**Gaia Politics, Critique and the “Planetary Imaginary”**

 **Abstract:** In this article, I examine Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers’s recent writings on Gaia, the mythological goddess repurposed in the 1970s by James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis as geobiological trope. I assess their claims that Gaia facilitates non-modern thinking (Latour) or short-circuits the anthropocentrism of Anthropocene vocabularies (Stengers), and represents an alternative to critique, which, they argue, confines us to the problematic legacies of modernity. Situating their work alongside contemporary “postcritical” thinkers, I challenge their accounts of critique, arguing that a future-oriented model of critique is compatible with their aims and can be used to inform a more reflective understanding of Gaia.

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In 2017, Bruce Clarke proposed that Gaia, the mythological goddess repurposed in the 1970s by James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis as geobiological trope, and later adapted for twenty-first century environmental discourse by Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers, is a vital resource in the cultivation of a “planetary imaginary” which attends to “our systemic entanglements” (Clarke 23). Contemporary forms of Gaia discourse, Clarke argues, are “fit for communicative efficacy in the so-called Anthropocene epoch” (3). In an era marked by scalar and communicative disjunctions, Clarke’s claim is significant. Whilst ultimately he deviates from Stengers and Latour, arguing that neither addresses “the cybernetics of Gaia (7) and attesting to the model’s overlooked compatibility with systems theory (a counter to Latour’s contention that Gaia is “the antisystem” (*Facing Gaia* 87)), he does so on the understanding that the figure is a fruitful one, “a mirror to humanity in its hour of need” (Clarke 5). This article aims to assess this claim.

Concerns about the gendering of Gaia motivated an earlier article in which I argued that, rather than provoking a radical shift from the concept of nature and articulating a new ‘planetary imaginary,’ Latour’s adoption of Lovelock’s figure of Gaia – part Mother Earth, part vengeful harridan – was clearly problematic and reflected a tendency in Anthropocene discourse towards reactionary apocalypticism. I re-purposed Catherine Malabou’s challenge to anti-essentialist feminism, which questions the conceptualisation of power without place, to contest Latour’s framing of Gaia as a herald of non-sovereign agency and a meaningful political intervention. This article is a companion piece to the earlier one, and uses the figure of Gaia to ask broader, methodological questions about the “postcritical” turn in the humanities and current notions of critique.

Following the publication of *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime* (2017), and *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* (2018), this article resumes my earlier engagement with Latour. In it, I identify a tentative break with Lovelock in Latour’s latest work, examining the ways in which his increasing tendency to pluralise the figure of Gaia, and his explicit wrangling with its conceptual insufficiency, highlight the conceptual challenges raised by the Anthropocene. I then turn to the work of Isabelle Stengers, whose trope of Gaia the “intruder” (“Gaia” 5) has been described as “a figure for the post-Anthropocene” which grounds a “feminist politics of the earth” (Tola 17). Uncompromising in her proclamation that critique “seems henceforth to have something redundant about it” (*Catastrophic* 111), Stengers proposes a methodology for environmental thinking after, as Latour famously suggested, critique has “run out of steam” (“Steam” 2004). In the final section of the article, I challenge these claims, ultimately insisting on the ongoing value of a critique which is irreducible to criticism in our developing quest for a “planetary imaginary” fit for the contemporary era.

**Gaia the “hot potato”: Lovelock, Latour and the possibility of non-modern thinking**

For Lovelock writing in the 1980s, Gaia was an apt metaphor for “the living planet” Earth (*Ages* 19) which countered the mechanised thinking that had both characterised geological science and, implicitly, qualified anthropogenic environmental destruction. “Was it necessary to use language that apparently personified the earth?” (8) asked Mary Midgley decades later in 2007. Yes, she concluded; Gaia’s invocation of earthly agency was both scientifically justified and strategically necessary. As I noted in the earlier article, Lovelock’s depiction of Gaia was always gendered female, tapping into stereotypical fears about womanhood: Gaia is beautiful, yet emotional and inconsistent. Finally, in *The Revenge of Gaia*, now “an old lady” (*Revenge* 60), Gaia turns against us. As a figurative, hybrid alternative to the destructive modern binary between nature and culture, Gaia was a perfect fit for Latour’s image of our “postnatural” world (“Waiting for Gaia” 9). However, in his description of Gaia in “Waiting for Gaia,” a lecture delivered in 2011, Latour’s imagery echoed that of Lovelock: whilst Gaia is forcefully resistant, ultimately she is perceived, constrained and judged by her failure to adhere to feminine stereotypes. Accordingly, Gaia is “too fragile to play the calming role of old nature, too unconcerned by our destiny to be a Mother, too unable to be propitiated by deals and sacrifices to be a Goddess” (“Waiting for Gaia” 9). As I argued then, “there is a tension between the potential of the Gaia *model* to provide an Anthropocene science and politics and the reversion of the Gaia *metaphor* (and myth) into masculinist fantasy” (XXXX 293). However, whereas in “Waiting for Gaia,” Latour offered a relatively systematic definition of Gaia – she is local, sensitive, scientific, non-sovereign, explicitly feminised – the later text *Facing Gaia* multiplies definitions, cautioning against both the reduction of Gaia to a single, systematic organism, and the perception of Gaia as something stable, a ground, like “Nature” or “Earth,” upon which we can erect an ecology. In my discussion of *Facing Gaia*, I shall argue that Latour’s wrangling with a Gaian vocabulary in this later text exposes the problem of articulating an Anthropocene future which is not recuperated by existing political discourses.

