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# Understanding Displacement, (Forced) Migration and Historical Trauma: The Contribution of Feminist New Materialism

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## ABSTRACT

Feminist new materialist theory has taken up the challenge of reconfiguring politics, ethics and justice in ways that critically account for contemporary forms of materiality, affect and embodiment at work in the contemporary world. There is much at stake in such a project. The crisis of displacement, we argue, is the crisis of capitalism as it impacts on the biosphere of planet earth, necessitating an approach that can account for *all* the processes essential to life and living. In this paper our intention is to suggest ways of understanding displacement that unites social and environmental justice, while simultaneously merging ethical, political, ontological and epistemological concerns. Building on the nexus of capitalism and displacement, we investigate the confluence of the necropolitical (Mbembe 2003) and the necrobiopolitical (Bubandt 2017; Cooper 2008) as we sketch an uncanny tableau of more-than-human displacements across various entangled cenes – the Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Shadowcene and Chthulucene. Our intention is to displace, trouble and haunt the centrality of the purely human in social work. The unfolding crisis of capitalism, we argue, is a crisis of displacement for *all* forms of life; a crisis that necessitates troubling humanist formulations of justice, care and ethics.

## KEYWORDS

Posthumanism;  
necropolitics; anthropocene;  
capitalocene;  
plantationocene;  
shadowcene; chthulucene

This article articulates a discomfort we feel with how anthropocentric ontologies, epistemologies, ethics and politics are still prevalent in social work as well as being foundational for other professions which focus exclusively on the human. The focus of the ‘human’ in social work-related theorising has too often been conflated with both universalist and masculinist viewpoints and constrained by Western and legalistic human rights using individualistic logics (see Bozalek and Pease 2021, for a fuller discussion on the problems associated with humanism for social work). Our contribution in this volume addresses posthuman concerns raised around issues of displacement as well as the limited and limiting disciplinary focus on the human that still inheres to social work. Humanism curtails, we argue, the possibilities for more-than-human living and flourishing in the blighted social and ecological landscapes of capitalism. As wildfires, pandemics, extreme weather events, desertification and ensuing socio-political crises continue to

accelerate the spectre of human displacement, social work finds itself 'shadowed by futures that will surely need repair', writes Stacey Alaimo (2016, 188). To become worthy of a future that it surely hopes to repair, social work needs to first become worthy of its time, which means accounting for some of the often disregarded causes and conditions of the crisis of displacement that this special issue seeks to address. This, as Alaimo writes, will necessitate new ways of thinking and doing 'that refuse to take refuge' within lingering humanist 'ontoepistemologies' that are simply no longer 'tenable within a world of rapid anthropogenic alterations, strange agencies and precarious human and nonhuman lives' (2016, 188).

Names such as the Anthropocene, the Capitalocene, the Plantationocene, the Shadowcene and the Chthulucene capture the nature of the poisoned cloud that hangs over social work and its attempts to engage with displacement in the age of international free-market capitalism, including social work's implication in them. These terms, we argue, provide us with valuable insights into the damaged mental, social and environmental ecologies of capitalism, in order to re-evaluate the conceptual tools by which social work parses the world and its role in issues such as displacement. By turning our attention to the nature of the disruptions that lie at the roots of displacement using the lenses of posthuman new materialist philosophies, we seek to affirm hopes for a reinvigorated social work politico-ethico-onto-epistemology<sup>1</sup> appropriate to the challenges that social work faces today, especially in the light of the current global calamity of the coronavirus, with its consequent austerity measures and the knock-on effect this will have on dispossession and displacement. These disruptions require us to explore the outlines of a new politico-ethico-onto-epistemology (Barad 2017) that is able to 'stay with the trouble' (Haraway 2016) of displacement. Being able to ethically account for a more-than-human world on which human lives depend means considering the conceptual value of the terms outlined above in the light of what Achille Mbembe calls necropolitics (Mbembe 2003). New materialist posthuman theory, we argue, is fruitful for coming to terms with the true nature of necropolitics, 'and displacement today and might, moreover, help us to reconsider the humanist logics which social work has come to parse issues such as social justice, displacement and its role in relation to these. How, we ask, might we productively extend the ambit of social work in the context of the current age of crisis as we move toward a more ethical and accountable justice-to-come<sup>2</sup> (Barad 2019; Derrida 2006)?

Our intention in this paper is to trouble the humanism that continues to haunt social work by exploring the more-than-human spectres of displacement as they present themselves across a tableau composed of different cenes – the Anthropocene, the Capitalocene, the Plantationocene, the Shadowcene and the more hopeful Chthulucene.

