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Brad Tabas

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Brad Tabas
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On Environmental Justice and Outer Space

I want to begin by highlighting a feature all too common in discourses on space futurism. This is the idea that space colonization, settlement, or expansion can be just, or even more strongly, is the way to achieving collective justice. This is a utopian fantasy, part of a larger vision in which the development of outer space somehow redeems the past wrongs associated with terrestrial history. This idea, in both forms, namely that there will be a just colonization of space, or that past colonization can be justified through space, lies at the heart of the ideology of astrocolonialism. We cannot save the world and render all just by going to space: that is to confuse the physical domain beyond the Earth with the occupation of a metaphysical heavens. It is to confuse becoming *homini stellaris* with becoming angel. Which is not to say that it is useless to speculate and to discuss how to make futures in space more just. Such exercises in science fictioneering play a pragmatic role in bringing about better future outcomes and righting past wrongs. Yet the belief that we can determine and realize a just future via speculation is part of the problem. It itself fuels injustice, social and ecological, justifying injustice in the name of the greater good of the collective salvation through space. Believing that any of us knows in advance what will be just for multiple parties human and non-human is not only delusional but also tyrannical. It is what occurs when a future-oriented vision dresses up its usurpation of the collective future in democratic and egalitarian rhetoric by forgetting the existence of others and by denying the reality and potential consistency of the outside.

The second point I want to make allows for a demonstration and illustration of the above. Discussions on justice with respect to outer space often remain temporally and even spatially one-dimensional: space is out there, and it is the future, and our interest lies in making a just future in the stars. This is an impoverished way of thinking about both justice and outer space. It ignores the fact that we can already have multi-dimensional discussions about space and justice. These would consider the past of space expansionism as well as the past of space utopianism. They would reflect critically on how current versions of space futurism, usually grasped as pure visions of expectation, stand with respect to this longer history. A multi-dimensional account of justice in space would also learn how to think inside out. It would not only think of justice in space as out there, but as already involving here out there, and there in here, in the multiple senses of these spatial complexifications. For it is only once we rethink the spatiality of space, and that is also to say the ecological relationship between the planet and near space, that we become prepared to confront the fact that it is only in our fantasies and perhaps in some deep future that activities in space can become disconnected from terrestrial politics and earthly ecologies. All space development has mostly revealed its meaning through changes that it has brought about with respect to how life is lived on Earth. Outer space

infrastructure now mediates how Earthlings relate to the Earth. The question of justice with respect to space is thus already a question of justice and injustice on Earth resulting from the *de facto* uneven development of space. The question of planetary ecology is already a question of extra-planetary ecology.

We need to thus develop an account of how uneven extraterrestrial development has resulted in an uneven sharing of the benefits reaped from the exploitation of the extraterrestrial common. This means that we need to look back at the winners and losers of the age of globalizing commerce, we need to explore the ways in which the deepening monetary and environmental inequalities which have characterized the last seventy years were inflected by uneven access to space data and by the unequal distribution of space power. Space history thus reveals itself to have introduced a neo-colonial dimension within a period which is otherwise classified as post-colonial history. The history of space environments is the history of the discovery of our planet as an environment. But this discovery has not been unified or global. To think the planetarity of the planet with respect to the reality of outer space is to break with the illusions generated by the globalized imaginary. That means that in addition to narrating the global emergence of discourses of domination—forms of cognitive coloniality associated with the spread of global capital—there must be a spatialized study of how unequally distributed and controlled extraterrestrial infrastructure disseminated domination, but also unequally shared insights into the dangers of changing the planetary environment associated with the purported liberation resultant from growth. Without fully studying this history, in the absence of a clearer and more realistic sense of how extraterrestrial technologies altered power relations and created Anthropocene injustices, we cannot even begin to glimpse the outline of what would be a just approach to thinking outer space. Pragmatically, we ought to aim not at producing absolute justice through outer space, but rather at understanding past wrongs and modestly aiming to mitigate their perpetuation into the future. Such efforts are vital in the new space age. The boom of economic growth in space compounds past forms of inequality and adds new grievances, not least extending the environmental crisis out into orbital space.

