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Gender Abolition and Ecotone War

To the extent that life is understood scientifically, the management of life becomes a science. This is the underlying developmental logic of Michel Foucault’s account of biopolitics, featuring the transfer that characterizes his thought: an epistemology becomes a mode of domination. It is within this period of his thought, most notably in the talk later known as “Mesh of Power,” that Foucault comes closest to aligning his own approach with that of Marx, decisively associating biopolitics with the power not simply to make live but to make productive (albeit in a more variegated sense of “production” than is found in Marx’s critique of political economy). Never the twain shall meet, however, despite noble efforts to synthesize their models of history. Marx’s so-called primitive accumulation, wherein the feudal subject was separated from means and possibility of subsistence by direct force of the state sovereign, might be understood in accordance with Foucault’s biopolitics—the peasant is made productive through being made free of everything but the capacity to sell their labor power. Following this transition, however, capital (subsuming history into its motion) becomes self-moving, in the form of self-valorizing value and impersonal compulsions. The impositions of force
lose their ordering power. What sovereigns remain are no longer either oblig-
gated or able to make anything; they are more or less along for the ride. This
set of impersonal compulsions churning forward autonomous of anyone’s
will is the mature Marx’s antihumanism, against which Foucault appears
less antihumanist than we once thought; his meshes of power are far more
expressly vested in persons and groups, and in their human capacities.

In the present essay, deriving more from Foucault’s logical structure
than the particulars of the biopolitical, we are interested in the imperative to
make differential: how differences that precede the eras either of capital or of
biopolitics, existing at both the so-called natural and social levels, are repro-
duced as differentials across which value can flow. These differentials are a
necessary basis for the imperative to make productive, since productivity
within capital requires differential valuations. This assessment provides for
us three things. First is a conceptual terrain, that of the ecotone, the meeting
point of two ecologies across which value flows. Second is a unification of
ecological and other struggles as sharing this logic of ecotone and differential,
despite various claims that the logic of the Anthropocene does away
with differential thought because it threatens all equally with absolute
destruction. And third is a logic of struggle, which is that of abolition. Gen-
der is our question here, for the way that it is preserved as a differential as a
matter of necessity within capital, and thus becomes itself a lever of capital
expansion that is now identical to anthropogenic planetary destruction. But
this is differently true of class, race, and property arrangements that spatial-
ize differentials. Against the Anthropocene we see the abolition of these dif-
ferentials as an immediate and necessary struggle.

The Kumulipo

We begin with a poem. We are both sometimes poets, so this seems apt.
Moreover, poetry has not only a thick precapitalist history (in distinction,
famously, to the novel, much less the newer media) but a historically privi-
leged relation to representing the Anthropocene: it is at its beginnings often
an anthropogenic mode for formalizing and cataloging ecological data such
as the sorts of fish, of winds, and so forth. It is such a poem we have chosen:
the Hawaiian creation chant of the Kumulipo.

We want the poem to stand as an allegory for the historical develop-
ment this essay traces. The allegory is not, however, in the poem’s content or
form—even if we linger on these for a moment, even if these are necessary
elements in what will happen. The allegory blooms in the poem’s material
entanglement, its historical fate: how it was taken up and transformed by capital toward certain ends that it could not have foreseen.

The particular transformation in which we are interested concerns the remaking of an aggregate arrangement, various and elaborated and tending toward a whole, into a systematic differential purpose-built to accumulate capital. The distinction between difference and differential from which our argument develops identifies the historic internalization of the social into the political-economic, in a manner that preserves and produces difference at the level of lived experience only to homogenize it at the level of value production where all difference becomes a potential lever for accumulation. We shall return to this analysis; for the moment, we might say that this transformation of difference into differential is one way to describe the character of the Anthropocene.

No such historical transformation happens in an instant, even in a given locale. Correspondingly, the dating of the Anthropocene remains open to general debate and to specific inquiries in cases like ours of Hawai‘i. We hope the tracing of this allegory and this history will lead us toward a useful sense of how we date the era, toward a politics adequate to the present, and an idea of where to intervene.

The Kumulipo is a good example of what poetry can look like before the Anthropocene. It is written in a social order both precapitalist and pre-Western contact. It enacts poetry’s long history of engaging eco-complexes. It is said to be composed around 1700 by Keaulumoku, who like Homer may or may not be an avatar for a collective poet. Like many creation chants, it narrates the genesis of the world by listing a series of births. Unlike many creation chants, it tracks an evolutionary course, moving more or less up a phylogenetic chain. So the list begins with slime, then coral, then the burrowing worm, then the starfish, the sea cucumber, the coral-dwelling sea urchin, the kumimi crab, the whale. Humans do not show up until the eighth section of sixteen. The poem pivots on the following line: “from embryo the infant child has formed until now” (Johnson 2000: 25, l. 649). The chant is enumerative, but not merely enumerative. About sixty lines in, it begins a transition from the ocean to where the ocean and the shore meet, a new contrast or tension: the ‘aki‘aki seaweed next to the manienie shore grass; “the fragrant red seaweed living in the sea / Kept by the succulent mint living on land” (ll. 66–67).

