"Being-in-the-World: Recognition and Subjectivity in Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement*"[1]

Ana M. Luszczynska
Florida International University, the United States

> The point I would like to underscore here is that a frame for understanding violence emerges in tandem with the experience, and that the frame works … to preclude certain kinds of questions, certain kinds of historical inquiries … It seems crucial to attend to this frame, since it decides, in a forceful way, *what we can hear*…
> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*

Internationally acclaimed novelist Amitav Ghosh takes on the "unthinkability" of climate change in his non-fiction work *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable.* As the title indicates, what is at stake in Ghosh's text is "our" very ability to conceive and hence address, climate change in "the modern novel," "the narrative imagination," and indeed "in culture, in the broadest sense" (Ghosh 7, 9). Why is it, he asks, that "contemporary culture" has so abysmally failed in this regard? Why is the most overwhelming and arguably imminent threat to the existence of humans (climate change), not often rendered in "serious" works of literature (Ghosh 7)? Interestingly, he notes, when matters pertaining to climate change are tackled in "the arts and humanities," they are generally relegated to the less respected genres of "science fiction" or "fantasy" (Ghosh 7-8). In contrast, "highly regarded" works of "literary fiction" that are "taken seriously" by "serious literary journals" (such as, to use his examples, *The London Review of Books*, *The NY Review of Books*, *The LA Review of Books*, and *The Literary Review*), generally do not address the theme.

How are we to account for the wild discrepancy between the imminent global threat that is climate change, and the lack of thematization of it by writers of serious fiction and, more broadly, according to Ghosh, culture at large? And further, what will future generations of "museum-goers" and "novel readers" make of the bizarre silence of our era's literary/novelistic and cultural archive, Ghosh asks? Should we not be at the point of no return in our destruction of the earth, and future humans do indeed continue to exist in thousands of years to come, he suggests that they will consider "our time," a time of "the great derangement." Although, he says, we fancy ourselves to be particularly "self-aware," our culture at large, including the "arts and humanities" and "the modern novel," proceeds in a deranged manner, with a bizarre unseeing and even concealment of the

acute, immediate, and comprehensive danger of climate change. Rather than a recognition and corresponding treatment of these threats, our era has willfully concealed that which we nonetheless recognize or know "within" ourselves.[2]

The Great Derangement responds to this seemingly inexplicable "unseeing" of our era and ambitiously traces the ways in which Enlightenment epistemologies created the conditions for "the modern novel," "the narrative imagination," and "contemporary culture in its broadest sense," which then correspondingly and simultaneously reflect and reify the conceptual frameworks with which they were imbricated. As such, there is a sense in which all of these have contributed to, rather than resisted, the constitution of the Anthropocene broadly and the current climate crisis specifically.[3] From as specific as "the modern novel" to the larger "the arts and humanities" to the quite encompassing "narrative imagination" and finally to all that is, in some sense, "culture in the broadest sense," Ghosh has his interpretive sights on the very foundations upon which "we" perceive, organize, and value our world and those with whom we share it. Indeed, Ghosh compellingly notes that "culture" as "we" know it emerged at the same time as that when "the accumulation of carbon in the atmosphere was rewriting the destiny of the earth" (Ghosh 9). Enlightenment frameworks and the corresponding Western colonial enterprise, and presently, global capitalism, are woven into the very fabric of "the narrative imagination" and "culture" which have emerged and evolved in terms of the said context. More specifically, these epistemological frameworks and the culture to which they correspond, reflect, reinscribe, and therein constitute, the existence and valuing of particular ontological and linguistic presuppositions that are generally unequipped to think the reality of the Anthropocene broadly and climate change specifically. The consequence is the climate-precarious world that we all inhabit, and our attendant and paradoxical inability to even think it as such, which is, indeed, the derangement to which Ghosh refers.[4]

Ghosh's thoughtful presentation on various ways in which Enlightenment epistemologies have worked to create our current world and further and importantly, what and how we can conceptually access it, is as admirable as it is ambitious. But what are the presuppositions, formulations, and conclusions that ground it? In other words, how is Ghosh accessing those fundamental concepts upon which he rests his argument? Is there a sense in which he reinscribes that which he simultaneously critiques and to what degree, if any, does that undermine his analysis? Are distinct and potentially productive insights made available when we open a space between Ghosh's formulations and the presuppositions that ground them? These are some of the questions that will guide the inquiry that follows.