## **Anthropocene displacements**

The term Anthropocene (*Anthropos*, meaning human / *cene* from *kainos*, meaning recent), the so-called epoch of humanity, registers the impact of human activity on atmospheric, hydrological, biological, and geological processes that together generate and sustain life on planet Earth. As a term, the Anthropocene unites climate science, evolutionary biology and environmental studies with the arts, the humanities and recently also social work, in the fight against climate change denialism and calls on us to take urgent heed of an unfolding anthropogenic biological mass-extinction event. The *anthropos* prefix to the

word refers to the way in which human activities have escalated to the point at which they have become a geological force, heralding an end to the climatic stability and biodiversity of the preceding Holocene epoch (Pereira Savi 2017). The exact point in time when the Holocene transited into the Anthropocene is still being debated. Although its origins can be traced to the onset of industrialisation, the Anthropocene is thought by some (for example, Zalasiewicz 2014) to have started with the explosion of the first nuclear Trinity A-bomb on July 16, 1945, at Alamogordo, New Mexico. This was followed by more widespread testing, including 67 nuclear and thermonuclear bombs detonated on the Marshall Islands, destroying entire islands, animals, plants and habitats and producing massive forms of nuclear displacement and dispossession of the Marshalese population, who were forcibly removed from their islands by the US state (Barad 2019).

While US nuclear colonialism, alluded to by Barad (2019), represents one strand of Anthropocene displacement, nuclear technologies are only one of the countless industrial technologies (such as the carbon dioxide-fueled combustion engine, industrially synthesised plastics, pesticides, herbicides, fertilisers, hormones, genetically modified organisms, vast monocultured plantations, fish-farms, etc.) that are now dominant Anthropocene drivers. The leading outcome of all this industrialisation has been twofold: a calamitous disruption of the climatic stability, biodiversity and ecological stability that characterised the Holocene; and, of course, displacement.

According to Opitz-Stapleton et al. (2017, 6), 'displacement refers most commonly to instances where there is no choice but to move, either temporarily or permanently, within or across borders'. Many of the Anthropocene's displaced are effectively invisible, as are the borders, both physical and conceptual, that need crossing. Human climate migrants are invisible because they often 'fall through the cracks of international refugee and immigration policy', rendered imperceptible 'in the international community, both literally and figuratively' (Brown 2008, 10). In 2016, sudden-impact climate-change in the form of floods, typhoons and fires, accounted for about 24 million refugees (Opitz-Stapleton et al. 2017). When parts of Southern Africa – Mozambique, Malawi and Zimbabwe – for example, were hit by two cyclones in March and April 2019 about 2.2 million people were displaced (Wachiya 2020). Such numbers do not include the countless millions of human victims of slow-onset climate change (such as the 45 million people in Southern Africa alone that face growing hunger as a result of drought), the growing number of victims of economic collapse and shrinkage, the millions of victims of corporate land-grabs in the interest of international agribusiness or mining, or the untold victims of soil erosion, nuclear and toxic waste. Nor – crucially for our argument here – does this number reflect the vast numbers of nonhuman species and ecosystems impacted; the casualties of 'dead land and dead water ... sites marked by the expulsion of biospheric elements from their life space' (Sassen 2014, 150).

In this epoch that has come to be known as the Anthropocene, such displacements are inseparably entangled with a 'crisis' instigated by the 'shift from state-managed capitalism to the financialised capitalism of the present' (Fraser in Fraser and Jaeggi 2018, 9). This as a shift of geological proportions that standard humanist epistemologies are unable to properly account for. This shift, however, represents only the most recent (albeit, the most calamitous) of the many anthropogenic perturbances that have led humanity into its contemporary climate and extinction crisis. From the perspective of climate science, anthropogenic climate change is seen to have gradually accumulated over 8000 years

as agricultural societies slowly cut and burned their way through the world's forests (Flannery 2005). This took a decidedly 'ugly' turn around 1800 when 'the gargantuan machines of the Industrial Revolution first began to influence the Earth's climate' in a significant way (Flannery 2005, 64). While the gear-shift to industrialisation was momentous indeed for the stable climatic regime of the Holocene, it was the onset of the even uglier 'great acceleration' of the post-industrial age – the age of neoliberal capitalism – that irrevocably tipped the scales of climate, extinction and displacement. The lack of accountability in standard epistemological models, including that of social work, to account for this latest of anthropogenic perturbances is hardly surprising given that it has occurred 'in such a brief time that our imaginations are irretrievably mired in the past' (Flannery 2005, 295). Such radical shifts necessitate new ways of thinking and doing. They require conceptual movements across disciplinary boundaries, as well as new formulations of social reproduction, care, recognition and redistribution. The Anthropocene crisis is manifestly a crisis for both humanism and life itself. In the Anthropocene, all of life has become unmoored and displaced from the multispecies world makings that create and sustain terrestrial life spaces, including those of humans. Under the aegis of neoliberal biopower – more so than under any previous time in human history – the biosphere itself is undergoing a process of 'terraformation' as 'capitalist relations' invest themselves in 'biological production' in seeking to overcome all 'limits to growth' (Cooper 2008, 41–42).