Once set forth, the conjoined difference of land and sea becomes an organizing principle for the poem, alongside occasional clusters: a list of fish, a list of birds, a list of seaweeds, a list of taros. The concerns of the Kumulipo are larger than the charismatic megafauna that dominate the
concerns of mainstream environmentalism. Still, these lists, as many lists in literature of this sort, tend to be anthropocentric; they are the plants and the animals that humans might need to survive. Despite its interest in the food plants and animals, however, the Kumulipo does not distinguish between human and nature. It puts humans, one more list among the lists, in their place on land while pointedly embedding them in the conjoined unity of land and sea that the poem works so hard to convey.

The meeting of land and sea is a paradigmatic ecotone, the meeting of two biomes: a transition zone, a contact zone, a space of flows. And those more knowledgeable about things Hawaiian, such as Rubellite Kawena Kinney Johnson, point to how the poem notices the dependencies between not only land and sea but also more complicated ecotones: open ocean, reef zone, coastal wetlands, dry and wet forest areas. It is also, and we think this is important, a beautiful poem that is expansive and inclusive.

And yet, ironically or inevitably, it becomes not just a poem elaborating the ecotone but itself part of that ecotone and of its transformation. The poem is in circulation at the very moment of Western contact. It is said that the Kumulipo was chanted to James Cook on his landfall at Hawai‘i: a consequential meeting of land and sea, to say the least. Cook, some say, was thought to be Lono-i-ka-makahiki (the Hawaiian deity of fertility, agriculture, and rainfall) come to life. This is 1788.

Let us make a claim, then, one that we will have to make good on. “The Anthropocene” is not simply a period but a set of forces. It is, among other things, the name for the set of forces that drive toward the meeting of Kumulipo and Cook. England’s maritime and global power, of which Cook is an early emissary, will extend itself around the globe. Carl Schmitt’s (1997) brief book, Land and Sea, offers a different sort of creation myth from the Kumulipo, but a related reminder. Inevitably, with Schmitt (2003), capital and empire trace the spatial dispensation of the globe, what he later calls “the nomos of the Earth,” in this case the ambiguous undulations of the land-sea relation across centuries. In the era after the Westphalian interstate system is settled, it becomes increasingly the case that land is the place of politics, sea the space of economy. This division corresponds to the rise of imperial capitalism; as Walter Raleigh said, “Whoever controls the seas controls the world trade; whoever controls world trade holds all the treasures of the world in his possession, and in fact, the whole world” (quoted in Schmitt 1997: n.p.). This is “the world” seen from Europe, the world as it will be organized by the first capitalist world empire. The ur-ecotone of land and sea, which initially appears as more or less primordial and natural, has becomes historical and social.
When exactly the Anthropocene began is much debated. Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer (2010), who proposed the term in 2000, begin by locating it “since the industrial revolution in 1750.” There has been some suggestion that Crutzen now wants to place the beginning of the Anthropocene with the first nuclear tests (Voosen 2012). These are two of the three most persuasive datings on offer, basing themselves firmly in stratigraphic data. Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin (2015: 171–80), in a recent and critical revisiting, similarly offer two alternatives: 1610 and 1964. The latter date aligns with Crutzen’s second proposition, concerning changes wrought by nuclear fallout. This latter dating underscores an initial problem with the periodizing hypothesis: if purely stratigraphic, it suggests, at a practical level, that our largely post-nuclear age has solved its problem and, moreover, that the ongoing climate collapse is extrinsic to the Anthropocene proper. In trying to locate the social existence of the Anthropocene, we are compelled to take more seriously the remaining two dates, designating colonialism at a global scale and the rise of industrial production. An influential essay by Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) uses 1750 as well for its working assumption.

We might add here that the 1610 dating shares some logical puzzles with 1945 and 1964. In Lewis and Maslin 2015, the authors’ technical rationale comes from the dip in atmospheric CO₂: “The impacts of the meeting of Old and New World human populations—including the geologically unprecedented homogenization of Earth’s—may serve to mark the beginning of the Anthropocene” (175). The tension between 1610 and the latter eighteenth century is between the colonization’s privative destruction of common life and the coming of capitalist modernity, with its compulsions toward ever-increasing productivity. Here the case of Hawai‘i proves not unique but perhaps uniquely suggestive in the relative unity of these two events: the moments of its contact with empire and of the launch of the industrial revolution that will swiftly bestride the planet are one.

As the Anthropocene develops, the Kumulipo is carried along into the contemporary by its role in the complicated history that is the Pacific. A poem of beginnings, it is present no less at the ends of things. It was translated into English in 1897 by Queen Lili‘uokalani while she was under house arrest in ‘Iolani Palace, after a coup d’état by the emissaries of Anglophone capital. Three moments, then: composition, contact, coup. This alliteration feels easy. If it offered a complete story, it would be another wherein a poem exists both within colonial capture and as struggle through resistive translation, a struggle that has had uneven success.
But this is only part of the story. Squarely amid these events falls the Great Māhele, the moment in the 1830s when Hawai’i produces its first constitution and bill of rights, taking on the formal characteristics of a modern sovereign state, albeit one that would shortly be subjected to the iron law and discipline of colonization and international markets.

