thoroughly intertwined with capitalism that it needs to be discarded.

While Swyngedouw introduces the kind of critique of systemic structures of power that Morton and Tsing seem to fall short of, this wholesale discursive rejection of apocalypse also implies jettisoning the emancipatory potential that alternative notions of apocalypse might offer. Therefore, Skrimshire (2014, pp. 237–238) takes issue with the reductive and generalising manner in which Swyngedouw treats apocalyptic thought. Although Swyngedouw critiques mainstream apocalyptic environmentalism's embedding in capitalist structures of power, he neglects the pluralism of Christian

apocalyptic thinking and emancipatory political resources that it might provide. Skrimshire (2014) stresses that 'it is to be expected that, in ignoring [. . .] nuances in apocalyptic narrative, its potential for engaging, provoking, and critiquing ethical and social thought is also being overlooked.' In the next section, I suggest one possible direction for critically using apocalyptic thought, drawing on postcolonial readings of the Christian apocalyptic tradition that challenge linear temporalities and nonlocalisable or patchy ontologies.

Postcolonial theology and the spatiality of the end of the world

Postcolonial theology spans various strands and fields, including postcolonial literary criticism of biblical texts, historiographies of the spreading of Christianity as driving empire-building and colonialism, and the reinterpretation of Christian thought from Global South perspectives (see, e.g., Sugirtharajah 1991, Dube 2000, Lartey 2013). Although postcolonial theology emerged as a disciplinary approach only in the 1990s (see Nausner 2012), many of its ideas have existed throughout history in alternative theological traditions (see Yountae 2018). Postcolonial theologies emphasise many early Christian movements' opposition to imperialism, oppression, and exploitation.[8] Postcolonial theologies revive these resistant positions and prioritise the concerns of the marginalised and the oppressed (Taylor 2004, p. 49). Key to this is a reading of Christian theology in 'this world' rather than in the realm of the immaterial (Yountae 2018, p. 729). This shift is significant for theology's relationship to politics and relies largely on rethinking eschatology.

The theological basis for this shift is excavated in Westhelle's *Eschatology and Space* (2012). Westhelle is known in postcolonial theology for his research on Global South reconfigurations of Lutheranism, his postcolonial reading of eschatology, and his engagement with ideas of space in the Christian tradition. He argues that, although the temporal understanding of apocalypse is central to Christianity, the privileging of time over space is the outcome of a particularly Western view of history rather than a biblically grounded reading of eschatology. Based on texts of the early Church and the New Testament, Westhelle shows that at the inception of Christianity, 'the end' had various spatial connotations. 'The end' could refer to a specific place, a geographical location, or the last position in a hierarchical order (Westhelle 2012, p. 34). Despite the centrality of spatial understandings of the end for early Christians, such conceptions are rarely found in Western eschatological discourse, which is why he (2012, p. 79) calls space theology's 'lost dimension'.

The loss of the spatial dimension is significant because it entails a placeless theology that disregards the political realities people inhabit (Carvalhaes

2019, p. 462). Such loss of space figures prominently in Western Christian apocalypticism. Conceiving of environmental apocalypse as futural transposes the resolution of socio-economic and political conflict beyond the present. When eschatology is understood in terms of a future realm at the end of time, it may have the effect of disregarding social and historical contexts in which apocalypse takes place. This is the case because the focus on a single future catastrophe obscures present social antagonisms. But also post-apocalyptic ecological thought displays a difficult relationship to space. While Morton's 'nonlocal' conception of space neglects the political realities of specific places at the end of the world, Tsing's 'patchy' Anthropocene does recognise spatial diversity and she advocates using marginal spaces as windows into potential alternative forms of being within precarity (see also Tsing 1994). But even Tsing's affirmation of earthwide, ontological precarity reduces the transformative potential of attentiveness to marginal spaces to transformations *within* precarity. It appears that the exploration of space does not aim at overcoming precarity's enabling conditions.

In contrast, for postcolonial approaches, thinking eschatological time in terms of spatiality means examining margins and edges as sites that mobilise transformative potential *beyond* the existing world and its suffering.[9] Where Tsing (1994) emphasises the creative potential of the margins, Westhelle (2012, p. 82) conceptualises them as limits set by individuals or systems, producing suffering and necessitating the pursuit of liberation from them. Following Westhelle's (2012, p. 34) reading of the New Testament, margins and edges – the 'ends of the earth' – should be understood literally and figuratively. For the purposes of this article, the literal ends of the earth are those geographical spaces most adversely affected by environmental crises. Yet, Westhelle (2012, p. 79) explains that the meaning of such margins and edges is not only geographical. Instead, eschatological experience is constituted at the margins of existing systems and powers (Westhelle 2012, p. 73). Consequently, categories like race, gender, and class become relevant for postcolonial eschatology. While they direct attention to processes of marginalisation in the present, an eschatology that takes the spatial dimension seriously cannot categorically identify a single centre that determines marginalisation. Rather, it foregrounds the need to analytically establish the forms of marginalisation in specific places.