In his articulation of Gaia, Latour faces two parallel challenges: first, to emphasise Gaia’s position as “an *actor*, at least an *agent*, let’s say an *agency*” (“Totality” 62), without reinforcing the subject/object binary; and secondly, to present Gaia compellingly without anthropomorphising her. The assertion which distinguishes Latour’s work, that the nature/culture distinction is “a *secondary stylistic effect*” (“Waiting for Gaia” 68), is reiterated here. Not only is Latour’s insistence on the necessity of new terminology, in general, dependent on the force of this claim, the potency of a Gaian vocabulary, in particular, is rooted in its pre-modern heritage. “Gaia,” Latour asserts, is “a force from the time before the gods” (“Waiting for Gaia” 81). Latour has perhaps set himself an impossible challenge: the affective potential of Gaia is undergirded by her relatable characterisation, and yet to be an effective heuristic, she must shift the entire grounds of earthly thinking about agency and must “*appear* as a threat” (*Facing Gaia* 244). As such, like Lovelock, Latour’s account of Gaia shuttles between perceiving Gaia as an individual being with a “face” (“Waiting for Gaia” 107) and as an event or condition, “the secular aggregation of all the agents that can be recognized thanks to the tracing of feedback loops” (*Facing Gaia* 283). When Gaia risks becoming too familiar or domestic, Latour warns that, both literally and conceptually, she is “a hot potato that might burn your mouth if eaten too eagerly” (“Totality” 63).

In Lovelock, Latour finds a daring attempt to articulate a genuinely novel idea. It is this which he endeavours to replicate, believing a significant conceptual shift essential for responding to environmental crisis. Inevitably, Lovelock sometimes lapses into inconsistency. Nonetheless, Latour is unfailingly generous towards him, not least to distinguish himself from readers for whom Lovelock’s innovation is literally invisible. See, for example, Latour’s critique of Toby Tyrrell, author of *On Gaia*, an attempt to debunk the Gaia hypothesis. For Latour, Tyrrell’s critique is grounded in imaginative failure: he cannot even *think* the significance of Lovelock’s work because he is trapped in a neo-liberal, neo-Darwinist paradigm. Whilst Latour’s debt to Lovelock persists in *Facing Gaia*, in this text he is more judicious about which elements of Lovelock’s Gaia he adopts, attempting to shear away what is inessential to, or detracts from, Lovelock’s innovation. He is increasingly reluctant to identify Gaia as a goddess, appealing to an even deeper history than that of Hesiod’s *Theogony*, through which Gaia is “always antecedent” (“Waiting for Gaia” 83). Entirely side-stepping the issue of gender, however, Latour’s logic in moving away from goddess imagery is determined by the desire to resist the restriction of agency to human life.

In his defence of Lovelock contra Tyrrell, Latour stresses Lovelock’s visible struggle to articulate Gaia. We witness a similar struggle in Latour; how can we find appropriate terms to express Gaia’s resistance without divinising, humanising or domesticating her? How can we think agency without de-animating certain parties and over-animating others? How can we understand “*connectivity without holism*” (“Totality” 75) without presupposing a totality? If Gaia, for Latour, speaks to or for these questions, it is because she both articulates a pre-modern conceptual framework which precedes the distinctions and hierarchies which became sedimented in modernity, and a non-modern future unavoidably “coming toward us” (*Facing Gaia* 243). We inhabit, he writes, a geohistorical moment “between two goddesses” (*Facing Gaia* 243). For this reason – the possibility of a non-modern future – Latour displays a hesitant optimism about an alternative Anthropocene discourse. As a period of “utter confusion between objects and subjects” (“Agency” 8) in which the primacy of human history over geo-history is challenged, the Anthropocene offers, Latour contends, the possibility that humans will adopt “a more realistic image” (*Facing Gaia* 110) of themselves, and acknowledge that “all agents share the same shape-changing destiny” (“Agency” 15). It is appropriate, then, that Latour’s descriptions of Gaia will sometimes appear confusing or incoherent when filtered through modern conceptual frameworks. “So who is Gaia, the Gaia of mythology?” he asks, noting that her performances are “multiple, contradictory, hopelessly confused” and that she is “not a figure of harmony” (“Totality” 82), but a “muddle” (“Waiting for Gaia” 100).

