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# Critique and the Black Horizon: questioning the move 'beyond' the human/nature divide in international relations

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**Abstract** *In the contemporary moment of the Anthropocene there appears to be a growing consensus on the need to move beyond the key modernist binary, the Human/Nature divide. We draw out a shared understanding at work in International Relations across critical approaches in Science and Technology Studies (STS), new materialist, and material feminist fields, as well as critical Indigenous, decolonial and pluriversal thought. This is an understanding that seeks to go beyond the limits of modern epistemological and ontological assumptions of human exceptionalism. These approaches seek to rework both sides of the Human/Nature divide: to reconstitute the Human as a knowing, responsive and relational subject, no longer tainted by hierarchies of race and coloniality; while, redistributing agential capacities of responsibility, care and relation beyond the Human. Drawing from work across the broad field of critical Black studies, we flag up the limitations of these entangled, relational posthuman and more-than-human imaginaries, which can easily reproduce hierarchies of subordination and control. We suggest that another approach to the Human/Nature divide is possible, a critical perspective we call the Black Horizon, focused upon the task of deconstruction: an approach which emphasises difference rather than identity, negation rather than addition, critique rather than affirmation.*

## Introduction

One of the most important developments in contemporary International Relations theorising is the increasingly shared understanding across theorists of the 'relational' and the 'ontological' turns, including new materialisms, posthumanism, scientific feminism, critical Indigenous and decolonial theory. This alliance has cohered around the concept of the Anthropocene, understood as a new geological epoch, where humanity becomes a crucial planetary actor and the boundaries between society and nature become destabilised. New materialists and decolonial theorists share much in their critique of the foundations of the modernist episteme and a modern

ontology, that was constituted by histories of resource extraction, coloniality and, increasingly, climate change. For both new materialist and decolonial approaches the Human is no longer separate or apart from Nature or was never apart except in the modernist imaginary (Latour 1993). The understanding of the Human as an agential subject is transformed as these approaches seek to read agency and subjectivity – intentionality, feeling, responsivity and information production and exchange – across the human into the sphere of the nonhuman. In this way, nature or the nonhuman sphere is ‘humanised’, that is, given human characteristics, anthropomorphised or animated; matter is given ‘vitality’ (Bennett 2010).

Critical Indigenous and decolonial approaches have offered critiques of new materialist and posthumanist approaches, by highlighting their unacknowledged debts to non-Western forms of thought. Their criticism focuses largely on the uncredited appropriation of non-Western and Indigenous understandings that have never bought into the Human/Nature divide of modernist thought (Todd 2015; Davis and Todd 2017). Decolonial approaches also question the temporality implicit in contemporary concerns over environmental catastrophe, as much recent work neglects the fact that other peoples’ worlds were and are still being destroyed in order to produce the Western modernity now considered to be under threat of its own extinction (Danowski and de Castro 2017). Thus, the problem is not merely one of knowledge appropriation but that this knowledge is used to service the needs of hegemonic forms of power and existence. These critiques suggest that what is at stake is not merely the inclusion of alternative or excluded forms of knowledge but recognition that the problematic of the Human/Nature divide is one that is specific to a modernist Western, Eurocentric, epistemological and ontological framing. However, more recent scholarship has openly acknowledged these debts, and sought to draw together decolonial and Indigenous work and new materialist approaches into a united conversation on ‘planetary social thought’, grounded in relational ontologies, entangled nature and culture and the recognition of nonhuman agency (Clark and Szerszynski 2020).

The relationship between the Anthropocene and race, as a problem for thought and governance, has increasingly concerned contemporary International Relations (IR). The increasing popularity of new materialist and posthumanist framings has inspired re-imaginings of the global political order, which stretch beyond the social into the natural world (Cudworth and Hobden 2011). Much of the recent literature has called for reconfigured forms of global governance that include nonhuman agency and recognise the entanglement between nature and culture, which has created environmental security risks for both humans and more-than-humans (Fishel 2017). In response, decolonial critiques have interrogated the coloniality of global politics, and the importance of challenges to the modernist ontology from non-Western and Indigenous perspectives (Rojas 2016; Tucker 2018). This has led to calls for a ‘pluriversal IR’, which incorporates both new materialist and Indigenous ontologies, drawn together by a ‘cosmopolitics’ of careful diplomacy between multiple non-Western worlds and modernist forms of thought (Blaney and Tickner 2017).

In this paper we seek to problematise this convergence of new materialist, relational ontologies and decolonial approaches, suggesting that the critique of

posthuman imaginaries must go further. The argument draws on a long tradition of work in Black studies and Black feminism,<sup>1</sup> which also engages in critiques of race and modernity, but from a different ontological and epistemological perspective. We argue that in this new consensus around planetary social thought, the framing of the Human/Nature divide is understood in terms of capacity and capabilities, particularly the capacity for agency, which is only attributed to the Human. However, for Black Studies and Black Feminist scholars, the most important ontological divide is the one which is constitutive of modernity, that between those who have the capacity for 'being' (the human) and those who lack 'being' (the black(ened) non or semi-human). It is this divide which allows for the exploitation of those considered Black as objects, and the instrumentalisation of the objects that are created through this divide.