Spatialising environmental apocalypse thus entails focusing on the social, political, and material constitution of the spaces where it *takes place*. As Westhelle (2012, p. 4) argues, the significance of historical events is linked to the space where they occur. An eschatology without spatial location becomes formalist and empty. Westhelle (2012, xii) suggests to 'frame eschatological thinking in a way that addresses the experience of those who live in and through the *eschata* [the ends] on a daily basis with regard to the places in which it happens.' The implication of this shift to the spatial dimension is

that environmental apocalypse no longer appears uniform and planetary. Rather, the problems of the present come to demand spatially situated analysis.

Reinterpreting Christian theology from postcolonial and feminist perspectives, Keller (2005, p. 170) suggests that the particularity of a place should not be established by separating it from other places – by solely emphasising its 'difference' – but by tracing its relation to those other places. These relations should be analysed as loci of power and domination, expressive of the systemic effects of colonialism, sexism, and global capitalism (Keller 2005, p. 170). Spatiality is thus not understood here in the narrow sense of territoriality, but in terms of, for example, social location, race, gender, and class. Central to postcolonial theology is the recognition that, for example, for displaced peoples, transcendence is a matter of places – fences and walls – and the means by which structures of power like capital and the state keep them out of specific places, rather than a matter of a new time to come (Keller 2005, p. 171). Thus, eschatology is concerned with that which differently affects lived realities (Westhelle 2012, p. 138), since location in space is usually attached to some degree of advantage and disadvantage (Soja 2010, p. 73). Thinking apocalypse in these terms means attending to economic inequality, class struggle, racial conflicts, means of production, and their relation to the earth that constitutes their place (Carvalhaes 2019, p. 462). Addressing environmental apocalypse in terms of the limits and edges entails challenging spatially specific manifestations of such generalised relations of oppression in their intersection with environmental politics.

These theological debates are relevant for the field of environmental politics because they allow for understanding the problems of predominant, Western environmental apocalypse discourses that reproduce the structure of a specific version of the Christian eschatological tradition. Postcolonial theology shows that the separation of time and space and the privileging of the former detaches the idea of transformation from concrete historical existence. Instead, postcolonial eschatologies think space and time in more emancipatory ways. Consequently, what I call 'postcolonial environmental eschatology' directs attention to issues of power, geographical, and material inequality in engagements with climate change or environmental degradation. This means prioritising the socially, politically, and economically differentiated spaces where the environmental apocalypse takes place and analysing their intertwinement with structures of oppression to enable transformative practices aiming to move beyond them. It is beyond the scope of this text to discuss what exactly those transformative practices are. We might consider, for example, landless peasants' struggles (Westhelle 2012), particular forms of environmental conservation (Bocci 2019) as examples of practices that can be understood as underpinned by postcolonial

environmental eschatology. Yet, fully fleshing out the implications of such an approach remains a task for further research.

Conclusion

The conception of environmental apocalypse as a futural and planetary phenomenon – prominently expressed in sources such as Figueres and Rivett-Carnac's *The Future We Choose* – reproduces the prioritisation of time over spatial differentiation that has been typical of Christian theology and modern, Western understandings of history. Such futural apocalyptic discourses may be interpreted as expressions of what Dupuy (2012) calls 'enlightened doomsaying,' which aims 'to raise awareness and spur action' to avert catastrophe. For Dupuy (2012), the political purpose of focusing on the future is to produce 'an image of the future sufficiently catastrophic to be repulsive and sufficiently credible to trigger the actions that would block its realization.' The aims of Figueres and Rivett-Carnac and others who deploy environmental apocalypse discourses may be similar to this. Yet, regardless of the possible intentions behind such discursive mobilisations, I have argued that the futural and planetary notion of environmental apocalypse entails disregarding existing political and socio-economic inequality and conflict. Consequently, the futural formulation of environmental apocalypse risks producing environmental politics that sidelines their role in addressing environmental problems.