Whilst it is clear to Latour, as to many other contemporary environmental thinkers, that “we can no longer tell ourselves the same old stories” (“Waiting for Gaia” 44) if we intend to construct a different future, effective new stories are yet to be written. Latour’s strategy is one of multiplication; in *Down to Earth*, for example, whilst acknowledging that that language of Gaia is “appropriate” (*Down to Earth* 40) but requires lengthy explanation, he supplements it with something more direct, the notion of “the Terrestrial” (*Down to Earth*, 40). Like Gaia, which aims to disrupt the binary between nature and culture that denies that humans are *of* the world, the Terrestrial reflects an environment in which the opposition between global and local is unsustainable. Resisting “the illusion of the Global as the horizon of modernity” (*Down to Earth* 71), the Terrestrial rejects the prioritisation of objectivity and distancing espoused by scientific modernity. Instead, it proposes the re-animation of the earth and renewed focus on the proximity and relations between the Terrestrial and terrestrials, “the Earthbound” (*Down to Earth* 86), thus disrupting the distinction between earth and world, as famously instantiated by Heidegger, which assumes that ‘worlding’ is unique to humans. “The Terrestrial,” Latour insists, “is bound to the earth and to land, but it is also a *way of worlding*, in that it aligns with no borders, transcends all identities” (*Down to Earth* 54). Such a mode of thinking also re-appropriates the notion of futurity so that it is no longer bound to the assumption that progress depends upon a rejection of traditional local knowledges. For Latour, Gaia and the Terrestrial are complementary approaches to the same task, that of articulating non-modern conceptual and practical responses to problems generated by and within modernity. The scale of this task is illuminated when we place the two vocabularies in conversation. If Gaia names “the occasion for a return to Earth” (*Facing Gaia* 4), how might we articulate such a return outside the modern ideologies of the earth, of “Lebensraum” (*Down to Earth* 53), and “blood and soil” (*Down to Earth* 17), which marked the twentieth-century? How can we catch up sufficiently to understand that “the very notion of soil is changing” (*Down to Earth* 4)? How might we position ourselves post-theologically so we no longer believe that “the condition of being in the world” is one for which we might seek a “cure” (*Facing Gaia* 13)?

Latour’s engagement with Gaia in *Facing Gaia* is much richer than in his earlier work, as here he grapples explicitly with the challenge of articulating a new vision through an old vocabulary. It is at this point where Latour diverges from Lovelock: Lovelock willingly succumbs to modern hierarchies and vocabularies. When he calls Gaia a goddess, he accepts and embraces the political and historical baggage that accompanies her. Latour is less comfortable: “But if it isn’t a goddess, why call it Gaia?” (*Facing Gaia* 95) he asks, urging us to return to the mythological Gaia of “a thousand names” (*Facing Gaia* 82) to correct our tendency to read her as maternal or nurturing. Latour’s boldest claim for Gaia is that she might function as “a political lever” (*Facing Gaia* 226), or as “an injunction to rematerialize our belonging in the world” (*Facing Gaia* 219). For Latour, Gaia defies modern thinking: we should not think of Gaia as derivative from nature, but the distinction between nature and culture as derivative from Gaia. The operative value of Gaia, however, depends on her ability to evoke an alternative, non-modern conceptual framework. Yet we read her through our own modern vocabulary. Accordingly, her mythological characteristics – monstrous, life-giving, holy, even castrating – are recuperated by the restrictive perceptions of the female advanced by modernity. At times, Latour explicitly underscores this: Gaia is hectoring, goading, cunning and manipulative. Returning to Hesiod, he reminds us that it was she who first devised the “horrible stratagem” (*Facing Gaia* 82) of castrating her partner and who “endlessly goads her immense progeniture of monsters and gods into assassinating one another” (*Facing Gaia* 83). In his prohibition against perceiving her maternally, his descriptions yield to other gendered stereotypes. He approvingly cites Margulis’s contention that Gaia is “a tough bitch!” (*Facing Gaia* 288). It is hard not to read these moments as lapses in which the fascination of unruly female power, so visible in Lovelock, resurfaces in Latour. His caveat about the inevitability of anthropomorphism, that “the capacity of humans to rearrange everything around themselves is a *general property of living things*” (*Facing Gaia* 99), is insufficient. The specificity of human responsibility entails being accountable for the material effects of the conceptual structures we endorse. Gaia is all too easily re-assimilated by the modern; both disarmingly spectral and re-producing a materiality which has long been used to discredit the rationality of the female, Latour’s account of Gaia cannot evade these tropes.

**Gaia “the Intruder”: Stengers’s “ecology of practices” and the redundancy of critique**

Like Latour, Isabelle Stengers perceives Gaia as providing an alternative to an Anthropocene discourse which is easily accommodated by modern thinking. Gaia is an intruder, both literally, threatening human dominance of the earth, and conceptually, disrupting the theoretical frameworks which facilitate this dominance. Stengers is correct to identify that the Anthropocene has generated a resurgence of the “grand narrative” (*In Catastrophic Times* 9) in which the figure of Man or the *anthropos*, alert to the damage he has caused, “must therefore take responsibility for the future of the planet” (*In Catastrophic Times* 9). For Stengers, Anthropocene thinking reinforces the oppositions and methodologies of modernity, which she perceives as inescapably anthropocentric and Eurocentric. In her consideration of witchcraft via neo-pagan witch Starhawk, she repeatedly frames the witch hunt as the dark underside of Enlightenment models of emancipation, appealing to an “ecology of practices” (*Cosmopolitics I* 56) as a less suspicious and destructive alternative to the critical method.