The variegated array of oppositions or confrontations or pairings figured by this history that begins with the land and sea and then swiftly proliferates can scarcely be enumerated, much less resolved, here. It would take a poem as sustained as the Kumulipo just to name them. But to quickly enumerate some of the issues: the Great Māhele generated more than a constitution and bill of rights. As Lilikalā Kame‘eleihiwa (1992: 8) notes, it “transformed the traditional Land systems from one of communal tenure to private ownership on the capitalist model.” Kamehameha III, in an attempt to avoid losing the lands to the takeover by Americans (but not in the name of America at this point), divides the islands among 245 chiefs. The islands are apportioned into wedges pointedly including both the shore and the interior, a literalization of the attention to the intersections between these zones that defines the Kumulipo. Land and sea. Every wedge a contact zone now, every wedge a site for differential flows.

One can often hear it said that Kamehameha III was wily in this move to privatize the islands because these wedges are ecologically attentive in how they acknowledge the relationship between land and sea. But we cannot help noticing how the poem’s ecopoetics are so easily applied to the onset of Western capitalist modernity and, in fine dialectical fashion, mediate this onset as well. Most of this land, of course, ends up sold or leased to those who are not Hawaiian. As Kame‘eleihiwa (1992: 16) writes, “In the sweep of history, it is but a short step from the 1848 adoption of private ownership of ‘Āina to the 1893 overthrow of the Hawaiian government.”

This is what is sadly compelling about the trajectory of the Kumulipo: its own transformation, we almost want to say transubstantiation, over the period we are considering and how this is entangled with the problem of capital as such. If the poem of ecotone produces an ecopoetics at its inception, this is transformed into a full-blown ecopolitics by the time of Hawai’i’s extended confrontations with Western powers and concomitant collapse of sovereignty at the end of the nineteenth century. State of nature to nature of state.

But this genitive inversion risks concealing what will turn out to be its content: how the chant becomes saturated with capital, with the logic of private property rights, with enclosure and primitive accumulation in the style that is specific to a variety of Pacific archipelagos, and within that, the his-
historical onset of wage and commodity relations, the possibility for exploitation through a new mode of production that will restructure circulation in turn and in full, drawing Hawai‘i into a global space of flows.

This is not the poem’s original content, but becomes its unstated and unsayable substance. We see here in the story of the Kumulipo an ecological account of capital’s internalization of, and leveraging of, differentials toward the maximized rates of value accumulation—the way in which islands, nations, people are brought into the “world-system” of capital.

Gender

And now another story with a similar structure, a structure that becomes evident when set next to the previous tale. This one is about gender. The gender distinction does not arise with capitalism, obviously. Yet just as capitalism was spectacularly successful in using the ecotones that are represented in the Kumulipo, capitalism has been spectacularly successful in using the gender distinction toward its own ends. When Silvia Federici narrates capitalism’s onset, she points first to a feudal system in failure, to a crisis that went on for more than a century, endured from 1350 to 1500. And then she points to how European ruling-class response was what we now call primitive accumulation, or the conquest, enslavement, robbery, and murder that would be among, as she notices, the “bloodiest and most discontinuous in world history” (Federici 2004: 62).

Departing from Marx’s focus on how capitalism produced and generalized the waged industrial proletariat, Federici enumerates how capitalism takes up and preserves the gender distinction to make possible its profound transformations. Women who resist are called witches and hunted down. And primitive accumulation, she notes, depends on raced, gendered, and aged difference. And it is through these, she writes, “imposed divisions—especially those between women and men—that capitalist accumulation continues to devastate life in every corner of the planet” (64). We note her term division as a suggestive mediation of our terms difference and differential to which we return shortly.

Much of the mainly Italian Marxist-feminist thought of the seventies explores the impact of this subjugation hundreds of years later. When Maria Dalla Costa and Selma James (n.d.) turn their attention to this in “Women and the Subversion of the Community,” they speak of the role of the working-class housewife as “indispensable to capitalist production.” The subjugation of women to the role of housewife who cares and feeds and otherwise maintains labor power, and provides this service to capital without
any direct wage—here Leopoldina Fortunati (1995) provides the most rigorous account—is a necessary condition for capital’s capacity to extract surplus value toward accumulation on a world scale, capital’s sine qua non.

These materialist-feminist arguments are of their time. In many ways these responses are entangled with the global crisis of capitalism arising in the period 1968–73, a crisis that raised specific questions around value production and productive labor and the related struggle over who ought to be calculated as the properly revolutionary subject. It was distinctive in how it invited reconsiderations of capitalist value production that did not limit themselves to the assumption that value arises only in the scene of industrial and manufacturing production. The question of where value is produced arrives with a concomitant question: and by whom?