In this paper, we will argue that the approach of the critical consensus to the Human/Nature divide seeks to extend 'human' attributes into nonhuman forms of life in order to transcend modernist framings, in a new Anthropocene imaginary. However, drawing on Black Studies and Black feminist approaches allows us to unsettle and disrupt the ontological foundations grounded in the divide between being and non-being, in order to offer a deeper and more comprehensive critique of contemporary social thought. We wish to highlight an approach, we call the Black Horizon, drawing on the work of Nahum Chandler (2013), which focuses on problematising the concept of the Human/Nature divide from the starting point of antiblackness. In doing so, we suggest that more critical attention should be paid to the attributes of subjectivity which are being extended beyond the biological human to nonhuman life, diffusing allegedly human capabilities down to the smallest bacteriological and molecular levels. We suggest that an alternative, Black Horizon, approach to relationality and entanglement could focus upon understanding how these 'capabilities' are, in fact, historically denied to those considered to be non- or less-than-human.

This approach argues that Human capacities and capabilities can only exist on the basis of their denial to the other; without this denial or disavowal 'human' capacities and capabilities disappear. Without slavery there can be no 'freedom', without dehumanisation there is no 'human', just as without the inequality of the worker and the owner of capital there could be no 'equality' of the market. Human capacities and capabilities thus are dependent upon a series of hierarchical cuts and distinctions in which they are denied to the other. Historically these hierarchical cuts and distinctions have been made in relation to antiblackness, therefore analysing the stakes involved in placing antiblackness at the heart of an alternative approach to the problem of the Human/Nature divide is the goal of this paper. Crucially, this requires a critique of relational ontologies from a place of paraontology, which rejects the call to set out new forms of being but focuses on deconstructing or

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article we refer to both Black studies and Black feminism, to highlight the importance of Black feminist theorists to the critical points that we draw out. While Black feminism could be subsumed under the category of Black studies, the crucial role of Denise Ferreira da Silva (2007), Zakiyah Iman Jackson (2015) and Sylvia Wynter (2007) to our argument makes it important not to erase the contributions of Black feminists to this field. Many of the Black studies theorists we draw on are also heavily indebted to key Black feminist thinkers like Saidiya Hartman and Hortense Spillers, making it even more vital to highlight the role of Black feminism.

desedimenting the modernist ontology that has created the current predicament. We argue that the Black Horizon and its paraontological approach provides an important alternative to the relational calls to move beyond the nature/culture binary in International Relations.

The paper is organised in three sections. The first section highlights what we see as a shared agenda across new materialist, feminist, STS, relational and decolonial approaches, seeking to problematise and move beyond the Human/Nature divide. The second section analyses how the posthuman risks reinstating the human at the centre of agendas of governance. The third section outlines how problematising the posthuman enables another approach to the Human/Nature divide. Here we read posthumanism as 'Man 3', in the terminology of Sylvia Wynter (2003), and suggest the Black Horizon as an approach to critique which, starting from the problematic of antiblackness, enables us to rethink the problematic of relational entanglement and enables an alternative approach to the Human/Nature divide.

### **A shared agenda: the ethics of encounter**

The desire to critique and move beyond the Human/Nature divide unites new materialists, posthuman, relational and decolonial approaches. This is important, as despite the critiques of posthumanists from decolonial and Indigenous scholars, there is much shared ground in terms of ontological and epistemological commitments, which allows for collaborative projects, which draw on both new materialist and decolonial intellectual resources (Jackson 2021). While much of this debate has occurred across other disciplines, including Gender Studies, Environmental Humanities, Anthropology and Philosophy, it is highly influential in contemporary critical International Relations work (see for example Cudworth and Hobden 2022, Kurki 2022). The shared ground of critique that has developed through these debates has been crucial in uniting philosophical and social critics, opening-up new ways to understand and act in the Anthropocene. At least three important tropes can be identified from this shared agenda, which tends to shape the critical points across these areas of thinking. Firstly, there is a rejection of a hierarchy of being, with the human at the top; secondly a redistribution of power and agency across the Human/Nature divide; and, thirdly, a focus on becoming with others through an ethics of care and responsibility. These three tropes help to delineate a shared space for developing a critique of the Human/Nature divide in the Anthropocene.

The first key point of this shared agenda is the critique of any hierarchical framing placing the human above or distinct from nonhuman modes of being. This marks a key point of distinction from Eurocentric, hegemonic and anthropocentric framings of the world which have dominated thinking in modernity. This critique argues that in the narrative of modernity, humanity sits apart from the natural world, able to change, develop and ultimately progress, coming to know and control a world which is inert, unchanging and available to be used and understood. Society, politics and history play out as the 'foreground', against the 'background' of nature, which acts as a stage, a venue to be used by the intelligent life of humanity. This modern, hierarchical, conception is challenged by a range of work, both decolonial and materialist,

from Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2014) and Eduardo Kohn's (2013) Indigenous anthropological work on multiverses, multi-natures and semiotic life to the materialist feminism of Donna Haraway (2016), Vicky Kirby (2011) and Elizabeth Grosz (2011). For Grosz, we must understand change in the world in terms of 'becomings', which occur through the engagement of dynamic environments, encounters and transformations that stretch across the human and the non-human; material relations that cannot be neatly separated into the human and the natural. Whilst the work of Grosz (and other materialist feminists) proceeds through an engagement between the scientific work of Charles Darwin and the thought of continental and feminist philosophy, it arrives at a very similar place to the decolonial discussions of ontology, nature and subjectivity. Indeed, the anthropological investigations of Viveiros de Castro, Kohn and others, which constitute an 'ontological turn', draw out similar insights from working with Indigenous ways of being, which carve out non-hierarchical worlds of nature/culture that exist within a 'world of many worlds' (De la Cadena and Blaser 2018).