In *Cosmopolitics I*, Stengers compares the ecology of practices to gardening. The latter, a mode of stewardship, is hierarchical, projecting a singular vision onto the environment. The gardener, Stengers observes, “has the power to judge and select” (*Cosmopolitics I* 56). Instead, the ecology of practices has no guiding force, teleology or pretensions to neutrality; it disregards the modern oppositions of knowledge/belief and progress/regress. Taking place “without grounding definitions or an ideal horizon” (“Introductory Notes” 187), it enables “reciprocal capture” (*Cosmopolitics I* 57) between participants. Elsewhere, Stengers frames the ecology of practices through Deleuze and Guattari’s account of “‘thinking *par le milieu*’” (“Introductory Notes” 187): it is always embedded, never estranged or distanced. For Stengers, Gaia instantiates the ecology of practices. Irreducible to modern categories, she exposes the inadequacy of modern attempts to assess or respond to the threat she proposes. As critic A.J. Nocek glosses:

Gaia is the one who lures us into confronting the fact that there are radically different ways of having a situation come to matter, and none of them can be subsumed under a common measure or set of ‘shared values.’ Put in other terms, Gaia is a fabrication that obliges us to approach each situation by asking… How can divergent series come together in our epoch so that we may formulate questions and answers without a transcendental measure that would be capable of validating or disqualifying them in advance? (Nocek 107)

Whilst I am sympathetic to Stengers’s identification of the problematic universalism of Anthropocene discourse, it is hard to see in Gaia a genuine intrusion rather than a new character which will be appropriated by the existing Anthropocene narrative. Stengers frames Gaia as offering an alternative history. Gaia, she writes in *In Catastrophic Times*, “makes the epic versions of human history, in which Man, standing up on his hind legs and learning to decipher the laws of nature, understands that he is the master of his own fate, free of any transcendence, look rather old” (*In Catastrophic Times* 47). Acknowledging Gaia’s existence and agency, she contends, where Gaia names “an unprecedented or forgotten form of transcendence” (*In Catastrophic Times* 47), denaturalises the Anthropocene narrative, exposing it as the disavowed re-instatement of anthropocentric, narcissistic Enlightenment logics. Naming Gaia, Stengers argues, endows her with the power to “induce thinking and feeling in a particular way” (“Gaia” 1) and thus to destabilise the assumptions which shore up modern structures and categories. Whilst it is certainly true that the Anthropocene complicates the question of human agency, Stengers’s Gaia often feels like another participant, clearly identified by Stengers as a “‘being’” (*In Catastrophic Times* 44), on the “epic” stage of human history – a transcendent intruder – rather than the marker of a different, non-anthropocentric history.

Both Latour and Stengers have high stakes in the claim that Gaia cannot be “assimilated into our ideas of progress and knowledge” (Davis and Turpin 171), that the kinds of agency, relationality and force she represents cannot be acknowledged by modernity. This is over-optimistic; as we have seen with Latour, Gaia is relatively easily assimilated by these systems. Stengers locates the power of the figure of Gaia in its potential for provocation; as “the bastard child of scientists and paganism” (“Matters of Cosmopolitics” 177), it is an affront to the moderns and their active policing of the boundary between knowledge and belief. Stengers invites us to reconsider the practices dismissed or destroyed by the charge of superstition, resituating them within an ecology of practices which does not assess their value by pre-determined, external criteria, or presuppose the possibility of a neutral position from which to judge.

A key distinction between Stengers’s Gaia and that of Latour is Stengers’s contention that Gaia might serve as a feminist alternative to masculinist Anthropocene narratives. In recent texts, Stengers has spoken more explicitly than ever about her debt to ecofeminism and the ways in which Gaia counters the “troubling abstraction” (*In Catastrophic Times* 10) of Man. A key dimension of Stengers’s work is its suspension of abstraction in favour of affective engagement. The current environmental crisis, the argument runs, demonstrates how abstracted distancing – the anthropocentrism of the Enlightenment – contributes to material catastrophe. Here the “interruption” of Gaia, explicitly informed by the Reclaiming Witchcraft movement, is framed in terms of a disruption of patriarchal logics. Gaia, Stengers contends, marks “a major unknown […] at the heart of our lives” (*In Catastrophic Times* 47), a denial that the human is granted “the first and last word” (*In Catastrophic Times* 50). For critic Miriam Tola, Stengers’s Gaia provides the resources for a “feminist politics of the earth” (17).