This is only one of a wide variety of contradictory responses to this moment offered by the various and divergent ideologies that get grouped under the term feminism. Feminism is all too frequently another tool that capitalism is able to use for its own ends; much of First World feminism takes the form of calls for more and for better paid work for women and not always all women at that. This makes a feminist-based theorization of, and resistance to, the environmental destruction of the Anthropocene complicated and perhaps contradictory, though it seems fair to note that ecological and feminist thought are historically conjoined not least in the ways in which they can and have been used to affirm and manage capitalist accumulation, particularly in moments of crisis.

That said, the feminist inquiry that oriented itself from the question of value production indicates the moment in which a gendered critique internal to Marxist political economy becomes possible. The moment that is “Wages for Housework” provides an interesting example of what an anticapitalist feminism might look like. Kathi Weeks usefully summarizes many of the reasons to be suspicious of this thirty-year-old feminist project: methodological fundamentalism, universalizing claims, the reductionism haunting the claim that the role of the working-class housewife is the determinant position of all other women, and so on. Still, the series of short manifestos demanding wages for housework can be understood to mobilize the rhetoric of better-paid work for women so as to critique how capitalism uses the gender differential to preserve the necessary space of unpaid labor toward the reproduction of labor power, the laboring body, and its support apparatus in the domestic sphere. For Weeks (2011: 310), this “disturbs the model of separate spheres, demanding that we map across the borders of the public and the private, between the realms of work and family.” In Dalla Costa and James’s terms, the gendered family and its domestic sphere function to pre-
serve the proletariat in its capacity to valorize capital; without this unpaid “women’s work,” capital could not generate accumulation; such preservation of both capital and proletariat nexus is therefore necessarily at the expense of women. They write:

On this family depends the support of the class, the survival of the class—but at the woman’s expense against the class itself. The woman is the slave of a wage-slave, and her slavery ensures the slavery of her man. Like the trade union, the family protects the worker, but also ensures that he and she will never be anything but workers. And that is why the struggle of the woman of the working class against the family is crucial. (Dalla Costa and James n.d.: 25)

It is worth lingering, at this pass, on the distinction we have drawn between difference and differential. One might bracket the question of whether gender difference exists in any essential way and still recognize two things. One, it had salience as a lived experience before the advent of colonialism, or capitalism, or the Anthropocene. Two, capitalism seizes on it, transforms its social character, and becomes itself the producer of the gender difference. It is often overlooked that Judith Butler’s celebrated argument regarding gender as performance, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, takes its subtitle directly from “Women and the Subversion of the Community.” The space between the accounts is clear enough. For Dalla Costa and James (n.d.: 16), the production of gender, of the subject “woman” (epitomized for them in that ceaseless supplier of domestic labor, the housewife), is unpaid labor for capital: “The role of women, in other words, has always been seen as that of a psychologically subordinated person who, except where she is marginally employed outside the home, is outside production; essentially a supplier of a series of use values in the home” (emphasis added).

Gender functions for capital not as difference but as differential, as a socially arbitrated and ideologically naturalized gap in wage levels (whether women are waged or not) across which surplus value flows. It is a sort of development of underdevelopment at the household level. The underlying argument is importantly elaborated in the essay “The Logic of Gender: On the Separation of Spheres and the Process of Abjection,” written by the Endnotes Collective, which names the sphere of labor not directly mediated by the market as “abject.” Abject labor is wageless; wageless work makes women; the abject and unwaged work of women makes valorization possible at the levels necessary for capital’s self-expansion. As the Endnotes authors remind us, this sphere of labor “is obviously not abject per se—it exists as abject because of capital, and it is shaped by it. There is always this remainder that has to remain outside of market-relations, and the question of who
has to perform it in the family will always be, to say the least, a conflictual matter” (Endnotes Collective 2014: 86). “Wages for Housework,” clarified thusly, identifies the making-inoperable of capital with the annihilation of an unpaid and gendered domestic sphere and thus cannot but take an abolitionist position. Indeed, we might suggest that the idea of gender abolition is the idea of annihilating the value-productive differential as applied to the specific category of gender and, further, that this identity is itself an artifact of capital rather than of any given analysis.

The Anthropocene

This line of reasoning brings us again to the matter of the Anthropocene. We find ourselves now in what is not a similar but the same crisis of accumulation that arises in the sixties and is often assigned to the global collapse of profitability in 1973, its underlying volatility unresolved. But we discover now an added valence. In our moment, the crisis is located not in the limits of value production but in the limits posed by ecological destruction. We say “limits” here knowingly, with some ironic despair, aware that we might expect so much more devastation that we will look back at this moment and wonder at how blithely we kept onward. And it has been interesting in these last few years to see Marxism begin its turn toward ecology, for example, in the work of John Bellamy Foster, Matteo Gagliardi, Minqi Li, and Jason W. Moore.

The turn is late. It is easy to blame Marxism for its perverse failures to grapple with changes in this most material of conditions and we sometimes do, but the belatedness should not disqualify it. For Marxism provides us not simply with the necessary ruthlessness of its critique but with the analytic capacity to name the dynamic of destruction adequately. As each intensification of crisis presents a new set of underthought problems and limits for accumulation, we should expect, indeed demand, of our moment a flowering of Marxist-ecological thought equivalent to the moment of Marxist-feminism. Similarly, we should demand of our Marxist-feminism an attention to the ecological.