The second key point is the focus upon the distribution of power and agency across the Human/Nature divide. This is often done through speculative approaches towards otherness or alterity, reaching out not to grasp the other or assuming that it is possible to fully understand the other but to position oneself in an open ethical encounter with the other, imagining how the other might think or feel. Leading decolonial theorist Viveiros de Castro (2014) does this through the Amerindian imaginary of how other creatures see the world through the same eyes as the human but merely in different bodies and therefore with different needs. Feminist thinkers such as Elizabeth Grosz (2011) and Vicky Kirby (2011) articulate this through extending semiotic information exchange to non-human and non-organic life, this communication expresses itself in many ways, from lightning flashes to the chemical exchanges of bio-organic life. Grosz identifies the possibility of non-human forms of ethics in her reading of Darwin, arguing for the existence of an 'insect ethics, a morality that accords with the morphologies and life-cycle of bees ... a mode of morality that maximises what bees privilege' (Grosz 2011, 22). While theorists like Grosz and Kirby proceed from a Western tradition, drawing out new resonances from Darwin's evolutionary biology or Derrida's deconstruction, decolonial thinkers, like Viveiros de Castro (2014), Eduardo Kohn (2013) or Walter Mignolo (2011), draw on thinking by Indigenous, Afro-descendent and other marginalised peoples in Latin America to ground their critique. Thus, Kohn's (2013, 81) exploration of the life of Runa people in Ecuador leads him to reassess the nature of the forest, as a set of interrelations between different 'semiotic life forms' in a 'dense ecology of selves'. This conception of the forest and all the life forms that dwell in it as a relational ecosystem, which thinks and communicates, leads us to a similar set of questions around power, agency and ethics to those pondered by theorists of the Anthropocene. If forests can think and bees can act ethically, then the dominant conception of nature, as outside of sociality, must be fundamentally reassessed along with the existing ways of relating with the thinking, acting beings that reside within it.

The third theme, logically following from the previous two, is a focus on becoming with otherness or alterity, through ethical reciprocities which



establish ethical duties of care and responsivity. These ethical duties enable imaginaries of equality and mutuality, where both humans (as learning and exchanging subjects) and nonhuman others are understood to be mutually constituting rather than existing independently. Karen Barad (2007, 2010) is a key thinker for approaches that rely on entangled processes of becoming, as she articulates a compelling ontology of relationality. Barad replaces an ontology of interaction between separate entities with one of intra-activity, where entities do not pre-exist relations but are constituted through them. This extension of relations of equality beyond the human is often understood through a feminist 'ethical practice of encounter', which rests on the recognition that existence and subjectivity emerges from relations with multiple others (see Haraway 2016). Thus, an ethical practice requires making kin with human and nonhuman others, worlding (or worldmaking) together, working through entanglement and mutual care. In short, capacities and capabilities which were previously preserved for the human are now understood to be widely distributed across human and non-human life, as what were previously understood to be passive or inert matters or substances become recast as animated, vibrant and lively (Bennett 2010). The social and political questions that previously only concerned relations between humans become extended to encompass all levels of existence, and the interactions of sovereign subjects are replaced by ever shifting processes of relational becoming, with beings inextricable from their lively environments.

Deboleena Roy's *Molecular Feminisms* (Roy 2018) is a good example of an approach that brings together materialist and decolonial thought around these three themes, demonstrating the compatibility between new materialist approaches and a decolonial agenda. Roy (2018, 205) states that she combines 'molecular biology, feminist theory, Deleuzian philosophies, postcolonial theory and decolonial studies' in an inclusive critical engagement with modernist thought, recasting the understanding of the human as separate to or apart from the world. In bringing these trends of contemporary thinking together, she reworks the 'social' so it includes 'not only humans but all nonhumans, including organic and inorganic others' (Roy 2018, 205). Drawing upon Jagadish Chandra Bose's understanding of plant capacities for responsivity and the contemporary work of Rey Chow and other post- and decolonial thinkers, she calls for 'an affirmative postcolonial studies' that 'is less anxiously preoccupied with the mechanisms and apparatuses of European exclusion' and more focused upon capacities and capabilities ignored or refused by dominant paradigms of thought (Roy 2018, 47). This critical capacity to learn from others – whether it is the pluralised frames of knowledge forwarded by decolonial thinkers or the cosmologies and practices of Indigenous peoples or those of feminist STS practitioners of molecular technologies, seeking to open new knowledges through the study of bacterial lives – enables new epistemological and ontological breakthroughs not on the basis of Enlightenment reason but on the basis of decentring the human in flat ontologies of immanent becoming.