Tola’s claim is rooted in the contention that Gaia brings together several disparate feminist currents, challenging the ongoing anthropocentrism of Anthropocene discourse. Like Latour, who insisted that what makes Gaia “*politically* interesting” (“Waiting for Gaia” 10) is her lack of sovereignty, Stengers questions the perception of politics as the gathering of sovereign individuals, instead proposing “a feminist politics of composition with/in the earth” (Tola 8) where Gaia is understood as “an undifferentiated and unmaternal force” (Tola 9). I have written elsewhere about the problems of identifying a politics of non-sovereignty with a female Gaia (XXXX 298-302), employing Catherine Malabou’s claim that the troping of “woman” results in “a feminism without women” (Malabou 6) and a non-sovereignty without operative power. The problem Malabou identifies is clearly visible in the accounts of Gaia that we have read. The non-sovereignty of the female (which cannot be read aside from perceptions of the maternal body, whatever Latour claims), is transformed, in Tola’s words, to “an ensemble of concatenated differences characterized by tendencies toward perturbation” (12), which, I contend, ultimately nourishes the forces denying female agency.

There is perhaps scope for more affinity between Malabou, who opposes a minimal strategic concept of womanhood (which does not undermine fluidity) to unchecked anti-essentialism, and Stengers, who questions the over-hasty dismissal of ecofeminism as unsophisticated essentialism by invoking an ecology of practices. For Stengers, the danger here is a re-assertion of the modern distinction between knowledge and belief which facilitates the policing of how “proper feminist knowledge should be produced” (Tola 12). Yet unlike Malabou, Stengers’s “ecofeminist sensibility” (Tola 12) declares itself incompatible with any kind of theorization on the grounds that theory is inherently modern and undermines alternative forms of activism. She is thus only interested in ecofeminism “before its theorization” (“Matters of Cosmopolitics” 178), therefore rejecting the inevitable diversity of a movement which was, as Catriona Sandilands astutely observes, “born of a shared political desire, not a shared epistemological or ontological position” (29). Rather, Stengers insists:

There was no worse enemy for the eco-feminist reclaiming adventure of the eighties than the feminist academics hunting down the dubious spirituality of this movement, disserting about the need to subtract from it any shade of essentialism, and in particular to subtract the so compromising insufferable Goddess – the Goddess, who may well, notwithstanding, be one of the thousand names for matter-of-fact Gaia. (“Gaia” 7)

Academic feminism, Stengers contends, was guilty of its own witch hunt in following, she caricatures, the “academic first duty to debunk belief” (“Gaia” 7). Her intervention polarises the debate between unquestioning, essentialist ecofeminism and with it, the capacity for new, nonmodern stories, on the one hand, and the dead-end of theoretical critique on the other. Sustained engagement with the plurality of ecofeminism exposes the limitations of this opposition: the work of Sandilands herself, for example, whilst asserting that the gendered nature-culture dichotomy is given in patriarchal relations, rather than in “nature” itself, proposes that a strategic endorsement of the woman-nature association short-circuits attempts to take the association at face value. There is, perhaps, potential for an interesting connection between this approach and Stengers’s, in her own words, “pragmatic” (“Gaia” 1) endorsement of Gaia, but her wholesale rejection of theoretical forms of ecofeminism renders this impossible.

Echoing Latour in dismissing critique as “redundant” (*In Catastrophic Times* 111), Stengers attacks the “piety of modern critique” (“Experimenting” 56), guilty, she suggests, of facilitating capitalist exploitation, or, in the case of “critical (de)constructionist theory,” of facilitating the “ultimate triumph of the witch hunters” (“Experimenting” 49). Stengers’s polemic here – particularly against deconstruction, a resolutely non-purist discourse – feels unnecessarily inflated, particularly in contrast with more nuanced treatment of the legacies of modernity in other texts and even in the same text. Following Whitehead, for example, she pragmatically notes that “[w]e cannot think without abstractions” so must “take care” (“Experimenting” 50) of them, and praises Whitehead not for denouncing modern categories, but by suggesting that we are not imprisoned by them (“Experimenting” 51”). It is this doubling, the refusal “to choose between the track of the critics and the pragmatic one” (Despret 67) as Vinciane Despret frames it, which renders Stengers’s work most interesting, and yet so frequently gets lost.

**Criticism, Critique, and the Postcritical**

The challenges posed to critique by Latour and Stengers can be fruitfully situated alongside similar anxieties expressed by correlate disciplines. “[D]ebates about the merits of critique are very much in the air” (1), noted Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski in 2017, speaking both from their home discipline, literary studies, and more broadly, in a context where critique has come to define the humanities in general (Michael 253). Such debates tend to constellate around connected anxieties about the politics of critique and what Anker and Felski term its “chronic negativity” (11). Concerns about the politics of critique issue from its historical association with the Enlightenment and the increasing scepticism towards Enlightenment claims of intellectual and political emancipation. For challengers to critique, Stengers included, a reassessment of modernity exposes its presupposition of clear distinctions between truth and appearance, and knowledge and ignorance – distinctions which ground Kant’s famous dictum “*sapere aude*!” – as anachronistic. As Jacques Rancière notes: “today there is allegedly no longer any solid reality to counter-pose to the reign of appearances” (25).[[1]](#endnote-1) Whilst such challengers must address their own problematic reliance on the critical method, any serious defence of critique must take seriously this destabilisation of Enlightenment thought. Similarly, exposure of the interconnectedness between Enlightenment pretensions to universal reason and the history of imperialism necessitates a considered response to Latour’s provocation that critique itself is “a careful, obstinate and deliberate empire-building” (“Enlightenment” 90).