But we cannot simply leap from problematic to problematic—not even additively, when, as Hegel (1977: 11) reminds us, “the truth is the whole.” The task before us is to think the two moments of crisis together: episodes that seem to belong temporally to the seventies and the present while being marked with the problematics of feminism and ecology. Inasmuch as we have already insisted that from the perspective of capitalist accumulation this is a single crisis developing over time and appearing differently in different
moments, we can in turn insist that an adequate and absolute opposition to crisis capitalism (which is to say capitalism tout court) must turn to synthesize the problematics of ecology and feminism at the level of the whole.

We might understand the conceptualization of the Anthropocene as a registration of the need for such a new totalization of “nature and culture” or, more capaciously, nature and history. Such efforts have arrived too often at the problem of “modernity” and, in various progress narratives, indexing the particulars of ecological anthropogenesis to concrete developments. The era has been aligned with the development of the modern world-system, where the two hemispheres become connected and trade becomes global; with James Watt’s steam engine, just four years before Cook arrives in Waimea Bay; with the technologies of ecocide, with fossil fuels taking pride of place. These form themselves into a cruel litany, a verso to the Kumulipo’s recto (Crutzen 2002; Crutzen and Stoermer 2010). But there is a risk in identifying the Anthropocene, via its coincidence with industrial technologies or through an accounting of specific damages, with technical developments, as if these were a constitutive part of what capitalism is. Such imaginings have led to the idea that we can develop our way out of ecological crisis. For all the weight on industrial, on the dark satanic mills and chlorofluorocarbons, capitalism is not technology. Capitalism is a real relationship among people—one that internalizes relationships that precede it and is compelled to preserve these relationships through technological development and systemic expansion. It makes these relations historical.

Capitalism depends on multiple differential relationships. Gender has already provided us one clear example via the Marxist-feminist analysis, wherein the seemingly natural gender difference is remade in a new social mode—capitalist patriarchy, let us say—necessary for accumulation. Race is an equivalently clear example of this historical seizure of exploitative relations for a particular differential mode (Chen 2014). No less the ecological.

Rather than say, as people sometimes like to in response to libertarian market utopians, that state makes markets—rather than say this, we will insist that capital makes differentials. And, as the dialectic turns, differentials make capital. The drive to bring together the most cost-effective means of production with the lowest wages is intrinsic to capital’s expansion and intensification, which is to say, constitutes the Anthropocene; this can be done only through the production of social relations in which multiple differentials are presupposed. And this presupposition in turn can articulate why the many redistributive solutions on offer have little purchase on the problem; maldistribution is a form of appearance for necessary differentials,
not an incidental outcome. Maldistribution is itself a constitutive part of value production, rather than an unfortunate effect. There is no such thing as capitalism without ongoing and intensifying maldistribution.

In contemporary popular discourse, the reality of long-term intensifying maldistribution has had no greater explicator than Thomas Piketty (2014). However, Piketty in many regards considers this maldistribution a political outcome, rather than the condition of possibility for capital; inevitably, his only imagined remedies prescribe conventional political struggles toward mild wealth redistribution. The destructive inadequacy of such a “solution” is only multiplied when the argument is then applied to ecological catastrophe.

This is precisely the course plotted by Jedediah Purdy. In his essay “Time Bomb,” Purdy (n.d.), a law professor, calls for “real conflict, not its facsimile.” This call depends from the revelations provided by Piketty in tandem with the latest UN climate reports. The lesson Purdy (n.d.) takes from this combination, following Piketty, is that “climate change also presents distributive questions.” This is inarguable. Immediately confusing these effects with causes, however, Purdy (n.d.) enters into a desultory fantasia wherein mild redistributive measures would somehow affect the direction or even rate of climate change:

Other big questions for climate policy are even more explicitly distributive. Suppose there were a successful effort to charge for greenhouse-gas emissions—a carbon tax. Where would the payments go? Would emissions rights be doled out free to industry according to historical levels of pollution—basically a subsidy for past polluters? Would they be sources of public revenue? Or might they create something like Alaska’s oil-financed Permanent Fund, a stream of payouts to individual citizens? The latter alternatives would announce, in effect, that the global atmosphere belongs to the people of the world, that it is a global commons and that the right to use it comes from these owners and must benefit them. (James Hansen, the eminent climate scientist, calls this idea “cap and dividend.”)

As must always be the case, redistributive fantasies imagine a capitalism that somehow works for the mass of people, ostensibly in some way that also benefits the ecology—by the simple measure of closing the differentials between rich and poor, climate-secure and climate-vulnerable, and so forth. This misrecognizes what capitalism is at the most basic level; capital cannot expand (and expand it must) absent these differentials. This misrecognition finally flowers into the purest of absurdities: “Inequality is driven by global
capital flows” (Purdy n.d.). In truth, global capital flows are driven by inequality: by wage differentials between places, genders, races; by the difference in resource extraction costs; by the kinds of exploitation that become possible only when some are dispossessed and others are not. These are aspects of the social relation from which value and profit arise.