At the heart of Roy's well-received book is the development of a molecular feminist research methodology learnt from grass, by the openness to what grass does, how grass (as a stoloniferous plant) explores the world and communicates by way of sending feelers out in different directions, feeling towards

others rather than seeking to grasp, to control or to fully know them, in what she calls a methodology of 'microphysical desire' (Roy 2018, 30). Thus 'becoming plant' or 'becoming a blade of grass' (Roy 2018, 33) is another way of extending or projecting oneself into the world as a 'contact zone' for ethical engagements with non-human forms of being and with matter itself. This approach of 'posthumanist ethics' (Roy 2018, 69), in effect, seeks to extend scientific knowledge by asking 'what it is that we as humans can learn from our exchanges with nonhuman actants', thinking not about them but 'with them' (Roy 2018, 68).

These combinations of critical materialist and decolonial approaches to thinking through the Human/Nature divide have proven increasingly influential in work across the social sciences and humanities concerned with the challenges of the Anthropocene, seeking to learn from non-Western forms of thought and experience to move beyond culture/nature binaries. This is often done in aid of 'decolonising' the Anthropocene (Jackson 2020), by telling new stories about humanity, by 'rethinking concepts of the human and the material within an explicitly anticolonial and antiracist framework' (Simpson 2020, 68). This is linked to pluriversal perspectives that argue for multiple ontologies coexisting in the world that allow for different ways to entangle the natural and the cultural. Thus, arguments for 'becoming with' non-human others, indeed for becoming as them, engaging, learning and encountering the world from a place beyond a sovereign humanity, become a theoretical basis for a decolonial Anthropocene politics (Hoelle and Kawa 2021). This shared project of moving beyond the Human/Nature divide seeks an affirmative state of relation, of entanglement, an expansive re-imagining of agency and the world that produces creative possibilities for new ethical becomings.

### **The problem of the posthuman**

The approaches outlined above can be understood as advocating for a move from the 'human' to the 'posthuman' in answer to the questions posed by the Anthropocene, which can be read across both more recent decolonial and new materialist approaches. The ethics of encounter, of openness to the other and to alterity, seeking a mutual ethical engagement in becoming with others, presents a clear alternative to modernist epistemological and ontological assumptions which are held to have brought us into the Anthropocene as an epoch of catastrophic climate change and anthropogenic global warming. However, the claims that 'posthuman' approaches achieve a break from discourses of control and domination have been contested by theorists critical of the claims of ethical encounter. It is important to note here that we are heuristically grouping new materialist, materialist feminist and posthumanist work together with decolonial perspectives as 'posthuman', due to their shared agenda of moving beyond the human towards more-than-human, relational, entangled conceptions of the world. We are not suggesting that these approaches all have the same approach to race, but that they are able to converse in a shared space, which is based on a similar set of ontological commitments and critiques of modernity. It is against this shared critical ontological



space that we develop the Black Horizon as a paraontological approach, which will be set out in the third section of this article.

Some recognition of the role of race, capitalism and the exploitation of both nature and people in the creation of the Anthropocene has been shown in work on the Capitalocene and Plantationocene (Moore 2017; Mitman et al 2019). These strands of thought have problematised the Anthropocene, and proposed alternatives that highlight the centrality of economic exploitation and, in the case of the Plantationocene, the entangled forms of racialisation and racial capitalism that have driven environmental destruction (Saldanha 2020). However, this literature, led by new materialist pioneers like Donna Haraway (2015), remains embedded in the relational, ontological forms of worlding of new materialist, materialist feminist and posthumanist work.<sup>2</sup> Thus, while these critiques took a further step towards undermining the foundations of modernity, they failed to recognise the ontological separation at its heart, between humanity/being and black(ened) non-being, remaining committed to developing a new conception of humanity, which can thrive in the world after modernity, collaborating innovatively with more-than-human agents who can become the adopted 'kin' of the posthuman subject (Davis et al 2019).

We argue that putting this new posthuman version of 'Man' at the centre of the world is problematic - when read from Black studies and Black feminist perspectives - as the attempt to appease decolonial concerns, prevalent in more recent posthumanist work, fails to adequately confront the colonial basis of modernity. As we learn from Sylvia Wynter, the contemporary framing of modernist Man or the Human is not the only way of articulating colonial powers of hierarchy and exclusion. Wynter (2007, 2003) analyses how racialising, Western or Eurocentric understandings of Man have changed over the history of colonial exploration and domination from the fifteenth Century to the contemporary period. In particular, she highlights the importance of what she calls 'Man 1', the secular Renaissance imaginary of Man as a rational and autonomous political subject, and 'Man 2', the *biohumanist homo oeconomicus* (Wynter 2007, 9) of capitalist competition and accumulation, essential to the constant reworking (and planetary extension) of the global colour line (Wynter 2007, 10; Du Bois 1903).

The problems of posthumanism are further illuminated by Afropessimist Frank Wilderson's (2010) critique of post-Marxist imaginaries of self-ordering immanence, which share much with the posthumanist affirmation of multi-species becoming. Whilst these imaginaries operate only at the modernist level of the social, they offer a similar goal of affirmative, entangled subjectivity, challenging the status quo of sovereignty, the state and the market. Wilderson argues that the relational, immanent, creative, capacities of Hardt and Negri's *Multitude* depends upon a binary clash of modes of subject being which is only possible on the basis of Black objecthood (Wilderson

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<sup>2</sup> The materialist feminist approach of theorists like Haraway has been critiqued for its lack of attention to deeper issues of race (see, for example, Didur 2022; Jegathesan 2021), and alternative Black studies approaches to the plantation have also made valuable contributions (see McKittrick 2013; Yusoff 2019). However, Haraway's approach remains one of the most influential, particularly in International Relations (see Harrington 2016; Pereira and Hernandez Gebara 2023; Cudworth and Hobden 2022).