Unearthing the unspoken conceptual foundations of the opening pages of *The Great Derangement* is somewhat difficult and painstaking, but well worth the effort since it permits a seeing and thus examination of how and what (and the degree to which these overlap is important) these conceptual underpinnings *allow us to think at all*.[5] A couple of insights become possible when the conditions of possibility for Ghosh's arguments are revealed. First, the degree to which Ghosh's philosophical interventions/thesis fundamentally rest upon historical understandings of the nature of and corresponding relationships between being, language, and the world, become visible. Second, revealing these implicit theoretical foundations opens the space, and hence opportunity, to consider alternative conceptualizations of being, language, and world that may permit a more sustained and productive thinking of climate change (and correspondingly being, language, and world, and culture). For example, what groups and events may be more culturally and epistemologically situated to engage in this manner of thought and create artistic forms that reflect such a thinking.

Ultimately, I will be proposing something along the lines of what Eaton and Lotentzen call an "epistemological claim" that they outline in the introduction to *Ecofeminism and Globalization.*[6] They suggest that since women are and have been disproportionately impacted by climate change, they may be epistemologically privileged regarding abilities to conceive and address its existence. Following the same logic vis-à-vis a connection between environmental/cultural exposure and epistemological sensibility, I propose the possibility that peoples less fully or distinctly inculcated by the conceptual frameworks of empire, may be *more* able to think and, in some way, exist, outside of its terms. This "lesser" or, perhaps more precisely, distinct kind and degree of inculcation, results from a couple of different factors. First, epistemological sensibilities distinct from those of Western modernity and even Western metaphysics, such as those evident in Asian, West African, and Indigenous philosophical traditions of the Americas, were already powerfully in place before the rise of empire. Secondly, while Western modernity has undeniably had sweeping global impact, particular regions and cultures (such as those mentioned above) have been explicitly placed in historical opposition to it (given the violent and enduring nature of the colonial enterprise and, presently, global capitalism). In other words, philosophical traditions and corresponding cultural values and systems that are in some way distinct from, and often resistant to, those of Western metaphysics, modernity, imperialism, and resultingly, the Anthropocene, existed in some moments and ways, before and outside of the rise of empire and global capitalism. Arguably, such potentially transgressive traditions and sensibilities have continued to endure in diverse manners in various contexts (and sometimes resistance to them is co-existent with complicity). As such, strands of linguistic, cultural, and conceptual

resistance to the philosophical frameworks and systems of empire and global capitalism, emerged in concert with the already existing epistemologies.[7] Ultimately, in order to locate and hear such events and epistemologies of resistance, a broadening of our view of "the arts and humanities" as they are traditionally, which is to say, colonially, conceived, is necessary.

My interpretation of Ghosh's text is a performative repetition of the very same thought that propels his project. It largely revolves around his unthematized and apparently unrecognized thinking of various concepts, guiding oppositions, and the concomitant and vast implications regarding the nature of being, language, and the world which are presupposed therein. This process of unknowingly grounding thought in a particular way, is indeed a primary and productive part of Ghosh's project in *The Great Derangement* and he presents valuable insights as he unveils these generally unseen conceptual foundations.[8] Ghosh persuasively argues that we cannot *think* climate change due to our total conceptual immersion in colonial language/thought while I propose that *The Great Derangement* cannot think "our" or "we" (and thus being) and indeed "culture" in terms other than those of the same colonial sensibilities that he blames for our inability to think climate change. Indeed, he thematizes this very process in his provocative discussion of the ways in which the notion of "probability" has informed if not created the not-entirely-post-Enlightenment thought, culture, and world that we now inhabit. Drawing from the work of prominent historian Ian Hacking, Ghosh proffers that probability is a "manner of conceiving the world constituted without our being aware of it" (qtd. in Ghosh 16). It is in this same spirit of curiosity and critical inquiry regarding that of which we are not "aware" that I examine the role of several conceptual oppositions and understandings that appear to ground his thought.

A primary and foundational opposition of *The Great Derangement*, and one in some way referenced in the text's title, is that of knowledge and ignorance. The first several pages, in which Ghosh outlines his thesis, provide the theoretical points of departure for the analysis. As previously noted, the text explains that we are and have been in a time of "derangement" insofar as culture and its various manifestations are (and have been) proceeding from a willful concealment or non-recognition of that which we, on some level, already know (which is that the world within which we live is as much a subject as we humans are, a central point to be examined further in the coming pages). A substantive understanding of the stakes of Ghosh's analysis necessitates an interrogation of the meanings of ignorance, knowledge, and recognition as they are here articulated. The opening pages of the text present a significant portion of his thesis which provides an understanding of these guiding concepts:

> Recognition is famously a passage from ignorance to knowledge. To recognize, then, is not the same as *an initial introduction*. Nor does recognition require an exchange of words: more often than not we recognize mutely. And to recognize is *by no means to understand* that which meets the eye; comprehension need play no part in a moment of recognition.
> The most important element of the word recognition thus lies in its first syllable, which harks back to something prior, *an already existing awareness* that makes possible *the passage from ignorance to knowledge*: a moment of recognition occurs when a prior awareness flashes before us, *effecting an instant change in our understanding* of that which is beheld. Yet this flash cannot appear simultaneously; it cannot disclose itself except in *the presence of its lost other*. The *knowledge* that results from recognition, then, is not the same kind as *the discovery of something new*: it arises rather from a renewed reckoning with a potentiality that lies *within oneself.* (4-5, italics mine)

As is customarily understood, ignorance in the above is, by implication, a realm of "not knowing." While it is no surprise that ignorance is here opposed to knowledge, more interesting is that two kinds of knowledge are referenced. There are vital differences between the two and they merit considerable examination. Both states of knowledge are preceded by and distinguished from ignorance and each involve a kind of unveiling or un-concealment and hence encounter with an other (the "newly known"). Careful analysis, though, reveals that the "others" encountered by the two kinds of knowledge described, are markedly different.

The most important term in this portion of text is, arguably, "recognition" as this is what he will, a few pages later, oppose to "derangement," the state of our current era vis-à-vis the threat of climate change and that which is manifest in "the narrative imagination." Referencing but not naming Aristotle's exposition of the "passage from ignorance to knowledge" (anagnorisis), Ghosh here invokes a context of foundational, classical, Greek/Western sensibilities regarding the Universal and the True.[9] The central characteristic of "recognition," Ghosh says, lies in the prefix "re" as it indicates a harkening back to "something prior" which instigates a "flash" that is "an instant change in our understanding" (Ghosh 5). What is this flash of awareness that is, indeed, knowledge but requires no understanding (although it instigates a change in it) or comprehension and further exists as "a renewed reckoning with a potentiality that exists within oneself?" (Ghosh 5). Of what and how can we be aware without understanding or comprehending? And how does this awareness exist *already* within the self? Was there a time in which this awareness was "initially introduced" (like the other kind of knowledge he references) and "newly discovered" or has it always already been "within"? There is no indication from the text that it was ever *not* present as it is described as "already" there. The lost other that is necessary for re-cognition has presumably, then, always already been lost since it has always already been, in some sense, known

within. Additionally, this inner awareness that is a kind of knowledge often occurs mutely, specifically, without words or narration. This knowledge of recognition is thus inside us in a radically prior sense (as opposed to outside and discoverable as an object à la substance ontology and Aristotelian knowledge) and present only in the context of absence. It occurs as a flash of cognition of which we are aware but do not necessarily understand (although it effects a change in understanding).

The event of recognition that Ghosh describes is an extremely complicated moment, to be sure. It appears to be a knowledge of which we are unaware and yet always already possess within; something akin to that which we do not know that we already know. And herein, given that it is the world as subject rather than object, that we (human subjects) do not know that we know, there has to be at least, a relationship between the human being-subject and its alleged outside (the object or world-subject) for this knowledge to take place. This is a strange kind of uncomprehending awareness of the world as subject that prompts various questions. How are we aware without words? The knowledge of recognition that Ghosh describes is an extra linguistic knowledge that is within the self and about the world. Although he claims that it is a potentiality that exists within the self, it seems to be a potentiality that exists between or in the interstices of self and world such that an isolated and enclosed self or subject itself is called into question. At this point, it appears that Ghosh is simultaneously invoking and challenging Aristotelian presentations of ignorance and knowledge, and, importantly, the implied subject/object and inside/outside dichotomies therein.

Insofar as the knowledge of recognition has characteristics of an essential or universal sensibility (it is a knowledge that exists within subjects, outside of language, and having always already existed), it is aligned with Aristotelian notions of the universal and true. Regardless of context (historical, cultural, linguistic, etc.), the knowledge/truth of recognition can and will only be what it is. On the other hand, recognition is here dependent for its existence on a "lost other" and hence does not have the qualities of the essential or the "in and of itself." Indeed, it appears to fundamentally exist in the event of relation between subject and object or being and world (à la relational ontology), thus rendering it necessarily in a realm distinct from that of the universal and the true à la Aristotle. Lastly, the fact that the knowledge of recognition itself challenges the primacy of the subject over and against (objectifying) an inert object (that is world/substance) renders it a more complicated matter.

And what of the "initial introduction" and "discovery of something new" knowledge? Is this an essential, extra linguistic, universal knowledge that exists outside of language and a world that can be "discovered" by a subject or is this a more "particular" and

relational knowledge that is linguistically and contextually dependent? Indeed, one way of describing these truths is to say that they exist externally, outside and independent of human existence which is how they are universally discoverable as what they are. We might say that this new and discoverable knowledge is in some way, a more traditionally conceived basic knowledge as it does not require the presence of a "lost other" whereas the knowledge of re-cognition is a reacquaintance that is a wordless awareness which *is* dependent upon a lost other.