**Differential Ecologies**

The clarity of Purdy’s error provides occasion to offer, as already suggested, a different alignment: between gender and the Anthropocene, as two social relations that have been both transformed and totalized into a kind of unity by the expansive and intensive drive of capital. Part of us wants to assert that the gender differential is being partly abolished by capitalism as more women enter both more and less developed economies. As many note, there has been an uneven but continuing feminization of labor, both literally and figuratively, in the high-wage nations, a fact of deindustrialization and of declining real wages, which require higher amounts of wage labor from families. The expanding care industry, a result of women of caregiving age entering the workforce and having to hire care workers to do the reproductive labor that was once done by the housewife, has provided us with capital’s version of “Wages for Housework.”

But it is striking that this has not led to some imagined homogenization of the workforce, some dire equality of all against all, reduced to the lowest common denominator of simple labor. Instead, the feminization of labor seems like a series of moves within the preservation of differentials, driven by tendential wobbles in the trajectory of accumulation. As Jasper Bernes and Maya Gonzalez (n.d.) put it in a recent talk: “Paradoxically, women enter the workforce as permanents and bring with them, as a structuring condition, the subordinate status that previously attended their intermittent participation.” Gender differentials are still necessary both to provide unpaid reproductive labor and to drive down wages. The gender differentials proceed entangled with a host of other productive differentials (and here we mean productive for capital), many of which are immediately apparent as ecological differentials. Here we might consider the economic differences between global north and global south, between high-wage and low-wage nations that allow for global wage arbitrage; we might draw forth the necessary differentials among resource extraction, production, assembly, and consumption-led nations. The preservation of these differentials, just as with the gender difference, allows for surplus value to flow.
Perhaps we are saying something as simple as: **differentials are capital’s ecology.** Not difference—we are not picking a fight with post-structuralists here. Rather, we mean to designate the differentials that allow value to flow, to valorize and realize itself. This is true whether the differentials are familiarly ecological (as in the case of resource extraction, or forcing other regions to bear one’s toxic burden) or whether they do not appear particularly ecological at all (as in the case of child care). Feminism when it applies its attention to how differentials are used by capitalism and to further capitalism might provide a useful tool in this complicated moment, but it is certainly not the only or sufficient analytic framework. These differentials exist at every stratum, from the household to the geopolitical, from the brute materiality of the shipping container to the ethereal whirring of financial circuits, from the sex work down the street to the startup known as Dating Ring, which was designed to fly New York women “in dateable ages” to San Francisco to service the Bay Area’s “soldiers of code” (Tiku 2014). The carbon footprint is just a beginning of the problems with this idea.

Ecological differential, and accompanying concepts such as metabolic rift, leads us inexorably back to the term *Anthropocene.* A certain amount of acidic ink has already been spilled on this word. And much of this ink, such as Moore’s and others’ insistence on the term *Capitalocene,* is legitimate not least because it helps us spot the pitfalls in the path that is Dipesh Chakrabarty’s “Climate of History” (2009). In this article he claims that “the whole crisis cannot be reduced to a story of capitalism.” And then he adds, “Unlike in the crisis of capitalism, there are no lifeboats here for the rich and privileged” (221). One gets the sense that he has little idea what the rich and privileged have been up to: lifeboat sales are up. But more significantly, the logic that disallows a causal analysis because at some level of unfolding the causal dynamic will take down those who have most benefited from it is an odd one.

Chakrabarty’s essay is exemplary of certain conceptions of the Anthropocene as effacing previous differentials while disclosing a new, primary differential at the species level. This sentiment is vexed in several regards; we note merely that it is precisely the incapacity to think the Anthropocene as itself constituted by compelled differentials and unfreedoms at every stratum that makes analyses such as Chakrabarty’s curiously inert, and moreover lacking a logic whereby ecological struggles might both attune themselves to and solicit the engagement of other political antagonisms.

This is not to deny that there are clear gains in the language of the Anthropocene. To greatly foreshorten the arguments, one might point to Marxism’s notable failure to think nature adequately in ways beyond its met-
abolic role in value-formation. The term \textit{Anthropocene} might best be thought of as a struggle for a cognitive grasp on a unification of human and natural history that is at once more expansive and increasingly more pressing than modes of production construed narrowly as internal to but autonomous from the eco-epochal. These cognitive gains are useful to us to the extent that they do not forfeit the specificity of the Anthropocene as a fact of industrial capitalism, that strange fact that many partisans of the term seem intent on affirming and denying simultaneously. This contradiction may concern a certain difficulty in defining “industrial capitalism” in the first place. Otherwise, we are fine with the term \textit{Anthropocene} as long as it does not do what many fear it might: lead us away from the Capitalocene.