2010, 247–284; Barchiesi 2019, 54). From a Black studies perspective, we can understand these crucial questions in terms of spaces of thought projected from the slave ship, which can be viewed as the vestibule of modernity and the Human. If the Human operates on the ‘deck’, that is in the world of civil society, of sovereignty, democracy, rights and social contracts, then we can see that this world is enabled by the existence of the ‘hold’, created through the violence of antiblackness, where the slave provides the crucial counterpoint that makes life on the deck possible. Thus, Wilderson reveals that the question of the ethical encounter of equality and co-constitution, which both post-Marxists and posthumanists advocate for, can only be examined on the ‘deck’, enabled by a disavowal of the fragility and violence of the ‘hold’ (Barchiesi 2019, 58).

Much of the prominent contemporary International Relations discussion of the Anthropocene is reluctant to see posthuman positions as problematic and reproductive of hierarchical and antiblack ontological and epistemological understandings, instead preferring to fold posthuman approaches into an inclusive, pluriversal world of diversity, one which fosters ‘new forms of democratic community in a relational pluriverse of human and non-human communities’ (Kurki 2022, 12–13). What is important here is that recent posthumanist work recognises and accepts decolonial critiques but is easily capable of absorbing them due to a shared relational ontology, which allows the posthuman to thrive *via* its interpellation within pluriversal approaches (Sundberg 2014). The cross-disciplinary demand for a posthuman subject evidences that the ‘posthuman’ could be productively read as ‘Man 3’ in an extension of Sylvia Wynter’s reading of epistemic shifts in hegemonic models of thought. For Kathryn Yusoff (2021, 670), ‘Man 3’ could be imagined as a Donald Trump-inspired modernist extractivist and technological nightmare, but we argue that the posthuman is a more apt global figure for thinking about governance and policymaking in the Anthropocene.

In our reading, ‘Man 3’ emerges as a (post)human figure, capable of assimilating the critiques of decolonial approaches, and thus shaking off the Human’s negative associations with modernity, rebranding the subject as a sensitive caregiver in a new pluriversal world of entanglement and relationality. For ‘Man 3’, fundamental change in the world can be sidestepped, through opening up to the new productive possibilities of interactions with more-than-human agency and creative adaptation in a world of becoming. Crucially, though, the antiblack foundations of the world that ‘Man 1’ and ‘Man 2’ inhabited remain as unmarked background support for ‘Man 3’ (see also Colebrook 2014). This danger becomes clearer when framed in more concrete terms, particularly in IR debates that work through the lens of international governance, where the task becomes a remaking of Man as a mechanism for combating climate catastrophe. In an influential contribution, Jairus Grove (2017, 216) argues that new planetary forms of government need to be ‘unequal’ in counteracting the hegemony of overrepresented Eurocentric thinking and instead promoting the plural lifeworlds of different and differentiating human and nonhuman beings. Here the global governance of the late twentieth century is transformed into that of Earth Systems: the sensing, entangled planetary governance of the future (see also Bratton 2021).

However, as Wrangel and Causevic (2021) eloquently explain, ‘discourses of global governance have absorbed posthumanist critique in its attempt to naturalise postcolonial power relations’, articulating a problematic binary choice of either a crude modernist denial of climate change or the necessity of posthumanist constructions of salvation. Rather than risk the elevation of ‘Man 3’, a posthuman, into an upgrade of the capacities of previous versions of the Human, we argue that the contemporary decolonial discussions, influenced by thinkers like Wynter, are an important, but still only preliminary step in the development of an alternative approach to the Human/Nature divide. Instead, we suggest an approach drawing on Black studies, that centres the problem of antiblackness as a constitutive foundation for modernity and can shift critical focus to the importance of the ontology of ‘world’ or of ‘being’, rather than merely the construction of the Human within this ‘world’. As Patrice Douglass (2016, para 5.31) reminds us, ‘blackness as a paradigmatic structure is neither product nor other of Man, but a position of non-being’, suggesting that it is not enough to merely displace Man without accounting for the role of Blackness in constituting the world that he inhabits.