The sheer extent of the terraformation currently underway has deep implications for social work, too. Accounting for the crisis of contemporary human migration, which is tied up with an escalating climate crisis, as well as understanding the displacement of both humans and nonhuman species alike and their forced movements across artificially-drawn nation-state borders, can no longer take place in the absence of biological and ecological considerations. Social work, however, has yet to take stock of the 'incommensurable grids' of more-than-human 'vulnerability, culpability, responsibility and concern' that attend to capitalism's vast economic maldistributions in terms of access to resources and care (Alaimo 2016, 188). Under these circumstances we 'cannot simply return to older received' critiques and methodologies, 'but must rather complicate, deepen, and enrich' their efforts by 'incorporating insights [from] feminist thought ... poststructuralism, postcolonial thought, and ecology' (Fraser in Fraser and Jaeggi 2018, 7).

In this article we are attentive to those iterations of feminist and poststructuralist thought that have been labelled 'new materialist' or 'posthuman' – perceptions that seek to materialise contemporary subjective, social, and environmental concerns and make them immanent to one another. The approaches encouraged by these praxes enable us to navigate 'these urgent times called the Anthropocene when the arts for living on a damaged planet demand *sympoietic* thinking and action' (Haraway 2017, p. M31). In this view, attempts to address the social inequalities and disturbances of capitalism – its interlaced displacements or 'expulsions' (Sassen 2014) – need to do so by urgently becoming attentive to more-than-human entanglements. Haraway (2017, p. M25) offers *sympoiesis* or 'making-with' or making together, 'ways of thinking, writing and world-making' as a guide to such Anthropocene-appropriate modes of attention: this, as she explains is a 'word proper to complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems ... a word proper to [multispecies] worlding'. Capitalism's destabilising of social reproduction requires that recognition and redistribution discourses around social justice concerns be read alongside new materialist and indigenous discourses pertaining

to environmental justice. Humans do not exist independently of other forms of life. Nor, as Anna Tsing (2015) observes, will we be able to fix this Anthropocene mess we have made by ourselves. Instead, we will need the aid of multiple non-human others as nothing in the biosphere, including human-life or society, makes itself. New materialist scholars insist that the mis/recognition that requires redress, involves not only expelled and marginalised humans but also excluded and occluded non-human others with whom humans are entwined in dynamic more-than-human processes of co-evolution and world-making.

. In the Anthropocene, life – and not just human life – is increasingly ‘dictated by the dead hand of capital’; a hand that appears to have an iron grip on not only the meteorological systems of planet Earth, but on the very ability of the biosphere to sustain ongoing multispecies flourishing (Fraser in Fraser and Jaeggi 2018, 133). For this reason, feminist new materialists such as Haraway (2016) and T.J. Demos (2015) have proposed alternative names for the contemporary crisis of Earth-systems disruption that is currently underway. In this paper we argue, along with these thinkers, that no one name for this new era will suffice; we will need the conceptual aid of a multiplicity of names to fully account for the sheer intricacy and multiplexity of this new ‘geo-politico-economic ecology’ (Demos 2015, 1).

### Capitalocene displacements

The Anthropocene is not the geology of a species at all, but rather the geology of a particular economic/technocratic system. A suggested alternative, the Capitalocene, as Demos (2015, 1) writes:

has the advantage of naming the culprit, locating climate change not merely in fossil fuels, but within the complex and interrelated processes of global-scale economic-political organisation stretched over histories of enclosures, colonialisms, industrialisations, and globalisations, which have both evolved within nature’s web of life as well as brought ecological transformations to it.

The Capitalocene captures the fact that not all humans are together in or responsible for the Anthropocene in the same way (Demos 2015). The wealthy nations and individuals of the world sustain a global landscape of inequality in which the wealthy find their advantages multiplied while the poor and marginalised find themselves expelled/discarded or massively exploited – in other words, displaced – by acts of disaster capitalism. In these Capitalocene times of trouble, we find ourselves living under the ‘dead hand’ of an economic system that, as Isabelle Stengers (2015) observes, is naively thought of as reformable by social workers, scientists, economists and politicians, who are akin to the trusting frog in Aesop’s fables – the one that agrees to ferry a scorpion across a river on its back. Just as it is the scorpion’s nature to sting, even if it means sinking its life-raft, ‘it is in the nature of capitalism to exploit opportunities’, even it means sinking the very professions, societies, environments and planet on which it thrives (Stengers 2015, 53).