Assessing the challenge to critique requires clarity about its target, a difficult task given its “various grammars” (“What is Critique?” 214). Latour, for example, employs the term in two distinct senses. In a 1988 piece on philosopher Michel Serres, “The Enlightenment Without the Critique,” Latour stresses Serres’s deviation from critical philosophy. He uses the model of textual criticism to illustrate Serres’s rejection of the mastery and reductive metalanguage which both thinkers perceive as central to critique, and praises Serres’s work for being “free from negation” (“Enlightenment” 91). Latour’s account of critique here is unmistakeably modern. “The ‘Critique’ philosopher,” he notes, “wants to bring religion to an end and make all disciplines, including philosophy, enter ‘on the sure path of a science.’ The political overtone of this reversal of power relations was to at last emancipate the people and the mind from the tyranny of the senses, of beliefs, of the things, of the world” (“Enlightenment” 91).

In a later, much-cited paper from 2004, “Why has Critique run out of Steam?,” Latour uses the same term to describe a different phenomenon, which we might refer to as genealogical, or, cautiously, ‘postmodern,’ a critical methodology which refuses the dogmatism of modern critique and no longer claims to facilitate emancipation in the same way.[[2]](#endnote-2) Here, Latour’s historically-specific objection is that critique has become counterproductive, a “euphoric drug” (“Steam” 239) which pits us against the “wrong enemies” (“Steam” 231). He identifies a similarly suspicious disposition in both zealous critics and climate change deniers, questioning the value of an alliance between critique and constructivism: “Isn’t this what criticism intended to say: that there is no sure ground anywhere? But what does it mean when this lack of sure ground is taken away from us by the worst possible fellows as an argument against the things we cherish?” (“Steam” 227).

Whereas modern critique professes to lead to truth, genealogical or postmodern critique, Latour contends, can only generate more critique with no emancipatory end, rendering us groundless in the face of our political opponents. This kind of critique, therefore, is not defined by its goal, but by its methodology – for Latour an incoherent mixture of antifetishism, realism and positivism (“Steam” 241) – and by the critic’s perception, inherited from modernity, of his own infallibility. Latour’s proposed solution is a shift in focus from “*matters of fact,*” which are always ripe for a reductive critical “*debunking*” (“Steam” 232), to “*matters of concern*” (“Steam” 231), for Latour irreducible to the oppositions between nature and culture, and the real and the ideal. In his endorsement of this orientation, he appeals to “*a stubbornly realist attitude*” (“Steam” 231) as a counter to the kind of textual idealism that he perceives as conceding valuable practical and political ground.

In different ways, Felski, Latour and Rancière diagnose, not the obsolescence of critique, but its monstrous continuation. For Rancière, the critical method persists, but unmoored from the promise of emancipation (secured by belief in the pursuit of truth), it is empty. “This disconnection between critical procedures and their purpose,” he writes, “strips them of any hope of effectiveness” (40). Not simply politically neutralised, critique is repurposed in service of the status quo. It is, he wryly suggests, “doing very well, in the inverted form that now structures the dominant discourse” (41). In contrast to modernity, where a distinction between critique and criticism was largely upheld (Brown 3), postmodernity tends to collapse the two, blurring the philosophical and the literary in which critique becomes a “shorthand for theory itself” (Anker and Felski 3) and we are ensnared by “compulsive criticality” (Felski 148). Felski, Latour and Stengers all presuppose the “chronic negativity” of critique and contend that this negativity renders it necessarily individualistic and antagonistic, incompatible with collaboration.

If, as its challengers seem to suggest, there are only two conceivable manifestations of critique – a modern “theoretical imperialism” (Noys 81) informed by the “strong drug of enlightenment against illusion” (Stengers, “Introductory Notes” 188), and an unremittingly negative postmodern mode which is fundamentally incoherent – then these concerns are justified. However, the assumption that mastery and judgment are essential to critique – presupposed by both models – is mistaken. Rather, as Foucault reminds us, critique, “the art of not being governed quite so much” (Foucault 45), should always be a response to, never a seizing of, power. That such a definition demands reflection in light of the intervening history – not least the ever-changing relationship between criticism and critique – is no reason to accept the reductive formulations above.[[3]](#endnote-3) There are other, more interesting and productive, ways of negotiating this complex legacy. These tend to regard the plurality of critique as an inevitable consequence of its parasitism – that “its objects will in turn define the very meaning of critique” (“Foucault’s Virtue” 214) – and thus resist a misguided search for critique’s essence.