As I have shown, contemporary post-apocalyptic ecological writers challenge the futural temporality of these notions. However, despite this achievement, their ways of conceptualising planetary reality remain ambiguous regarding the structures of power and inequality that remain when calling for the affirmation of global precarity and the loss of place. To emphasise the spatial dimension, I have begun to chart the contribution of postcolonial theology to the field of environmental political thought and shown that an alternative environmental eschatology opens up when apocalypse is understood spatially. Consequently, 'the end' is variably distributed across geographical, social, and material divides. Recovering the lost dimension of environmental apocalypse entails putting these divides at the centre of examination. In this regard, postcolonial environmental eschatology resonates with those decolonial and Indigenous critiques of the Anthropocene that call for more pluralist understandings of the world and its ends (e.g. Davis and Todd 2017, Mitchell and Chaudhury 2020).

This line of argument is relevant for the field of environmental politics because of the centrality of the idea of apocalypse not only to Christian but also to modern secularised cultural imaginaries in general. The idea of apocalypse has an important role in mediating the public's understanding of environmental questions and, therefore, different formulations of this idea

are loci for the contestation of different versions of environmental politics. The postcolonial environmental eschatology that I have put forward here is one that draws attention to the political and socio-economic structures that constitute spaces of environmental harm, that prioritises the concerns of the marginalised, and that challenges spatially specific manifestations of oppression and their entanglement with environmental degradation. As such, postcolonial eschatologies have potential to contribute to more equal and just environmental politics.

Yet, more theoretical elaboration as well as empirical research are needed to further detail the potential contributions of postcolonial theology to the field of environmental political thought and to the practice of environmental politics. Especially the intersections between theological insights and activist practice should be further explored, given resonances between spatialised eschatology and activism that emphasises the already-existing end of the world (see Cassegård and Thörn 2018). In addition to this, further engagement with non-Christian and secular sources of environmental apocalypticism should help to situate the transformative potential of postcolonial eschatology within the broader debate on environmental apocalypses. This article has demonstrated that excavating the critical potential that such sources might harbour can prove to be a fruitful addition to existing critiques of current uses of apocalypse in environmental discourse.

Notes

1. Skrimshire (2014, pp. 233–234) is explicit about focusing on Jewish, Gnostic, and Christian traditions of apocalypticism, rather than 'global religious forms' such as environmental apocalypticism in Japan. This limitation could be addressed in manifold ways. Here, I extend the study of environmental apocalypticism to postcolonial interpretations of the Christian tradition. It is beyond the scope of this article to examine how other forms of apocalyptic thought (e.g. Nattier 2008, Hardacre 2011) inform environmental apocalypticism.
2. Buell (2010) details similarities and differences between contemporary environmental apocalypticism and Christian apocalypse in terms of their understanding of the end times, revelation, and last judgment. McNeish (2017) and Skrimshire (2014) further examine how specific forms of environmentalism display parallels with specific forms of Christian thought. For the purposes of this article, I focus only on the notions of time and space.
3. It is not possible here to do justice to the rich traditions of eschatological thought within Christianity and Judaism. For closer examinations of these traditions, see Hall (2009) and Cohn (1970).
4. This is not to say that the concept of space becomes altogether irrelevant for Morton (see, especially, his later work *Humankind* (2017)). *Hyperobjects*, however, is an exemplar of a tendency to de-emphasise spatial specificity in contemporary discourses on environmental apocalypse, and it is treated here with specific focus on that characteristic.

5. Flat ontologies assume all beings to have the same ontological status, thus questioning the usefulness of the human-object distinction and aiming for a greater appreciation of natural entities and technologies (Bryant 2011, pp. - 246–247).
6. Cole (2016) and Dean (2009) demonstrate that ontologies of vulnerability and precarity have limited political potential due to the ways in which they are complicit with the operation of neoliberal capitalism, offering an account of life that reproduces rather than challenges that system.
7. It is beyond the scope of this text to engage with Tsing's entire *oeuvre*, or to develop a more detailed critique of various aspects of *Mushroom at the End of the World*. For a more extensive and hard-hitting critique of Tsing's book, see Hornborg's (2017) argument that 'the promotion of posthumanist discourse [in Tsing and Haraway] is ultimately tantamount to looking away while neoliberal capitalism continues to destroy the planet. In other words, it can only serve as a convenient accomplice of neoliberalism.'
8. Taylor (2004) shows that early Christian movements were marked by 'a restless political contentiousness', entailing resistance to exploitative, hierarchical power structures in various everyday situations and through the building of new communities that opposed imperial powers. The basis for such counter-imperial positions can be located in various scriptural narratives such as Jesus' contestation of imperial corruption and apostle Paul's community building in imperial Rome (ibid.).
9. Mitchell and Chaudhury (2020, pp. 321–326) identify similar aims in Black, Indigenous and People of Color futurisms that formulate alternative subjectivities, temporalities, and mobilities to generate new worlds.

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