While ‘there is something perverse about capitalist society ... something structurally and systematically alienating’ (Jaeggi in Fraser and Jaeggi 2018, 129), there is also something profoundly disconnecting about life in the Capitalocene – namely, capitalism’s will to negate life, and the ecological/social processes that make life possible, as it seeks to ‘overcome’ not just individual and social, but also ‘ecological and economic limits to

growth ... by reinventing life [itself] beyond the limit' (Cooper 2008, 11–12). This reinvention lies at the root of contemporary displacement due to capitalism's tendency to financialise nature, including human nature, via epistemic abstractions that create a 'financialised nature [that] is at the same time an instrument of expropriation' – a nature 'composed of fungible, commensurable units, whose place-specificity, qualitative traits, and experienced meanings are of little import and can be disregarded' (Fraser in Fraser and Jaeggi 2018, 100). It is to the 'fungible, commensurable units' of more-than-human world-making that attend to co-created multispecies life-worlds – worlds that are utterly disregarded by financialised capitalism – that social work needs to make itself accountable. In doing so, as we have already suggested, social work will need to consider social and environment justice in posthuman terms – namely, as causes that are immanent to one another. Unless we can productively entangle human and non-human displacements then, arguably, all we will be doing is sticking plasters on a life-threatening wound in urgent need of multiple surgical interventions. Whether we can have a society without a functioning natural environment that supplies the resources and conditions of its survival, or social justice in the absence of environmental justice are no longer questions that lack definitive answers. When it comes to answering ethically and accountably to the question of displacement, social work will need to answer to its compliance with an economic system that has little regard for life itself – an accounting that will need to begin with an unpacking of the 'onto-theological' anthropocentric humanistic traditions within which social work finds itself embedded. Social workers are reminded by Jacques Derrida (2006, 86) that our disciplinary 'inheritance is never a *given*, it is always a task', and that 'whether we like it or know it or not', we will need to critically filter through the legacies that we have inherited, often unthinkingly, to see what is worth conserving and what urgently needs transforming, while also performing a kind of 'counter-sorcery' that moves against the sorcerous injunctions of capitalism toward a more equitable and inclusive justice-to-come.

Stengers (2015, 52) writes that 'capitalism must be understood... as a mode of functioning, a machine, which fabricates its own necessity, its own actors, in every conjuncture, and destroys those who haven't been able to saddle up for the new opportunities'. Although it can be thought of as a 'materialist' system, she continues, it ought rather to be associated with a transcendentalist humanist imperative to overcome all material limits and as a dark power 'that captures, segments and redefines always more and more dimensions of what makes up our reality, our lives, our practices, in its service' (2015, 52–53). In their *Communist Manifesto* (1848/1967, p. 114), Marx and Engels (1969) compared capitalism to a 'sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells'. Capitalism is indeed a type of sorcery, spread via exploitative colonial ventures, extractive industrialisation schemes and complex financial instruments, that continue to impose 'death sentences ... in the name of the common goods of progress, civilisation, development and liberal inclusion'; a conjuration that now finds itself not only facing the 'terra incognita' of mass displacement, both human and not, but climate change and a sixth mass extinction of biological life (Blaser and de la Cadena 2018, 3). Communism, which promised to annul capitalist sorcery in the name of social justice, fared no better. In maturing capitalist relations under the aegis of a centrally planned state, it witnessed vicious displacements in the form of genocides and ecocides: land-grabs by the state and millions of human and

nonhuman deaths as a result of industrial agriculture, massive deforestation, industrial pollution, the destruction of ecosystems like the Aral sea, etc. Seen from such perspectives, communism was simply 'a return of the most violent aspects of primitive accumulation' that attended to capitalist colonialism (Federici 2004, 12). In the decades since the collapse of soviet communism, the most brutalising horrors of primitive accumulation and 'predatory economic formations' have returned across diverse types of political economies around the world – a 'strengthening of dynamics that expel people from the economy and from society' (Sassen 2014, 76).

Yet the real *terra incognita* for Marxist and diverse capitalist formations alike, remains 'nature' – nothing more than an 'object for mankind' possessing meaning 'only in terms of economic requirements' and industrial use value (Ponting 2007, 131). The deadly blind-spot that all industrialised economic systems share is their inability to recognise that the human does not exist 'for itself' alone but is instead 'a kind of relay point in a swirl of chemicals, energies, processes, systems and interspecies encounters' (Snaza 2019, 155). It is impossible to extract humans, their livelihoods and social formations from this more-than-human swirl. Without a recognition of immanence between humans and more-than-human ecologies and planetary processes, justice will not only remain elusive but, we venture, completely unattainable.

If social work seeks justice, it will need to account not only for the victims of genocide, but for those of ecocide too. The vicious destruction and despoliation of complex ecosystems in the name of shopping centres, housing developments and plantations must be considered in tandem with the destruction of human social worlds in the name of profit. The exploitation of human labour needs to be deliberated alongside the unspeakable cruelties wrought on the bodies of millions of commodified animals that spend their entire lives on the conveyor belts of industrial food production lines. What Achille Mbembe (2003, 14) calls necropolitics – an unprecedented form of biopolitical 'instrumentalisation of human existence and material destruction of [certain] human bodies and populations' – can surely not be restricted to human bodies alone. Embedded in relations of necropower, already-marginalised bodies, both human and not, are rendered disposable, exploitable and displaceable by a 'material-semiotic interaction' that leaves 'disproportionally allotted traces' of exposure and harm (Tuana in Alaimo 2016, 184). Nils Bubandt (2017) suggests that under neoliberalism the necropolitical has morphed into the necrobiopolitical. 'In a time of global warming, ocean acidification, and mass extinction', as well as of industrialised killing (via factory farming, deforestation, chemical pollution, etc.), 'necropolitics has come to cover a much broader and much more stochastic politics of life and death' – one that extends beyond human bodies to those of 'animals, plants, bacteria and fungi [that] now live and die under conditions that may have been critically shaped by human activity but that are also increasingly outside of human control' (2017, p. G124). Here we need to consider the usefulness of a term like Plantationocene in understanding the homogenising but shadowy nature of displacement under the necropolitical regimes of international capitalism.