Once the role of (anti)Blackness is centred, posthuman approaches can be seen as a reconstruction and extension ‘to a planetary level’ of the global colour line. Thus, the posthuman focus on becoming with, in an ethical encounter, leaves the foundational antiblackness of the world intact. By simply aiming to supersede the humanity of ‘Man 1’ and ‘Man 2’ – of the individualised sovereign subject, of modern politics – the posthuman ethics of becoming leave the antiblack foundations of the human intact. This problem, we believe, becomes clearer in thinking with Franco Barchiesi (2019), in his essay on social death and the staging of the encounter. Crucially, he articulates an alternative approach to the ethics of encounter, and of becoming with the other, so central to posthuman approaches. Instead, in the experience of the Black(ened) non-subject, the encounter or the relation is not empowering but the opposite, based on the denial of capacities rather than their extension (Barchiesi 2019, 52–53). This is key, as Man, as the subject of modernity, emerges out of this encounter, drawing coherence and solidity when compared to the non-subject of Blackness (see also Warren 2018)

Patricia Northover (2012) reinforces this point, in her important critical engagement with Amartya Sen’s work on ‘agential freedom’, where she argues that approaches like Sen’s, which seek to extend subject agency to open up new possibilities, depend upon the disavowal of abject Blackness. This insight can be extended to posthumanist, relational, ontologies, which also work through expanding access to agency. These approaches are structured upon making transparent relational interactions, mutual affordances, dependencies and feedback effects, enabling more reflective, open-ended and transformative encounters with alterity. Thus, the attributes of ‘ontological resistance’, of being in the world, which were previously reserved for the Human, are extended to its many nonhuman others. However, for these ethical, positive capacities to be affirmed, there must necessarily be a disavowed underside from which these figures and their capacities are cut. Thus, Tiffany Lethabo King (2017, 166) argues: ‘Both the human and the posthuman are causes of suspicion within Black studies’.

This suspicion is grounded upon the fact that slavery and colonialism are so inextricably bound up with the modernist ontology of the world and the understanding of the human that any attempt to move beyond the human inevitably involves a larger set of ontological questions. King's work also highlights the disavowal implicit in Deleuze and Guattari's highly influential imaginaries of rhizomic and nomadic imaginaries of self-actualisation, which have been crucial in the development of new materialist and posthuman thought. This perspective, which advocates for open-ended relations of becoming, actually provides a mechanism so that Deleuze and Guattari's 'own and others' self-actualising, free-form whiteness can proceed unhindered. The rhizomatic West – *terra nullius* – is without a people, history, or a cosmology to navigate' (King 2017, 171). Thus, the posthumanist affirmative project remains grounded in the originary antiblackness of modernity, opening supposed virgin territory, boundless possibilities to explore, whilst conveniently forgetting how this world came into being.

Ultimately, we can see that the freedom of continuous, relational becoming, of creative relational improvisation, that posthumanism promises, remains a privileged resource, despite the illusion of radical inclusion. An Yountae (2017, 105) argues that the affirmative, creative and exploratory forms of life opened up by the Anthropocene are only open to privileged nomadic subjects, who are able to pick and choose identities and to travel and 'transgress' borders and boundaries. For King, as for other critical Black feminist authors, posthumanism is merely a 'ruse of subjectlessness' (King 2017, 178) attempting to resurrect the human (non- or relational) subject, free from the baggage of coloniality. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson argues that the call to move beyond Man to the posthuman could be interpreted as 'an attempt to move *beyond* race, and in particular blackness' (Jackson 2015, 216). As these authors highlight, both new materialist and (by implication) similarly constructed decolonial approaches are vitiated by their dependence upon affirmative framings of encounter. These limitations are most clearly expressed in posthuman approaches, which allow for the development of posthuman or more-than-human governance, allowing the power structures of modernity to reconstitute themselves without accounting for the colonial dynamics of the Anthropocene. As Jackson (2015, 217) states: 'a call for movement in the direction of the 'beyond,' issued in a manner that suggests that this call is without location, and therefore with the appearance of incognizance regarding its situated claims and internal limits, returns us to a Eurocentric transcendentalism'.

### Critique and the Black Horizon

In order to avoid the potential pitfalls of the shared approach to the Human/Nature divide, that unites new materialist, posthuman, materialist feminists and decolonial theorists, we suggest a different framing is required, one that focuses on destabilising and unsettling modernist framings and their foundations. In this approach, rather than seeking to redistribute (Human) capacities across the Human/Nature divide, we draw on work in Black studies and Black feminism that highlights the problem of antiblackness as the

starting point for rethinking the problem of the Human/Nature divide. This approach, which we call the Black Horizon, does not rely on appeals to ontology, as both modernist and relational accounts do, but instead seeks a par-ontological problematisation of the modern world, as this section will explain. Any account of life in the Anthropocene that seeks to unite the Human and the nonhuman in new forms of collective agential-being without addressing the foundation split between humanity and the Black(ened) subject which is outside of Being, fails to fully grasp a key ontological question at the heart of contemporary debates. As noted in the previous section, there is still a Human/Nature split in the posthuman and decolonial view that the understanding of the Human should be extended through (re)distributing human attributes.

Rather than seeing the world of humanity, sociality, politics, and philosophy as opposed to the natural world of plants, animals, geology and the planetary, we can see that the world of the human is counterposed to the space of nonbeing that is occupied by the Black(ened) subject. Thus, a split necessarily remains in posthuman framings because the attributes of the 'human', now distributed more broadly, beyond the biological human and even beyond organic life itself, still depend upon the production of an anti-black world, and a constitutive outside provided by Blackness. To flesh out the potential for another approach to the Human/Nature divide, we think it is vital to turn to critical Black studies work and build on its insights. Wilderson (2016, 4–5) notes:

There's a way in which Black Studies is the unacknowledged center of the Humanities and the Social Sciences. Because Black Studies is the place where one must, whether one wants to or not, confront and interrogate the un- and/or under-interrogated assumptions on which the Humanities rest: that all sentient beings are subjects; that empathy can be extended to all sentient beings; that all sentient beings are precarious in the same way, structurally (as, for example, exploited and alienated subjects of capital, sexism, homophobia and/or settler domination).