Alas, at this point in the text it is not entirely apparent precisely how Ghosh is conceiving the nature of and relationship between subject/object or being/world in the events of knowledge (as knowledge) or knowledge as recognition. The sensibilities revealed in the paragraph in question are nonetheless important as they form a base of understanding and framework from which he can proceed with his analysis. However, as *The Great Derangement* unfolds, there are additional clues that help to unravel the nature of Ghosh's subject, knowledge, and relationships to the world in or with which it exists.

In the very next paragraph on the same page, Ghosh expands upon the world as subject with or within which human subjects exist (Ghosh 5) (At this point it is not clear if human subjects exist *within* the world-as-subject or as another subject alongside the world-as-subject; the distinction is crucial given its implications for the possibilities of recognition and the relation that inheres therein.) Provocatively, and importantly, he frames his explication of our current "derangement" within stories of recognition from his own childhood in India wherein the natural world intruded explicitly and dangerously on his life and the lives of his forebears. (Such a continuous and seamless weaving of personal anecdotes and theoretical exposition serve as powerful, readerly reminders regarding the stakes of the text. In reference to the closing line on "recognition" of the previous paragraph (which is included here for clarity), Ghosh adds the following:

> The knowledge that results from recognition, then, is not the same kind as the discovery of something new: it arises rather from a renewed reckoning with a potentiality that lies within oneself.
> This, I imagine, was what my forebears experienced on that day when the river rose up to claim their village: they awoke to the recognition of a *presence* that had molded their lives to the point where they had come to take it as much for granted as the air they breathed. But of course, the air too can come to life with sudden and deadly violence- as it did in the Congo in 1988, when a great cloud of carbon monoxide burst forth from Lake Nyos and rolled into the surrounding villages, killing 1700 people and an untold number of animals. But more often it does so with a quiet insistence- as the inhabitants of New Delhi and Beijing know all too well- when inflamed lungs and sinuses prove once again that there is no difference between the without and the within: between using and being used. (5, italics mine)

In addition to a further reference to his family history vis-à-vis the natural world in India, Ghosh here critiques a foundational Western opposition ("the without and the within," or inside/outside) which he also invoked in the previous lines ("lies within oneself"). In this latter formulation, beings are *in*, part of (perhaps even constituted by?), the world (the outside) they inhabit or within which they exist. Using elements of the world such as air is the same as being used by them. In other words, when a worldly element is being used by the subject (and this is never not the case as the example of air so aptly illustrates), the worldly element is simultaneously using the subject. The subject is no longer an imperious, authoritative, and neatly external objectifying agent of an essential world that exists solely for their use. On the contrary, this textual moment primes us to proceed from the point of departure of blurred, challenged, or even non-existent lines between inside and outside and, importantly and by extension, being and world, subject and object, subject and other, and even civilized and savage, one of (if not) the founding oppositions of colonization and thus the Anthropocene and climate change. Interestingly, Ghosh's example of the coming "to life" of air points to the world-as-subject and perhaps even prompts a thinking that is beyond a subject/object opposition altogether. Possibly we are no longer in the realm of thinking in terms of a subject at all and can radically reconceive all kinds of beings as fundamentally in relation rather than isolated, individual, and essential; instead of prioritizing the substance of a subject, we can think in terms of *relation* between being and world. If relation replaces substance as ontologically constitutive, an entirely different and (potentially) fundamentally ethical view of beings, worlds, and languages is proposed.[10]

In the lines that follow, though, we are given yet another framework for thinking recognition, subjects and objects, being and the world, and the relationships between them:

> But more often it does so with a quiet insistence- as the inhabitants of New Delhi and Beijing know all too well- when inflamed lungs and sinuses prove once again that there is no difference between the without and the within: between using and being used. These too are moments of recognition in which it dawns on us that the energy that surrounds us, flowing under our feet and through wires in our walls, animating our vehicles and illuminating our rooms, is an *all-encompassing presence* that may *have its own purposes* about which we know nothing.
> It was in this way that I too became aware of the *urgent proximity of nonhuman presences*, through instances of recognition that were forced upon me by my surroundings. (5, italics mine)