\textbf{Abolition and Ecotone}

We have by now set forth more threads perhaps than can plausibly be tied up herein. It is late to be confessing this, but this essay is part of a larger project, one still very much in progress. In this essay we were invited to think what happens when one puts the word \textit{feminism} next to the word \textit{Anthropocene} and how it might change this in-progress work. It has let us think about differentials and of the flows across them, and the fate of these things in the era that some call the Anthropocene and how we might attempt to puzzle our way out of it. The larger project is for now called “Ecotone War.” An ecotone, as we have been suggesting, is not simply a meeting or an overlap, the intersection on a Venn diagram of ecologies. The regimes are in tension, \textit{tonos}. The relationship is uneasy.

Nonetheless, the ecotone in its initial formulation, as a contact zone between differing ecologies, does not mean to be antagonistic. A space of flows is not itself a problem. Certainly we are not arguing that difference as such is a problem. The ecotone presented \textit{in} the Kumulipo is not itself the sort of differential designed for value production. The ecotone toward which capital turns the Kumulipo, the ecotone of Cook’s landfall, of the Great Māhele—that is a different matter. What Marx allows us to describe is the way that, in a certain historical passage, such spaces of flow must become spaces of value flow. Marx is clear that accumulation, labor exploitation, and ecological change mutually reinforce capitalism. Moore (2010: 392) builds from Marx’s observations that changes in these dynamics are in this regard constitutive: “Every phase of capitalism emerges through a revolution in nature–society relations—new metabolic rifts, and much beyond—that creates new possibilities for the expanded accumulation of capital.” Britain’s
nineteenth-century industrialization, he points out, could not have happened without the agricultural revolution of the American Midwest. As he argues, left ecology has been limited by viewing “biospheric challenges as consequences of capitalism—rather than constitutive of the capitalist mode of production” (12).

It may be requisite to grasp both as true. As noted above, we see no real basis for the distributionist imaginary within which capital might develop its way out of crisis. Even John Bellamy Foster seems to fall prey to this, as (writing with Brett Clark and Richard York) (2010: 418) he ends *The Ecological Rift* with a call for “sustainable development” or an “ecology of consumption” in dialogue with an “ecology of production,” a rationale that will prove consonant with a defense of, for example, Hugo Chavez’s oil empire as a sort of positive entry in the ecological ledger because it funds a sort of socialism. There is no exit from the Anthropocene via technological change, though the latter will certainly be a consequence of the former. If there is an exit, it will be via an exit from the social relation that defines capital.

This will explain our insistence, apposite to Moore, on using the term *crisis* regularly herein. Crisis reduced to economistic terms is often understood as a more dramatic version of a business cycle; a properly Marxist account would insist that, as the world-system of capital expands, its crises expand as well toward some horizon beyond which they cannot continually recycle themselves. Just as economic crisis constitutes capital with its creative destruction while signaling its self-undermining character, ecological crisis signals the limits of the capitalist world-system’s ability to reproduce itself on an expanded scale. Like capital, ecological crisis is not simply cyclical but self-reinforcing, self-expanding—not like a wheel of fortune but a Fibonacci sequence, and not amenable to the kind of reset function that “creative destruction” imagines.

In this larger project we are trying to think with provocation, to insist on it really, to attempt to begin to provide a reply to that Facebook moment when friends link to the latest scientific data on the melting of Arctic sea ice, the melting of the tundra, the acidification of the ocean, and species extinction and then say I can’t get out of bed after reading this.

We want to get ourselves out of bed.

There is a risk in what we have provided to this point, of falling into what might sometimes feel like a resolution, one routed through certain philosophical rhetorics of difference: largely ethical theorizations imbricated with ideas of allowing for the otherness of the other. That might allow us a conclusion at once ethically clear and convivial: we call for difference not differential, heterogeneity not totalization, and so on.
We do not think that it is that easy. We do not understand the transformation of difference to differential as a choice that was made and can be unmade. It is immanent to capital. When we come upon the Kumulipo in the context of 2015, we cannot read it as a representation of a lost world: to have such an understanding is always to misrecognize the mythic aspect of creation myths. Rather, the poem’s blank enumeration enables its mobility and lability, enables it to testify about this present moment into which it is drawn. The story of the Kumulipo is indicative because it leads us to the coincidence of the colonial and capitalist turns that constitute the Anthropocene—but also because in so doing it leads us to the ur-ecotone of land and sea, which becomes, in the period since the eighteenth century, both literally and metaphorically the ur-ecotone of production and circulation. This is central to the history offered by Greg Dening, for example, in *Islands and Beaches*. Anticolonial struggles might be thought of as a conflict that returns always to contact, located in the ur-ecotone where land and sea meet; this increasingly coincides with the struggle of capital itself.

And now we have arrived at the key terms of *struggle* and *intervention*. We are advantaged in approaching this by the manner in which capital struggles with itself. With the decline in profits from global manufacturing, a decline that manifests in the sixties and enters into crisis in the seventies, capital increasingly seeks its profits in circulation. As always, we glimpse this in the ascent of finance; the vast buildout in global shipping with which finance is entangled; the extension of supply chains; and the concomitant rise of logistics and resilience strategies. The disunity of production and circulation—trouble in the ur-ecotone of capital—takes the form of bubbles and blowouts, the spiraling crisis of the last forty-odd years. These ecotones are one, Kumulipo and capital. Where the poem was, now we find the port.