In the alternative approach, forwarded here, we argue that the Human/Nature divide, despite its shifting definitions, is at heart, as Denise Ferreira da Silva (2007) notes, that between self-determining subjects and other-determined objects. This divide is at the heart of modernist or Enlightenment thought's construction of the Human and emerges alongside the global colour line. Foucault already engaged this as a problematic, in his reading of Kant's 'What is Enlightenment?' as articulating a divide between those who could act on the world to emancipate/liberate themselves and those who were acted upon by the world and required civilisation/liberation by others (Foucault 1984). In this framing, a relational rather than rationalist ontology enables the (post)human to galvanise the powers of rescue and salvage alleged to exist outside or exterior to the enclosed 'world' of being, of the modernist ontology. Access to the outside or alterity, or more correctly the ability to move towards, to feel towards or to approach this outside, is therefore central to both new materialist and decolonial framings. Alterity is always empowering and enabling, opening up other ways of knowing and relating to our Earth- or planetary 'kin' (Haraway 2016) or 'other worlds' that require the

care and attention denied them by modes of Western life that allow their destruction.

Here, it is important to understand how the foundational concept of this debate, the Human, came into being. As demonstrated by numerous Black studies works, the Human, his capacities, abilities, rights, attributes, the nature of his being, were developed and understood through comparison with and distinction from Blackness (Wilderson 2010; Chandler 2014). Blackness can be seen as a position of non-being, which must be held open in order to ground the being of humanity, as an ontological marker that provides the boundary between the human and its Outside. This means that however far we expand the boundaries of humanity, it still requires a border, and the Black position of non-being must remain as a constitutive foundation for the newly diverse set of posthuman humans. The extension of the line of beings with 'human' attributes from the biological human to the nonhuman – the recasting of the human in more inclusive terms, engaging and including other modes of being – merely affirms the world of antiblackness. As Daniel Colucciello Barber (2016, 3) highlights, affirmative forms of being require the maintenance of the 'habitus of modernity', which rests on an articulation of blackness as other.

Barber (2016, 4) therefore argues for 'negativity toward both being and the affirmation of the possibility of being-otherwise' in order to maintain the position of critique. The logic of Barber's argument, that only human subjects have the capacity to inherit, takes us directly to the problematic of Wilderson's (2010) 'ruse of analogy', that is the mistake of locating Blackness in the world of the human, rather than understanding that it exists in a position of non-being that acts as a foundation for that world. It is clear that the relationality of posthumanism, new materialism and much decolonial work remains problematic as a critique of the Human/Nature divide in the Anthropocene. Understanding the posthuman as the inheritor of entangled relational responsibilities (Barad) or with the capacities and capabilities to have ethical encounters of mutual constitutionality (Roy) posits an affirmative ontology of relation which necessarily reinforces the antiblack world. This means that the ontological commitment to relationality, which gives rise to an ethics of affirmation based on the disavowal of antiblackness, is an unstable foundation to ground a critical approach.

Drawing from critical Black studies, we argue that another engagement with the Human/Nature divide is possible from a non-relational perspective. This perspective we call, following Nahum Dimitri Chandler (2013), the Black Horizon. Chandler (2014) focuses on a project of 'desedimentation', seeking to destabilise the grounding notions of being that are so central to the categories of Western philosophical thought. This is an engagement with modernist thought from the perspective of the Black(ened) subject. The Black Horizon draws upon this tendency, a particular stream of critical Black thought which deconstructs the foundations of modernity, rather than seeking the affirmative possibilities of a 'posthuman' world. As Moten (2013, 749; 2018, 204) writes, relationality already presumes 'an expression of power, structured by the givenness of a transcendental subjectivity that the black cannot have but by which the black can be had'. Therefore, for Moten (2017, 67), Black studies could 'be understood as a critique of enlightenment and even as a critique of judgment from the position of what [might be called] an eternally alien immanence or



more precisely, from a radical materiality whose animation ... has been overlooked by masterful looking'. Thus, the experience of being in the world is different, not one of affirmation but of negation: not of the world as available to expand your experience and sense of self, but the opposite, that of 'being opened by the world' (see also Negarestani 2008, 197). For Glissant (1977, 154), this distinction between affirmation and alienation is described in the contraposition of an empowered subject's appropriative relation to the world *via* the 'thought of the Other' and non-relational immanence, the 'other of Thought'. Our point is that the shared relational approach to the Nature/Culture divide necessarily traps critical approaches into making ontological choices; whereas the Black Horizon suggests instead the problematisation of ontology, from another logic, the 'logic of the other' (Bey 2020, 5, italics in original).