Here we learn a great deal about the nature of the world-as-subject and the human subject who exists within and/or with it. Should we include the previous paragraph, the word "presence" is used to describe this world-as-subject three times, with one including the descriptor "all encompassing." Additionally, a few lines later, Ghosh will invoke his

own notes from prior years and use the words "alive" and "protagonist" to describe "the land" : "This is a landscape so dynamic that its very changeability leads to innumerable moments of recognition … I do believe it to be true that the land here is demonstrably alive; that it does not exist solely or even incidentally as a stage for the enactment of human history; that it is itself a protagonist" (Ghosh 6).The characteristics that Ghosh names to signify that "energy" and "the land" are "alive" (being) and "protagonists" (subjects) are an "all-encompassing presence" that is urgently proximate, and perhaps most importantly, that acts as a "protagonist" that "may have its own purposes about which we know nothing" (Ghosh 5). An all-encompassing presence that is agentic, authorial, and intentional, appears to lead us right back to Enlightenment *and* Western metaphysical notions of subjectivity and ontology. It seems then, that rather than suggesting a radical (constitutive) relational primacy between or among beings and world or subjects and objects (in which all are, in some way, all) Ghosh is suggesting that "energy" and "the land" are themselves also subjects/beings *as presences* alongside human subjects/beings *as presences.* The notion of the subject simply and easily "using" an external and objectified world is dismantled, but the meaning of the subject itself, as a fully present, authorial, and intentional agent, is, if anything, reinscribed. At this point, it appears that although at some textual points the text is keen on unsettling modern notions of the subject and object opposition, at other moments, it invokes the most classical sensibilities to describe it. It seems possible that Ghosh wants to make of "world" an agentic and authorial subject which itself implies a particular ontological starting point which is, arguably, itself metaphysical and colonial. The language of his intervention suggests that nature is imbued with all of the qualities that he understands as consistent with human subjectivity (presence, agency, intention) and therefore should be considered as an other, non-human subject amongst human subjects. One central problem with this formulation of a world comprised of Enlightenment-conceived human and non-human subjects is that it precludes the possibility of any relation between and corresponding accountability among.[11]

On a more directly cultural and historical level, *who* is the human subject about whom Ghosh speaks? What is the social positioning of the human subjects who will be assessing "our" current era of derangement? Who is this future "they" and further, whose "time" is "our time" and whose "world" is "our world?" The following thesis-presenting passage from the early pages of *The Great Derangement* reveals a very distinct understanding:

> In a substantially altered world, when sea level rise has swallowed the Sundarbans and made cities like Kolkata, New York, and Bangkok uninhabitable, when *readers and museum-goers* turn to the *art and*

> *literature* of *our* time, will *they* not look, first and most urgently, for traces and portents of the altered world of their inheritance? And when they fail to find them, what should they -what can they- do other than conclude that *our time* was a time when most forms of *art and literature* were drawn into the modes of concealment that prevented people from recognizing the realities of their plight? Quite possibly, then, this era, which so congratulates itself on its self-awareness, will come to be known as the Great Derangement. (11, italics mine)

The human subjects to whom he so confidently refers are "readers and museum-goers" who "turn to the art and literature of our time" to understand the altered world they have inherited. But who are these "museum goers" who will be "our" future readers? Are there no other readers? What subjects are not recognized here? Furthermore, to what and to whom does Gosh refer when he invokes "art and literature of our time?" What "art and literature" exactly and who is the "our" of "our time?" (Similarly, in his references to "the narrative imagination," is there only one?) Further reinscribing a particular "they" (subject) and "our" (subject) with specific characteristics, Ghosh asks *his* readers, what "should" and "can" these *future readers* do but conclude that "ours" was a time of the Great Derangement? Imbued with agency, authority, and the ability to name, define, and conclude, our future readers (subjects) will interpret "us" according to the same Enlightenment frameworks that created the conditions for both the current climate crisis and their own conceptual foundations.

If "our" future human readers/subjects are limited to this description, we will have a very narrow interpretation of our culture, history, and world. That Ghosh specifically references "museum goers" is notable, given the colonial history and corresponding problematics of the very concepts of museums.[12] Who decides what enters the esteemed and proper museum archive and what is therein noteworthy and valuable in our world? Who decides the composition of "the art and literature of our time?" Ghosh goes to significant lengths to explain the distinction between "serious literature" and the less respected genres of science fiction and fantasy, the latter of which will, apparently, not be part of the literary archive (and they *do* indeed address climate change). The "our" of "our time" to which they will be exposed via museums, art, and (presumably "serious") literature, appears to be an extremely limited "our" comprised of very particular and privileged subjects and objects. No doubt, Ghosh is referencing the same human subject who creates and consumes a particular kind of art and literature which is that presupposed by Enlightenment thought. Presumably, by "readers," Ghosh is pointing to "readers of a certain-kind-of-novel-who-also-visit-museums." Who is this subject if not a Western, white, propertied, traditionally educated, male, subject of coloniality, so deliberately and strategically placed in opposition to the object, the other, and by extension, the savage and uncivilized? Interestingly then, the subject he critiques as conceptually limited by

Enlightenment notions, is the same one he implicitly invokes as our future readers and critics, those who proclaim that ours must have been the time of "the Great Derangement." If the climate crisis is indeed "also a crisis of culture and thus of the imagination," and will be assessed as such, whose cultures and imaginations are being questioned? (Ghosh 9).