### **The Plantationocene: a cartography of displacement**

Countless displacements accompanied the growth of the international economy, perhaps none less notorious than the Atlantic slave trade, which furnished disposable African



labour for the cotton, sugar and tobacco plantations of the new world (Haraway in Mitman 2019). These labour-intensive crops were the first commodities of international capitalism and the newly forged industrial revolution, which grew on the back of disposable slave labour in the plantations, gruelling underpaid labour in the factories, and child labour in the coal mines (Haraway in Mitman 2019). Even after these exploitative labour processes were officially abandoned, they persisted in all but name. Slavery persisted in the rubber plantations of the Belgian Congo into the early twentieth century and it continues to persist still in all the plantations that service the burgeoning market in industrial agricultural and biofuel staples, as well as in the rare-earth mining that furnish the telecommunications industries (Parikka 2015). The American slave plantations served as prototypes of the contemporary industrial plantation: 'a system of multispecies forced labour' in which the generation time of all the players – plants, animals, humans and microbes are accelerated in 'situations' that enable the 'vast proliferation of some and the [forced] removal of others' (Haraway in Mitman 2019, n.p.). Never has there been a more thorough way of 'rearranging species life in the world' and a greater driver of displacement, 'because if labour', whether human or not, 'can escape, it will escape the plantation' and its brutal conditions of 'out-and-out slavery' (Haraway in Mitman 2019, n.p.). But where to escape to as the brutalising net of capitalist realism continues to tighten and environmental conditions around the world grow ever more precarious?

Neither has the 'land-grab' mentality that accompanied the brutal founding of the colonial plantations in the Americas, India, Indonesia and Africa diminished. Across vast swathes of the third world where land rights are 'nebulous, unclear and often insecure', small-farmers and extant hunter-gatherers continue to be forcibly removed to make room for vast swathes of industrial monocultures, such as palm oil, which are processed into a huge number of products, from lubricants and fuels to cosmetics and prepared foods (Sassen 2014, 112). Land grabs are perpetrated by 'energy companies, agricultural investment companies, utility companies, finance and investment firms, and technology companies', abetted by corrupt or weakening governments, facilitated by IMF and World Bank restructuring, and amplified by WTO rules, in a global economic climate where land acquisitions dwarf investments in manufacturing by several orders of magnitude (Sassen 2014, 107–8). Sometimes plantation-making is, even today, accompanied by acts 'genocide ... [forced] removal or some mode of captivity ... replacement of a local labour force by coerced labour from outside, either through various forms of indenture, unequal contract, or out-and-out slavery' (Haraway in Mitman 2019, n.p.). Entire ecosystems or diverse patch-worked peasant forest agricultures are converted into monocultures that are visible from space from which their inhabitants have been expelled forever. To this end and purpose, endless acres of rainforest are converted *every passing second*. Excepting those few species and humans conscripted as slaves in all but name to this necrotic machine for exploitation and extraction, the rest of the erstwhile inhabitants of these once vibrant ecological spaces, human and not, are expelled from their life-spaces to join the swelling ranks of the displaced (Sassen 2014). Multiple languages and diverse cultural lifeways have disappeared for good, along with other wild things (such as fish-stocks in the ocean, for instance, and biodiverse wild forests, including coastal mangrove forests). This displacement represents not only the conquest of terrestrial space by extractive capitalism, but a conquest too of 'internal space', or 'soul' – a subjugation that requires us to rethink the affective impact of capitalism on