One of the most persuasive accounts is offered by Judith Butler. In a lecture preceding the recent wave of “postcritical” thought which interrogated Foucault’s cryptic and counterintuitive assertion that “[t]here is something in critique which is akin to virtue” (“Foucault’s Virtue” 43), Butler systematically addressed the most prevalent misreadings of critique. She emphasised: the distinction between judgment and critique, traceable to Kant, where critique necessarily suspends and/or precedes judgment;[[4]](#endnote-4) the ongoing or unfinishable nature of critique, which therefore proscribes triumph or mastery; the impossibility of distinguishing, generalising or abstracting the practice of critique from its context; and the distinction between critique and reason which undergirds the complex relationship, one of intersection rather than coincidence, between critique and philosophy (“Foucault’s Virtue” 216). Butler’s description counters the most compelling challenge to critique: that, distant and detached, it is reducible to a “*diagnostic*” methodology (Ankers and Felski 4) which leads to a singularly adversarial relation with its object. It is this contention, transposed into a different field, which underpins Stengers’s association of critique with the witch hunt.

Informed by Foucault, who looks to perform the opposite move to Serres and rescue critique (an exploration of the limits of knowledge) from *Aufklärung* (propelled by the desire for knowledge), rather than vice versa,[[5]](#endnote-5) Butler undermines the link between diagnosis and critique – on the grounds that diagnosis is a species of judgment – and stresses the complexity of the relationship between critique and its context. Noting that critique is “inherently situated and partial” (Brown, Butler and Mahmood xix), she looks to modes of “affectively invested” (“Sensibility” 104) critique. A similar strategy is adopted by John Michael in his reframing of critique as a mode of translation, rather than interpretation, in order to encourage a focus on “the situational and context-bound importance of critique’s potential contribution” (Michael 273). Such approaches are surprisingly consonant with Felski’s method, which endeavours “to remain on the same place as my [her] object of study rather than casting around for a hidden puppeteer who is pulling the strings” (Felski 6), and even with Stengers’s version of thinking “*par le milieu.”* Unlike Stengers, Butler does not perceive affective and critical engagement as necessarily opposed.

In distinct but parallel ways, Felski and Latour both target a hybrid form of critique and criticism: for Latour, a criticism divorced from the aims of critique but retaining its structure has no purchase on the external world. Informed by disciplinary anxieties about the value of literary studies in an era of environmental crisis, Felski targets literary critics whose practice has become insular, “a form of addictive and gratifying play: a language game” (110). Her “postcritical reading” (173), explicitly informed by Latour, coincides with a broader turn in literary studies from text to matter. However, their conflation of criticism and critique is problematic. The two terms differ in their relation to judgment: criticism judges, employing the values of the current system; critique suspends judgment, envisioning an alternative to the value system on which it depends. Whilst, as Talal Asad observes, “in practice, forms of criticism and critique are so intertwined that their vocabularies can’t be neatly separated” (138), it is my contention that the irreducibility of critique to criticism assures its ongoing value for contemporary environmental thought. Its futural orientation ensures that critique is not foreclosed by criticism; rather, it inhabits “the tear in the fabric of our epistemological web” (“Foucault’s Virtue” 215), denaturalising and destabilising current structures in service of alternative possibilities. In so doing, it does not appeal to a predetermined horizon or normative model of truth, but rather, as Rodolphe Gasché outlines in his account of a non-dogmatic “hypercritique,” it “opens itself up to what, therefore, is by definition indeterminate, incalculable, and unforeseeable” (17).

**“Dare to Taste”: Gaia and critique**

In explicitly opposing critique, Latour and Stengers divert attention from interesting parallels between their projects and current accounts of critique. Latour’s appeal to a pre-modern past to circumvent the modern, and Stengers’s insistence on a suspension of judgment in order to understand the relevance of a silenced past, are methodologically compatible with a futurally-oriented critique which endeavours to destabilise the “prevailing ontological horizon” (“Foucault’s Virtue” 216). Stengers’s rejection of critique is informed by a strategic simplification. The reclaiming witches, she argues, “situate us at a crossroads – what will be our inheritance, that of the burned witches or that of the witch-hunters?” (“Postlude” 150). This fantasy of escape – that we can sidestep our complex inheritance rather than working through it – leads to a belief that it is possible “to detoxify our tradition” (“Relearning” 141) which counterproductively replicates the purificatory discourse of the witch hunt. Stengers’s account of Gaia is similarly escapist, even utopian, heralding the conclusion of an era of “triumphalist slogans […] that put the ends of humanity on stage” (*In Catastrophic Times* 152). In service of a non-modern model, both Stengers and Latour silently bracket the problematic historical resonances of Gaia, and its potential complicity with a framework, amplified by Anthropocene discourse, in which “nature is overpersonified and women are underpersonified” (Roach 51).