While I appreciate Ghosh's explications and agree that guiding colonial narratives have made and continue to make a world, I simultaneously suggest that, globally, there are marginalized groups who have a distinct and at times combative or oppositional (and therein instructive) relationship with these foundationally colonial epistemologies. Although *The Great Derangement* repeatedly exposes the colonial underpinnings of "the modern imagination," in centering and indeed presupposing a white, male, traditionally educated, default subject, it does not address possible theoretical approaches that have emerged from historically disenfranchised groups. The presumed readers of *The Great Derangement* as well as the future readers Gosh invokes are, seemingly, limited to those who created, benefited from, and still reinscribe colonial epistemologies and corresponding values (the privileged few for whom "serious literature" and "the arts and humanities," and museums, were intended in the first place.) Ironically, these are the human subjects (who defined, reified, and continue to reify the very notion of the human subject) who crafted, drove, and profited from Enlightenment thought and the colonial enterprise and thus are most intimately linked to it, imaginatively and otherwise.

There is further evidence of a default and privileged subject, in Ghosh's analysis of the powerful role of culture in constituting human desires that in turn, have created the climate crisis. Desire is herein produced in specific cultural contexts as occurs when human subjects value and crave particular "vehicles and appliances, certain kinds of gardens and dwellings – that are among the principal drivers of the carbon economy" (Ghosh 9-10). In explaining these cultural and imaginative processes, he notes that particular objects such as convertible cars "excite" us not for their engineering brilliance (or any other reason) but rather because "we envision James Dean and Peter Fonda racing toward the horizon; we think also of Jack Kerouac and Vladimir Nabokov. When we see an advertisement that links a picture of a tropical island to the word *paradise*, the longings that are kindled in us have a chain of transmission that stretches back to Daniel Defoe and Jean-Jacques Rousseau" (Ghosh 9-10). Who imagines James Dean and Peter Fonda? For whom does a "picture of a tropical island" elicit images of a particular notion of "paradise?" Certainly, there are many and varying cultures across the globe who do not imagine or even know of these actors and writers and for whom a "tropical island" is a complicated and difficult home. The impact of broad-scale colonial

narratives on the world is undeniable but is it not also the case that different peoples have had and have distinct relationships to those narratives? More specifically, might it be the case that those left outside of the purview of subjectivity (according to the Enlightenment epistemologies that Ghosh so productively critiques), those who, perhaps, have neither resources for, occasion to, nor interest in, reading traditional texts or visiting museums as they are generally conceived, might have an *enhanced* ability to perceive those aspects of being, language, and world, that more fluidly coalesce with an understanding of nature as (a kind of) subject, and further, and crucially, of subjectivity as constitutively relational rather than essential?[13] Or, at the very least, given the "blindness" and "derangement" of the current, Enlightenment-produced, conceptually limited, imperious and default subject, perhaps the "other" to this presupposed subject, having a different relationship to empire, coloniality, and Enlightenment thought, might be *less* imbued with the derangement that the former has so largely created? In either case, could decentering the colonial subject from these inquiries, open up productive and subversive approaches?[14] Perhaps a more useful and potentially instructive point of departure might be to consider other kinds of archives left by historically marginalized subjects who may have overarching understandings of subjectivity/being and the world as in some way constituted by relationality rather than agency, authority, and intention[15].

In other words, turning our critical gaze beyond the world of "serious literature" and "museums," and opening it up to other kinds of textualities, affords us the opportunity to see and hear various approaches that in some way challenge rather than reinscribe colonial frames of understanding.

It is worth an explicit reminder that such an expansion of a thinking of being/subject and world must happen in a twofold manner, both in terms of the nature of being (as relational rather than essential) and the corresponding historical/social positioning of various subjects. Relatedly, and in consideration of both, does such a sensibility allow us to conceive of human and non-human being as constitutively entangled with each other and with world and language? Is it possible that one of the first and most decisive moves of Western *and* Enlightenment *and* colonial thought, that of essentialized thinking, is one of the more immovable and powerful of them all? Perhaps non-Enlightenment conceptualizations of being, language, and world, and their foundational entanglement rather than independence*, are* evident in a myriad of contexts, including those containing marginalized subjects. Possibly, the iterations of such understandings unfold in the context of what we might call "art and literature" conceived in the broadest, which is to say, for our purposes, non-classical senses.[16]

Although not articulated as such, the constitutive overlapping of being, language, and the world, is indeed central to several aspects of Ghosh's argument. Understandings of an entirely distinct being (as an atomistic and isolated individual), language (largely representational and transparently owned by an Author), and the world (as the object of the subject's will), undergird Ghosh's critique of imperial ways of knowing and inhabiting the world. The Western metaphysical conceptions of an imperious subject radically removed from the world they inhabit as object, who narrates "himself," others, and the world with a simplistic and transparent language (as "tool for communication") must be unsettled. While this discussion may appear far removed from the very real and immediate threats of climate change, which ultimately form the stakes of *The Great Derangement*, it is not. Indeed, the theoretical frameworks presented in the opening pages allow and drive the analysis that follows for the remainder of the text and determines the ways in which we can proceed both in thought and action.