We hope that by now the correspondences of our argument are at least available, if not in any regard completed. There are ecotones, which become productive within capital. They become productive because value can flow across them and continue in its expanded circuit; in return, capital weaponizes these ecotones into necessary if veiled antagonisms so that they can be preserved in all their value-capturing capacity. *The Anthropocene is not itself an ecotone but is the name for the making-productive of all these ecotones, and the mode of management that endeavors to preserve them as productive differentials.*

But we do not wish to discover in the immanence of this structure the despair of recognition that the enemy, being everywhere in general, is nowhere in particular. We have been trying to set forth a logical framework in which practical choices can appear as such—choices that nonetheless elude the seemingly practical logic of redistribution, of pushing some value that
has been drawn from one side of an ecotone to the other, back across the differential and then watching it, nightmare-like, flow back again: the inevitable consequence of a politics of redistribution rather than abolition at every level.

Thus the siting of the port as an ecotonality is an attempt to decipher where material intervention can be most effective. It is a transitional space—transit, after all—whose unity of conjoined spheres is mediated, where the conditions of one become the necessities of the other and vice versa. A place where the mechanism requires and remakes differentials also discloses its own vulnerabilities in our present circumstance. The port is precisely the management of the differential, an apparatus through which value flows and is captured; it is like a condensation of the logic of the Anthropocene itself. Ports are the places where the underlying social relations of capital now present themselves. South African dockworkers have realized this for some years now. In 2008 they refused to unload a Chinese ship loaded with armaments for Zimbabwe and in 2009, in solidarity with the Palestinians, to unload ships carrying goods from Israel.

In 2011 two port actions in the United States coincided with that brief heady moment known as Occupy. On November 2, 2011, came the shutdown of the Oakland port and then a few weeks later the less photographically spectacular but potentially more interesting expansion along the West Coast, which suffered from an obeisance to procapital labor unions, but presented as a horizon the coordination of militant action among multiple locations, cities, states.

The problems with these actions are obvious: the uneasy relationship between anticapitalists and the strong unions of the port, the militarized port space, the flexible logistics networks between various ports along the West Coast. The failed Longview action (which if it had happened might have been the third port shutdown) was about all of these, but that is another sad and complicated story. And there are many ways to think about these provisional and partial interventions: about their relation to port workers, especially the mainly unionized longshoremen and mainly nonunionized truck drivers. About their relation to property and dispossession in Oakland. About the conditions that make it possible to rally more than twenty thousand participants, perhaps far more. And about their limits: how even with such participation, this intervention was able to interfere finally with but a fraction of the shipping industry for only a brief period of time.

We do not intend to be nostalgic about those few weeks. But we might echo here the recent arguments that have defined the Left over the last
twenty years that workplace-based struggles—from factory occupations to worker-organized calls for better pay—are every day a less useful horizon for struggle in the Anthropocene. Most of the critiques of workerist activism eventually present some chart showing declining union membership or increasing provisionality of labor or any of the various ways that deindustrialization can be visualized. All well and fine, but we might add to this that the more pressing reason for skepticism about worker-based struggles is that, as labor has increasingly been compelled to take a preservationist stance in the face of global surplus-population production, labor struggles that do exist no longer preserve an anticapitalist horizon and cannot but affirm the very differentials on which capital depends. Moreover, the shrinking space of industrial and manufacturing production in capitalism’s historical core asks us to turn our analysis from production to circulation as a space of struggles—not struggles to circulate, to distribute better, but to make the operation of capital impossible.

We recognize that this analysis and our own lives have not yet earned the stridency of the term war, yet we want to insist on it here as aspirational.

If the port ecotone has a contemporary other, it is the far less locatable space of banking itself, and specifically debt, where the compulsions of production are transformed into great bouts of circulatory liquidity. We take it as entirely unsurprising that the port shutdown should reappear on our shores (and reappear changed, having superseded the closed purview of union organizing) at the precise moment that struggle over debt achieves a qualitative intensification. Debt itself is the measure of a differential and, to revisit an earlier theme, a gendered one; the vast run-up of household debt since the seventies is the same fact as the decline in manufacturing profitability, as the decline in real wages; it is itself an expression of the gender differential, of the necessary and necessarily unpaid labor required by capital, amplified by crisis.

So we recognize that these struggles take as their horizon the abolition of both the ecological and the gender differentials, of the relations that enable capital to continue to valorize and realize itself, wherein it must proceed with the ecological annihilation named the Anthropocene. We argue that these are conjoined struggles: that the struggles against capital and against gender cannot involve a rebalancing of them, as these equilibria even when “working” are an ecocide machine; and thus that these struggles must be toward the abolition of each, must become an ecotone war that will define the near future if we are to escape the Anthropocene alive.
Note

1 For an explanation of many of these complications, see Heyman n.d.

References