Recognising that the “‘practices’” she endorses may be “radically non-innocent,” Stengers argues that in order to safeguard their unknown potential, they should be protected from criticism which may dismiss them as “guilty, deserving destruction” (“Relearning” 144). Accordingly, she advocates an affirmationism which seeks to resist the modern dichotomies between knowledge and belief, and truth and falsity. In so doing, she reflects a dispositional shift in the humanities towards affirmation, now “a dominant and largely unremarked doxa” (Noys ix), and its accompaniment, “the downgrading of critique” (Noys 25).[[6]](#endnote-6) Whilst critique should not be conflated with negativity, its suspension of judgment is also distinct from Stengers’s affirmationism. In contrast to the definitive crossroads she describes, critique is ambiguous and unsettling: it “neither destroys the inheritance of thought nor affirms it unequivocally” (“Sensibility” 108). Stengers’s affirmationism impedes real engagement, which, I contend, is multi-faceted: material, theoretical and critical. Indeed, Stengers’s own emphasis on “the messiness of the world” (“Relearning” 145) and the persistence of the “problematic” (“Humor” 39) are compromised by her demand for a singular mode of affective attentiveness. “We must “become aware,” she argues, “not reflexively or theoretically but affectively” (“Thousand” 7).

For Clarke, Latour and Stengers, Gaia designates a corporeal interruption to our epistemological frameworks. Both evoking and demanding “the occasion for a return to Earth” (*Facing Gaia* 4) and a different conceptual order – a non-global or non-englobing language, Latour might say – the Gaia model holds promise. There is an unavowed doubling in Latour’s approach which exposes the challenge he faces: on the one hand, he tries to fully articulate Gaia as that which exceeds our current conceptual frameworks (inevitably failing); and on the other, he draws, consciously or not, on existing conceptions to express Gaia. It is here that she is divine or secular, maternal or unmaternal, enraged or placid. Stengers does not acknowledge this challenge; adopting an affirmationism which rebuffs critique, she condemns any examination of the political implications of the woman-nature association as witch hunting. In different ways, therefore, both Latour and Stengers overlook, or strategically disregard, the gendering of Gaia, and its vulnerability to appropriation by the fantasies of gender which uphold modern thinking. By assuming that critique is unsalvageable from modernity, they cannot even articulate, let alone counter, this vulnerability.

Latour and Stengers’s respective rejections of critique assume that its varied components – including suspension, investigation, reflection and imagination – are reducible to criticism or judgment, where the latter is “quick to apply the ready-made tools neoliberalism has made available to it” (Nocek 107). Such a reduction denies the futural orientation of critique, whose suspension of judgment denaturalises prevailing discourses in service of “a future or a truth that it will not know or happen to be” (Foucault 42). Its ambivalent parasitism – it “only exists in relation to something other than itself” (Foucault 42) – is incompatible with Stengers’s affirmationism, which advances speculative storifying unencumbered by reflection and endeavors to make a clean break from the logics of modernity. In the case of Gaia, this leads to a protective gesture, which presupposes that reflection will prove destructive rather than dialogical, and disavows the potentially productive tensions in the Gaia model. Engaging Gaia through critique – entirely consistent with its destabilisation of judgment and exposure of the necessarily local and provisional nature of responses to environmental questions (Nocek 107) – leads instead to a discursive relationship with practices, to exploring different modes of articulation, and to an integration of affective and theoretical approaches. “Tasting,” Stengers writes, proposing a visceralisation of the Kantian dictum *sapere aude* via the ambiguity of *sapere* (know, taste, try), “means paying attention to the effects of this encounter on you, not blindly undergoing them.” It is this element of reflection, so often secondary to speculation in her work, which must underpin our engagement with Gaia – a dual engagement which aims to inscribe a “planetary imaginary” which exceeds modernity, through and beyond its codes.

**Notes**

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1. See John Michael’s reminder that “Kant, Hegel, and Marx in their different ways manifested a philosophical and historical optimism that today seems difficult to maintain” (255). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. These modes of critique can be distinguished in different ways. See, for example, Felski’s opposition of “hermeneutics versus genealogy” (18). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. One possible objection to this opposition is offered by Talad Asad, who questions whether human rights has become a “new domain of transcendent judgment” which has given “a new confidence to Euro-American believers in critique” (137). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See Butler: “It seems to me that critique designates the process of trying to delimit knowledge, indicating not so much a completed or successful action as an ongoing task to fathom and describe the various ways of organizing knowledge that are tacitly operating as the preconditions of various ‘acts’ of knowledge. This incomplete effort to delimit and name the conditions of possibility is not itself a judgment; it is an effort to fathom, collect, and identify that upon which we depend when we claim to know anything at all” (“Sensibility” 110). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Similarly alert to the problematic yoking of critique to Enlightenment ideals, Jacques Derrida performs a comparable manoeuvre, using deconstruction as a historicising tool to de-universalise Enlightenment claims. “When I say ‘more than critical’,” he writes, “I have in mind ‘deconstructive’ […] I am referring to the right to deconstruction as an unconditional right to ask critical questions not only about the history of the concept of man, but about the history even of the notion of critique” (*Without Alibi* 204). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Benjamin Noys attributes the rise of affirmationism to various causes, including the rejection of “the *via negativa* of Otherness,” particularly the Levinasian-Derridean ‘ethics of alterity’ which prevailed in the 90s and early 00s, in favour of an increasing interest in the work of Gilles Deleuze, and a response to the political problems generated by “the libertarian thinking of the 1970s” (2). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)