The stakes of *The Great Derangement* are real and urgent. Indeed, Ghosh does an exceptional job of weaving his childhood experiences of environmental dangers in India, into this extremely ambitious theoretical undertaking. On the one hand, I applaud and appreciate Ghosh for his compelling and impactful analysis of the ways in which ideologies, their frameworks, and their corresponding power structures, inform and constitute our ability to perceive, absorb, claim to know (and indeed our very understanding of perception and knowledge itself) and hence define (and thereby make and access a world). On the other hand, I seek to unsettle the conflation of the subject with particular readers who are, arguably, of a profoundly circumscribed sect, perhaps especially *unable* to perceive multiple interpretive points of entry on various themes but most notably that of essential being and subjectivity (given their default status as fully present and agentic). The ensuing blindness that has created the Anthropocene broadly and climate change specifically, as well as "our" corresponding inability to even "think it" is part and parcel of the Enlightenment subject whom Ghosh both explicitly and effectively critiques and yet implicitly reinscribes.

In closing, is it not possible that the broader and overarching inability to recognize beings (both human and non-human) and the world as constitutively relational "subjects" is an even farther-reaching derangement, one under which the climate crisis would necessarily fall?

Notes

1. My usage of "being-in-the-world" draws from Heideggerian phenomenology. In the examination that follows I am thinking alongside and through a thought line that includes Heidegger, Derrida, Glissant, Nancy, and Butler.

2. Curiously, Ghosh does not consider the impactful work of the many authors such as Octavia Butler, Barbara Kingsolver, and Richard Powers (to name just a few North American examples), who have penned "highly respected" novels that do indeed address climate change in impactful and nuanced ways.

3. The term "Anthropocene" has been challenged in important and productive ways. Donna Haraway, for example, has suggested that it is an appropriate term for the geological realm, but that "Capitolocene" is a more accurate and useful term in other theoretical contexts given that it points to the privileged global minority using the majority of the earth's resources and therein disproportionately causing damage. Dipesh Chakrabarty agrees that the unequal global distribution and usage of natural resources is crucial to recognize, but adds that we must also consider that the damage to the earth and its processes would be the same whether they are distributed evenly or unevenly.

4. This paradoxical inability to "think" our climate precarious world, resulting from the power and ubiquity of the mutually constitutive theoretical frame and its world, can be attended to with continuous and diligent critical inquiry or what David Wood so compellingly calls "the step back." See David Wood's *The Step Back, Ethics and Politics After Deconstruction.* Thank you to Prof. Samir Kumar Das for this important intervention regarding approaching the paradox.

5. It is worth noting that a classical seen/unseen, revealed/hidden, conceptual structure, grounds this figuration of "unearthing" that I invoke here and Ghosh invokes as a central component of his thesis ("we" are deranged because "we" cannot see the threat of the climate crisis). Even more interesting is the fact that "unearthing" and other figurative terms such as "mining" indicate a direct (although generally unseen) participation with Enlightenment sensibilities of the imperious human subject and the allegedly inert world/earth as object. I find this a particularly apt example of the difficulty of thinking "otherwise" or outside of the traditional terms of binary oppositions, particularly that of revelation/obfuscation and subject/object so central to a Western philosophical history.

6. Quoted from "The Anthropocene (and) (in) the Humanities: Possibilities for Literary Studies / O Antropoceno (e) (n)as Humanidades: Possibilidades Para Os Estudos Literários" by Melina Pereira Savi in *Revista Estudos Feministas,* "Eaton and Lorentzen tease out from the women and nature connection a question: '[s]ince environmental problems affect women most directly isn't it possible that women possess greater knowledge and expertise that could prove useful in finding solutions to pressing environmental problems? They acquiesce that most ecofeminists see the women and nature connection as based not on essence but on cultural constructs, and they propose that, in being women the most affected group in environmental disasters, are they not epistemologically privileged when it comes to addressing the problem?'" (2-3).