It is also against this background, i.e. in light of a realistic account of how space development relates to creating concrete injustices, that we can most clearly discern how the concealed biases within our utopian dreams are contributing to astrocolonialism. With respect to this point, I would urge all aiming to unmask space utopianisms past and present to pay particular attention to the abuses of the notion of the astronomical. This is a rhetorical figure whereby space futurists calls upon the existence of an actually existing quantitative infinity of really existing material potential to justify wrongs in the name of a promised qualitative leap towards and infinitely different, i.e. in all other terms unrealistic, future, one which will undo all past logics and all past forms of understanding. But the astronomical is also a threat to any account which aims to talk about ecology in light of outer space, for we cannot clearly articulate a system without limits, and with respect to the cosmos itself, the issue of limiting and limitation are self-evidently problematic.

One may think that in focusing on multi-dimensionality I mean to draw attention only to questions of time. Thinking about justice in space today requires inside out thinking which breaks with the idea of space and spacing as linear mapping. For example, there is clearly a link between the current boom in interest in space expansionism and the concern over the fate of the planet. This relationship is not one dimensional: we not only wish to flee to space because the planet is being degraded, but we also know that the planet is being degraded because we expanded out into space and created planetary science.¹ This means that many discussions of the planet are also discussions about space, and about the historical employment, and failure, to use space to bring about a just future on planet Earth. But these discussions need to recognize that employing space for the earth environment makes space into a threatened environment, thus spreading rather than controlling our environmental challenges. Whatever justice in space is, it is also entangled with terrestrial justice.

I have been placed in a panel focused on aliens. I have said nothing about aliens. At this point I want to introduce two figures, call them sovereign myths, Gaia and Cthulhu, which have interested me in my inside out thinking, and which bear on questions of justice, ecology, and outer space development. These two figures pertain to the relationship between extraterrestrial infrastructure and the Earth. I do not use these figures to designate real aliens or gods, but rather figures that play the role of the divine within extra-terrestrial political theologies, by which I mean political orders that promise to bring about an ecologically just (or unjust) order of things and which include outer space, and not just the globe, within their ontologies. Gaia is, in the words of Lynn Margulis, “symbiosis as seen from space,” while Cthulhu is an alien monster, invented by Lovecraft, to express the idea that an alien power already lies at the foundations of the terrestrial technosphere.² In evoking Gaia and Cthulhu, I want to draw attention to the ways in which discourses for Gaia, for an ecological saving the planet which would imply a transfer of sovereign power to the planet, often, and in light of their failure to fully and historically interrogate the extraterrestrial dimension within our understanding of our own planet and its transformations, serve Cthulhu, by which I mean the alienation of the human and the service of an archaic alien possessor, unwitting pushing humankind to produce not only a future in space, but one in which the dominant characteristic would be monstrous dystopian injustice and ecological degradation (one might think here of the weird dark ecology found in Lovecraft’s *The Color Out of Space*).³ There is also an inverse version of this in which an irrational fear of Cthulhu, the worry that we will somehow be seduced by the alien, delivers us into the hands of Gaia, here understood not as a just and ecological terrestrial order, but rather a green totalitarianism which justifies unnecessary suffering in the name of the will of a fantastic Gaia. This is not the place for a full elaboration of the dialectical relationship between Gaia and Cthulhu, suffice to say that there is a

¹ There is a great deal of work on this, one interesting recent reference is Richard Leshner and Thor Hogan, *The View from Space: NASA's Evolving Struggle to Understand Our Home Planet* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2019).

² Lynn Margulis, *Symbiotic planet : a new look at evolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), 2.

³ H. P. Lovecraft, *Necronomicon : the best weird tales of H.P. Lovecraft* (London: Gollancz, 2008).

relationship of inside outness to the two figures without them being identical, and that actions in the name of Gaia at times serve Cthulhu and the inverse, without that meaning that Gaia is Cthulhu or Cthulhu, Gaia. More simply: space expansionism does not equate to destroying the planet, and efforts to save the planet and its ecosystems can precisely translate into a justifications for astrocolonial space expansionism. Can, but need not always.

None of that has anything do with aliens of the sort that interest astrobiologists. What do real extraterrestrials have to do with discussions of environmental justice in outer space? It seems me that there are two key questions with respect to real aliens. The first one seems practical but turns out to be a matter of theory. How do we deal justly with aliens if we encounter them? The second question seems more theoretical but it concerns practice: what role can belief in the possible existence of extraterrestrials and speculations regarding alien ecosystems play in a just form of life in a space age?

The first question animates discussions of metalaw. On this, I have less than nothing to say. I strongly doubt that we can talk about hospitality for aliens without knowing the concrete details of the situation. Moreover, I would argue that anyone who pretends to know in advance that they can do this without in the slightest attending to the nature of the other and the situation in which that other is encountered in fact speaks unjustly. They seem to believe that their rationality is so universal that it renders insignificant and meaningless any contribution to our understanding of justice which might be made by the alterity of the other. It is only when we receive the alien other that we will grasp the full measure of the demands of justice. It is only when we understand ecology as an affair of coping with what Timothy Morton calls “strange strangers” that we can think about ecology in ethical terms.⁴ So let us put that concrete treatment of aliens in brackets: we ought to discuss it with them.