'subjectivity and social relations' (Parikka 2015, 91). Australian philosopher Glenn Albrecht (2012, 1) has coined the term solastalgia to describe the 'psychic or existential distress caused by [this] environmental and cultural change/damage', this pervasive homogenisation of planet earth's bio and cultural diversity. Solastalgia speaks of a modern unhomeliness that underpins the displacements of the present era, in which the older geographical space of places and the rich multispecies co-created eco-social life-worlds which once sustained human communities have become spaces of displacement, regulated by brutal biocapital flows. Life, including human life, has become increasingly surplus to capital. The forces of extractive capitalism – rampant deforestation, unchecked urban development, massive plantations of monocultured crop, fish-farms, open-cast mining operations, fracking, pipelines, chemical spills, trawl fishing, and a multitude of other terraformation projects – enact a two-tiered cartography of displacement. On the one hand there is an external displacement of humans and other species, while on the other, there is a dis/placement of 'an interior' shared world, 'of the soul, the space of time', of a sense of belonging (Parikka 2015, 91). And while it is true that 'underlying socio-economic, cultural, political and environmental processes ... enable or constrain people's ability to cope where they are or result in them moving' (Opitz-Stapleton et al. 2017, 7), the profound psychological and affective sense of loss that attends to the loss of ancestral bio-social environments of meaning and life-making needs to be factored in too. As Robert McFarlane (2019, 317) observes, 'as homes become increasingly unhomey around their inhabitants', a psychological dis/placement occurs even amongst members of ravaged communities that decide to stay put instead of leaving. In accounting for displacement, social work discourses need to factor in both the unfolding psychological and material cartographies of displacement: the 'human distress syndromes' that accompany 'ecosystem distress syndromes', which together speak to an unfolding 'modern uncanny' of displacement that is at once ghostly, affective, psycho-social and inextricably material (McFarlane 2019, 317).

### **The Shadowcene's subterranean effects and affects**

If the Plantationocene, Capitalocene or Anthropocene can be said to 'take place', they do so across huge scales of space and vast spans of time. Their energies are interactive, their properties emergent and their structures withdrawn. We are literally living in their shadowtime, existing between radically different durations and orders of temporal scale simultaneously. Timothy Morton (2018) uses the word hyperobject to describe entities 'so massively distributed in time, space and dimensionality' that they defy our perception, let alone our comprehension. Among examples Morton gives are Anthropocene drivers like climate change, plantation-based agriculture, mass species extinction and the proliferation of radioactive plutonium, chemical waste and plastics; things that tell and will go on telling about humans long into the geological future. In one sense, hyperobjects are abstractions, yet on a material level they are ferociously and catastrophically real, 'contaminating everything, [particularly] if we find ourselves inside them' (Morton 2018, 77). The idea of the Anthropocene as a Shadowcene implies that humans and nonhumans alike find themselves subject to extreme conditions and trends that are 'conceptually subterranean because we cannot easily make them visible through our current categories of meaning' (Sassen 2014, 212). Ontologically, we are being asked to imagine ourselves

inhabitants of deep time – the dizzyingly profound eras of Earth history that extend both behind and ahead of the present. Politically, the Shadowcene lays bare some of the complex and decidedly uncanny cross-weaves of vulnerability and culpability that exist between us and other species, as well as between humans living now and the future people still to come, if they are to arrive at all. Yet there are ethical and political implications, too. In such a context:

contemporary posthuman and new materialist philosophies ... that emphasise how life in all of its different and differing materialised forms are relationally entangled provide [us with] a necessary philosophical-political alternative, one that is suspicious of over-economisation and states that everything of matter matters, and that there are productive [ethico-political] ways out of the multitude of crises we are currently experiencing. (Geerts 2019, 125)

As Braidotti and Bignall (2019, 1) point out, the spectral indeterminacy of Anthropocene displacements – enacted across multiple geographical, temporal, material, psycho-social and affective fronts – call us toward onto-ethical and political epistemologies that ‘open out’ the conceptual ‘established anthropocentric frames’ that continue to haunt social work by exposing them toward ‘more inclusive practices of becoming human’. For Morton (2013, 314), the saving power of thinking in such uncanny co-existent more-than-human terms is that doing so has

the capacity to push humans out of the modernity that is coterminous with the Anthropocene, into a time of ecological coexistence, that is, a time at which this fact of coexistence becomes [ethically] woven into human politics, philosophy, and culture.

There are, of course, good reasons to be sceptical of the epitaphic impulse to declare the end of nature or even the extinction of the human, but this is not what posthuman or new materialist philosophies are asking us to do. While terms such as the Anthropocene, the Capitalocene, the Plantationocene or the Shadowcene might be decidedly spectral and shadowy, they are massively forceful and useful concepts for social work. If social work seeks to stay with the trouble of displacement on a damaged planet, it will need to do some detailed and difficult thinking through of its inherent and limiting anthropocentric biases as it comes to grips with the sheer uncanniness of this tableau of unfolding scenes.