7. Although outside of the scope of this inquiry, we can point to a few seminal texts that have powerfully treated these themes and continue to have an impact on theoretical explorations within (and without) the arts and humanities as they are contemporarily conceived. By way of example, consider Robert Farris Thompson's *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, Gloria Anzaldua's groundbreaking *Borderlands*, Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*, and more contemporarily Doris Sommer's *Bilingual Aesthetics* and regarding Black Queer resistance, Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's *Ezili's Mirrors.*

8. The seen/unseen and/or recognized/unrecognized figurations work in a provocative and at least a twofold fashion here. On the one hand, they form a basis of Ghosh's central argument in *The Great Derangement* and mine in this essay. On the other hand, and relatedly, the metaphor of sight for understanding, recognition, and knowledge, provides an apt example of the inescapability of figuration and the degree to which it constitutes what and how we are able to understand, recognize, and know. Indeed, ocular privileging is utterly central to Western metaphysical thought. A response to this paradox of knowledge and its constitutive lack (or that which it necessarily dispels in order to exist) is, again, endless critical inquiry and vigilance similar to that of David Wood's conceptual "step back" and arguably Derridean deconstruction writ large.

9. It is worth noting that recognition or anagnorisis in Aristotle's *Poetics* refers specifically to a shift in understanding in the context of "the literary," here, theater, drama, or Greek tragedies.

10. For crucial theoretical expositions of the ethical impact of undoing the subject as "individual" and proposing relational primacy as fundamental and potentially ethical, see Jean-Luc Nancy's *The*

Inoperative Community and *Being Singular Plural* and Judith Butler's *Senses of the Subject* and *Precarious Life.* For a variety of essays devoted to these themes see Cadava *et. al*, *Who Comes After the Subject*?; Todd Comer and Christine Junker's introduction to "Disability Studies and Ecocriticism: Creative Critical Introduction" in *Studies in the Humanities*, provides a compelling discussion of the productive possibilities of juxtaposing Jean-Luc Nancy's thought of community and singular plurality alongside ecocriticism.

11. See Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* and *Being Singular Plural*.

12. Whether we determine that the origin of the museum is in seventeenth-century England with Elias Ashmole at the University of Oxford, or 530 BC in Mesopotomian antiquity with its "wonder rooms" or "cabinets of antiquity," museums originated and unfolded according to the imaginations and values of the most traditionally educated and financially wealthy members of their communities.

13. Jean-Luc Nancy suggests the term singularity or singular-plurality to indicate constitutively relational being. Such being is distinctly contrasted to the Western and colonial frameworks of the Individual and Subject. See *The Inoperative Community, Being Singular Plural*, and *The Creation of the World or Globalization*.

14. For considerations of potentially emancipatory ontological events vis-à-vis Nancian singular plurality and Derridean witnessing in select literary works of Toni Morrison and Ana Menendez, see Ana Luszczynska's *The Ethics of Community*.

15. The South African philosophy of "Ubuntu" (often translated as "I am because we are") comes immediately to mind.

16. I am thinking of "art and literature" here as more closely aligned with "textuality" as it is understood from a deconstructive and cultural studies framework. Herein, we have the advantage of considering a far greater array of texts, including all kinds of popular cultural phenomenon, both dominant and marginal. The ways in which dominant and hence market-ready popular cultural forms generally emerge from the less immediately consumable marginal, and therein more likely transgressive, ones, is notable.

WORKS CITED

Aristotle. *Aristotle's Poetics*. Hill and Wang, 1961.

Butler, Judith. *Senses of the Subject*. Fordham UP, 2015.

—. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence.* Verso, 2004.

Cadava, Eduardo, *et al*. *Who Comes after the Subject?* Routledge, 1991.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "The Climate of History: Four Theses." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2009, pp. 197-222. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/596640. Accessed 12 July 2021.

Eaton, Heather and Lois Ann Lotentzen. *Ecofeminism and Globalization: Exploring Culture, Context, Religion.* Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, 2003.

Ghosh, Amitav. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. The U of Chicago P, 2017.

Hacking, Ian. *The Emergency of Probability*. Cambridge UP, 1975.

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Harper and Row Publishers, 1962.

Luszczynska, Ana M. *The Ethics of Community : Nancy, Derrida, Morrison, and Menendez*. Continuum, 2012.

Nancy, Jean-Luc, and Peter Connor. *The Inoperative Community*. U of Minnesota P, 1991.

Nancy, Jean-Luc, and Robert D. Richardson. *Being Singular Plural*. Stanford UP, 2000.

Savi, Melina Pereira. "The Anthropocene (and) (in) the Humanities: Possibilities for Literary Studies / O Antropoceno (e) (n)as Humanidades: Possibilidades Para Os Estudos Literários." *Revista Estudos Feministas*, vol. 25, no. 2, Aug. 2017, pp. 945-959.

Wood, David. *The Step Back: Ethics and Politics After Deconstruction*. State U of New York P, 2005.