The second question deals with the relationship between astrobiology, but also science fiction writing, and the pragmatics of ethical education. It is a question about *Bildung*, about what we need to cultivate to become better versions of ourselves, beings disposed towards ethical action. There is a massive literature on the figure of the Other within continental philosophy. I have in mind Levinas, but also Derrida, who has drawn explicit attention to the link between ethics and extraterrestrials even drawing attention to the ecological difference between thinking earth and moon.⁵ What this work challenges us to think is the relationship between being ethical, assuming the full burden of responsibility for our actions, and the need to stimulate a profound respect for the alterity of the other. We might think of that in this way. If I look at an alien planet, a so-called *terra nullius*, it is easy to claim that exploiting it is just, precisely because that exploitation is in the mutual

⁴ Timothy Morton, *Dark ecology : for a logic of future coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 18.

⁵ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et infini: essai sur l'extériorité* (Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1961); Jacques Derrida, *Hospitalité: Volume I. Séminaire (1995-1996)* (Paris: Seuil, 2021), 89-90.

material and even existential self-interest of all humanoids (even of all biological citizens of our planet). This is so because all these beings, those that right now we might feel are of our family, may benefit from these acts. By rapping space, we maximize collective well-being for those like us. If we assume that there is nothing there, nothing ethically considerable, then this egoism can function as virtue with respect to the various formulae, consequentialist or deontological, which we might apply to justify our actions. One finds a maximalist version of this in the writings of the effective altruists.⁶ When we do this, ethics becomes the rational pursuit of self-interest. Yes, that is collective self-interest, but it is nevertheless a collective egoism. In this light, there is little to differentiate acting ethically, which it seems ought to mean acting in function of an assumption of responsibility with respect to the other, from acting inethically, acting without regard for the existence of the other. The ethical act loses its meaning and significance. The threat here is not just to be measured in light of who might be harmed as a result of our actions—perhaps no one. The issue is the loss of meaning with respect to the ethical. It is only when we suppose that the other could be an alien, a being which has self-interests, but interests that are other than those in my planetary tribe, that we discover the full meaning, and assume the full burden of ethical responsibility. This is doubly the case with ecological ethics, which has always focused on the importance of our ethical debts to the more than human.

In believing in the alien, we recognize that the other approaches to ethics were, as Roberto Unger has pointed out, are really meta-ethics, techniques we developed so as to justify our belief in the idea that we can act without guilt.⁷ They are thus means of avoiding responsibility, while keeping the extraterrestrial in mind to the contrary reminds us of the full weight of our responsibility as actors. Within the economy of ethical subjectivity, belief in the extraterrestrial understood as something like a figure for the known unknown, can be a means of helping us to assume more fully the implications of a commitment to environmental justice. Yet I want to also insist that the for the alien to so function it cannot be a figure without qualities, and as such, our imaginations of aliens and our conceptions of alien ecologies need continual construction and deconstruction. This is so because once constructed, aliens can become dogmatized myths, hence part of logics of domination. The processes of construction and deconstruction occur through astrobiological research, they likewise occur from science fictional writing, an excellent recent example being Adrian Tchaikovsky's *Alien Clay*.⁸ The value of these figurations of the alien does not derive from how they might prepare us to concretely will receive alien beings. It relates to the cultivation of a certain receptivity towards the bizarre and the weird. In enriching our imaginations with extraterrestrials, in keeping the extraterrestrial or radically alien in mind, we create a normative mode of being in which we strive to take account of the radically other and its possible vulnerabilities and rights even if we remain in ignorance of the other. This can be called cultivating care. We should care about aliens,

⁶ On this, see William MacAskill, *What we owe the future* (New York, NY: Hachette 2022). For my critical analysis of this, see: Brad Tabas, "[To] the last [be] human," *Terrain* 79 (2023), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.4000/terrain.26386>.

⁷ Roberto Unger, *The World and Us* (New York: Verso, 2024), 376.

⁸ Adrian Tchaikovsky, *Alien Clay* (New York: Orbit, 2024).

and care for the possibility of aliens because it makes us into caring people, and that care will bring us as close to realizing ecological justice in space, and on earth, as can be.

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