### **The Chthulucene: hope in blasted landscapes**

An alternative name for the Anthropocene, the Chthulucene, is proposed by Donna Haraway (2016), who draws on the resources of science fiction as much as science fact, speculative feminism as much as speculative fabulation, in naming the post-anthropocentric age of multi-species assemblages. Chthulucene speaks to the distributed agencies involved in climate change and extinction, whilst emphasising the resilience and survivability of inter-species collaborations and world-makings that establish the very conditions of earthly life, outlining the onto-ethics of what Haraway (2017) terms response-ability, the skilled capacities for survival on a damaged planet that include the practice of multi-species justice and sustainable belonging. Contrary to the notion that a term such as Chthulucene ‘shifts the focus from corporate neoliberalism, neo-colonialism, and extractivism, emphasised by the Capitalocene thesis’ (Demos 2015, 1), we suggest that Anna Tsing’s *The mushroom at the end of the world: on the possibility of life in capitalist ruins*

(2015) demonstrates just how multispecies world-makings continue to take place despite the economic ruin of displacement and extractivism. As an anthropologist working toward more hopeful futures, Tsing (2015) takes as her subject the matsutake mushroom, supposedly the most valuable fungus in the world, which grows best in human-disturbed landscapes. Written in what she calls 'a riot of short chapters, like the flushes of mushrooms that come up after rain', Tsing's book describes a contemporary 'nature' that is hybrid and multiply interbound; one that weaves its interrelations even in the midst of the homogenous monoculture of plantation-based capitalism (2015, p. viii). Her ecosystems stretch from wood-wide webs of mycelia, through earthworms and pine roots, to logging trucks, hedge funds, supply chains and various salvage economies and peri-capitalist formations (i.e. those of illiterate villagers and farmers, displaced refugees and migrant labourers, etc.) – as well as down into the flora of our own multispecies guts. Tsing's account of nature thus overcomes what Rancière (2004) has called the partition of the sensible, by which he means the traditional division of matter into life and not-life and human society into the included and excluded. Tsing is interested in a vibrant materialism that acknowledges the economic agency of those excluded from the formal economy as well as the vital agency of ores, atmospheres, mycelia, as well as other organisms. Tsing is also concerned with the possibility of collaborative more-than-human survival in the Anthropocene-to-come. In Tsing's account, the psychosocial and environmental ruins of the Anthropocene, in which varying conditions of resource scarcity and displacement exist, continues to be animated with narratives of survival and more-than-human flourishing. Varying kinds of salvage and remediation are not only possible, but currently being practiced under the radar.

Even in the aftermath of a global anthropogenic disaster, even if we humans have killed ourselves in an ultimate act of displacement, there will be other forms of life that outlive us. Microbial life and certain species of fungi will survive and thrive after humans have made the earth uninhabitable for the lifeforms we love (Kirksey, Shapiro, and Brodine 2012, 15–16). 'Many different kinds of microbes and fungi', for example, are able to 'thrive in radioactive landscapes, including multicellular creatures such as nematode worms and tardigrades' (Kirksey, Shapiro, and Brodine 2012, 16). A 'geological genome bank' exists deep underground – SLIMEs (subsurface lithoautotrophic microbial ecosystems) outlive surface extinction events, encased in bubbles of air trapped in crystals and solid rock, coating the walls of abyssal caves, lining hairline cracks in crustal rocks, living deep under kilometers of polar ice, bubbling out of the lithosphere at deep-ocean vents (Wilson 2004). 'These microbes are the living dead'; slow growing to the point of inertia, they not only suggest the possibility of subsurface life on alien planets but are a likely survival safety mechanism for planetary biospheres, having 'likely reintroduced their banked genes to the surface micro-biosphere many times in the earth's history' (Kirksey, Shapiro, and Brodine 2012, 17). Against the bleak backdrop of one possible future, where concrete hopes for life on earth can only be grounded in tenacious microorganisms and mycelial networks, the historical present, as Tsing (2015) and Haraway (2016) point out, is ripe with open-ended biocultural possibilities.

Prefiguring liveable futures, and refiguring possibilities amidst changing contingencies, thinkers and tinkerers in conjoined biocultural worlds such as Tsing and Haraway are generating unexpected hopes. They suggest that we may yet learn to live better with multiple others (both human and not) by entwining our hopes and dreams

with theirs. Haraway's Chthulucene, speaks affectively to such dreams of multispecies assemblages and alternative technological and eco-social arrangements yet to come. Gray and Eloff (in press, n.p.) propose that developing 'new forms of sociality' that take into consideration 'the scale of environmental disaster', the incursion of financialised capitalism, 'and the dangerous idleness that marks contemporary thought-life' are key. While, as they remark, 'these are disastrous times, collapsing times, futureless times', it is also true that no alternative remains but to 'shake ourselves from our slumber to find new [conceptual] weapons, for we *are* fighting for our lives' (in press, n.p.). Like Tsing, Haraway, Alaimo and numerous other feminist new materialist scholars are attempting to do, we might begin to do this necessary 'fighting' by articulating 'tangible political positions and forge concrete proposals for novel ways of being with others' (Haraway 2007, 19). To figure more hopeful futures – as these authors do – means to read ourselves into a story 'of biocultural possibility' in which 'concrete alliances' are forged 'among social and environmental worlds in the historical present' (Kirksey, Shapiro, and Brodine 2012, 24). To teach about 'caring for other beings and things', means to figure ourselves as lively and creative agents engaged in generating 'openings for more audacious hopes' (Kirksey, Shapiro, and Brodine 2012, 24). Against the backdrop of bleak industrially-produced futures inhering to the other scenes of displacement that we have sketched, a posthuman hopefulness inheres to this final cene. The Chthulucene directs the attention of social work discourses around education and practice toward the ethico-political and psychological implications of posthuman efforts to recognise and account for the complex more-than-human material energies of the earth.