This mode of alienated being is what Cervenak and Carter (2017, 47) refer to as 'paraontological life'. This is the mode of being that constitutes Blackness, one which resists the strictures of ontology. Paraontological life is both the fungible material through or from which the modern subject and modern ontology is constituted or carved out but also the potential site for the undoing of these ontological cuts and imaginaries (see Chandler, 2013, 2014). The work of grounding of an alternative approach on this life, confronted by unknowability and forced to improvise and to invent on the move, is exemplified in R. A. Judy's recent magisterial study *Sentient Flesh* (Judy 2020). Whereas new materialist, relational, pluriversal and decolonial approaches often desire to inculcate capacities/affordances to respond to relational entanglements, the alternative approach differs in that it 'unsettles being' rather than affirming alternative ways of knowing and engaging. This alternative approach is deconstructive, whereas affirmative relational approaches are constructive. Whilst the world of antiblackness continues to exist, affirmation can only reinforce that antiblackness, as compared to the work of problematisation, of desedimentation, of paraontological life, which destabilises the foundations of that world.

In fine, we seek to forward the argument that the hidden assumptions of relational approaches to the Human/Nature divide can be challenged and brought into view *via* an alternative approach that seeks to avoid the trap of thinking in relation, thereby refusing an ontology of being. As Marquis Bey argues:

...a notion of a paraontology... functions as a critical concept that breaks up and desediments. By way of this, it permits the rewriting of narratives and the very conditions of understanding the present as such. Importantly, the goal is not to create a different, alternative ontology. Paraontology is not a search for new categories, as if categorisation is a neutral process. It is not; categorisation is a mechanism of ontology, an apparatus of circumscription. What the paraontological suggests is a dissolution. (Bey 2020, 17)

Carter (2019) understands this as a form of the 'black sacred', which he counterposes to the more traditional conception of sacredness. For Carter (2019, 73), the sacred, as a 'sphere of pure divinity depends on the accursed, an excremental element, to constitute and secure itself, within the terms of a restricted economy of sacrificial exchange, as pure'. He thus sees Blackness as an abyssal force, an excess of humanity which is both required and

destabilising, a force that unsettles from a (non)ontological position. Crucially, this conception of Blackness is not one that can be drawn into a pluriversal ontological schema, one which can be given political rights, a diverse Other to become with in relation. A pluriversal decolonial politics is still a form of politics, albeit one that imagines a civil society open to animals, plants and other species of nonhuman. A paraontological approach to the Human/Nature divide puts into question and unsettles the concepts of politics which this posthuman civil society would rest on, it is excessive, ambiguous and impure. As Carter (2019, 74) argues, Black social life 'is ever poised to incite volatility within regimes of politicality'.

For a different approach to the Human/Nature divide, the refusal of a relational ontology of the subject makes a stand not only against attempts at salvation of the antiblack world but on the contrary aspires to the ontological deconstruction of the world given meaning by the 'global colour line' (Du Bois 1903; Chandler 2013) – a line understood as undergirding the ontology of being itself, in both its rational and relational modes of construction. The quest for new genres of Human still accepts a need for some form of Human and thereby always leaves the door open for new forms of hierarchy and subordination, for governance to re-emerge, for a posthuman security to seek new ways to regulate and control the multiple beings of the Anthropocene, guaranteed by the remaining foundations of antiblackness.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the insistence that we move beyond the figure of the Human, it still looms large over the Anthropocene debate in International Relations. We have shown that the new approaches to society and planetary politics which have developed out of this debate have begun to converge on a set of approaches that promise to critique, decolonise and to move beyond the Human/Nature divide, working from a variety of perspectives. This broad, shared set of approaches draws in new materialists, posthumanists and materialist feminists, together with pluriversal anthropologists and other decolonial thinkers. Together they depict a world of relational entanglements, where human and non-human beings become with each other, make kin, and embrace the pluriversal possibilities of affirmative living and worlding. These assemblages of beings work across former modernist barriers between nature and culture to open up the possibilities of new creative, processual forms of life. Posthuman and decolonial scholars have converged on a position that advocates for the democratisation of agency, the diffusion of human capabilities, and a rejection of hierarchical conceptions of being. Whilst decolonial scholars have critiqued new materialists, posthumanists and materialist feminists for their lack of attention to Indigenous modes of thought, and the history of colonialism that undergirds modernity, there remains a shared space of engagement on questions of ontology, ethics and agency, allowing for visions of more-than-human futures in the Anthropocene.

We have argued that this affirmative approach misses a crucial point in its critique of modernity and the human. Instead, we drew on Black studies and Black feminist theorists to outline a 'Black Horizon' approach, which is based on a different paraontological problematisation of modernity, distinct from

both new materialist and decolonial frameworks. This perspective demonstrates that the Human/Nature boundary may be broken, but the division between being and nonbeing, which severs the Black(ened) subject from the Human remains in place. Thus, relational, creative and affirmative visions of life in the Anthropocene continue to rest on this antiblack foundation. The Black Horizon approach identifies the paraontological nature of Blackness, the state of nonbeing that both creates the space for the Human and provides the possibility of eroding that space, of desedimenting the foundations of modernity. As we have argued, both decolonial and new materialist approaches do not go far enough in examining and critiquing the foundations of the world of modernity that has enabled the climate catastrophe of the Anthropocene. While it is easy to sympathise with the desire to move beyond a world of Humanity and to imagine an affirmative, decolonial future, we have argued that the downside is the underestimation of the ways in which the foundations of coloniality remain to undergird these imaginaries of salvation and escape.

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