### **Conclusion: posthuman ways of understanding displacement**

The mis/recognition that haunts existing social-work discourses around displacement, as we noted earlier, involves an ethico-political and onto-epistemological recognition of the inseparability of humans from the dynamic more-than-human processes of world-making that sustain them. Untold millions of expelled and displaced humans and animals are but the tip of a perilous iceberg that threatens to unmoor the entirety of social production (let alone, the processes that sustain planetary life). As we have observed in our sketching of an uncanny tableau of various scenes, environmental devastation increasingly rips apart the psychological and social bonds that holds communities together. Displacements, in our tableau, are enacted across multiple fronts requiring new forms of attentiveness, discourses and action. Increased levels of violence and aggression as well as rising levels of anxiety, stress and depression are the psycho-social markers of an unfolding cartography of ecological and social unmooring that threatens not only the very integrity and continuity of life on Earth, but also individual and collective rights as well as diverse forms of local democracy.

Thinking with the various posthuman/new materialist theorists whose work we have alluded to throughout suggest that social work needs to come to grips with the more-than-human nature of displacement. We have suggested that social work needs to expand the sensibility by which it understands displacement today as it unfolds across multiple temporalities, societies and environments. The posthuman sensibility we have alluded to in our discussion of the various cenes suggests that social work must cultivate

the capacity to contemplate the entangled more-than-human nature of displacement today (which involves inextricably entangled human and non-human species and processes). More than this, social work needs to show up and respond to the unfolding crisis of displacement in ways that are more ethically accountable to the processes that sustain *all* of life (and by extension social reproduction), than those allowed for by traditional humanist discourses.

As we noted, throughout, humans are not on this planet by themselves but inextricably entangled, both materially and affectively, with more-than-human species, ecosystems and processes. 'Staying alive – for every species [including humans] – requires liveable collaborations ... [and] collaboration means working across differences, which leads to contamination. Without [multispecies] collaborations, we all die' (Tsing 2015, 28). This implies that social work needs to cultivate a response-ability for staying with the trouble of collaborative survival; an attitude that has become all the more pressing in the time of coronavirus which, by its very nature, has necessitated coming to grips with the entanglement between the social and ecological, the ethical and the political as well as the ontological and the epistemological. As the climate and extinction crises deepens, engendering further economic and social crises and displacements, the necessity of forging an immanent and response-able politico-ethico-onto-epistemological basis for social work will become evident in a much starker and more urgent way.

Posthumanism, as we have observed, calls on social work to become accountable to the multitude of living beings (both human and not) and the vibrant planetary forces that sustain the integrity of collaborative individual, social and environmental lifeworlds. For the last four hundred years, western colonialism has spread the 'twin-notions of human-exceptionalism and our entitlement to exploit nature' (Vetlesen 2019, 220). This anthropocentric investment has brought with it a concomitant recalcitrance: a 'need to be unrepentant and defiant in the face of its actual costs: of well-documented looming anthropogenic disaster ... [and of] the ways in which we [humans] have culturally erred' (2019, 220). Posthumanism suggests that it is high time that social work lets go of its lingering humanism; an attitude which has inculcated in us humans a fatal reluctance to rock the boat by changing its course – even if it is headed straight for calamity. Along with various marginalised indigenous cosmologies and ecofeminist discourses, posthuman new materialisms call on social work to recognise the way in which it, along with other western-Enlightenment founded disciplines of knowledge-making and praxis, have been informed by and implicated in the investments of anthropocentrism, colonialism and capitalism. Posthumanism calls on social work to become accountable; to acknowledge, contra its inherited narratives of human exceptionalism, that humans inhabit a 'becoming world' in which diverse lifeforms as well as non-living forms and forces together sustain the places and spaces that make social life possible (Braidotti and Bignall 2019, 1).

## Notes

1. Politico-ethico-onto-epistemology is a neologism created by queer quantum physicist and US philosopher, Barad (2017), who insists on the entanglement of the political, ethical,

ontological and epistemological. Furthermore, in regarding all these as entangled, Barad emphasises the relational aspect of knowledge creation by bringing politics, ontology and ethics to the fore and onto the same level of consideration and importance as epistemology.

2. We prefer the term 'justice-to-come' (Barad 2019; Derrida 2006) to social justice as it connotes how justice is incalculable - how it is never something that can be obtained, predicted or calculated. Justice-to-come encapsulates how justice cannot be sustained once and for all, but is an ongoing endeavour. The indeterminacy present in such a formulation also foregrounds how past, present and future cannot be viewed in a linear sequence, but that the past and future bleed always into the present.

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