

What Lay in the Abyss – A Faint Light in the Dark of *Beyond the World's End: Arts of Living at the Crossing*

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Abstract:

Similar to previous publications of T.J. Demos, *Beyond the World's End: Arts of Living at the Crossing*, is an urgent call to action that looks towards radical aesthetic practice for pragmatic solutions to the climate change crisis. This compilation of revised, previously published articles consists of close readings of contemporary artworks and social movements that act as case studies from which Demos develops and demonstrates his concept of *ecology-as-intersectionality*, an amalgamation of political ecology, critical race theory, and decoloniality.

Was im Abgrund liegt - Ein schwaches Licht im Dunkel von *Beyond the World's End - Arts of Living at the Crossing*

German Abstract:

Ähnlich wie frühere Publikationen von T.J. Demos ist *Beyond the World's End - Arts of Living at the Crossing* ein dringender Aufruf zum Handeln, der in Richtung radikaler ästhetischer Praxis nach pragmatischen Lösungen für die Krise des Klimawandels sucht. Diese Zusammenstellung überarbeiteter, bereits veröffentlichter Artikel besteht aus eingehenden Lektüren zeitgenössischer Kunstwerke und sozialer Bewegungen, die als Fallstudien fungieren, aus denen Demos sein Konzept der *Ökologie-als-Intersektionalität* entwickelt und demonstriert, eine Verschmelzung von politischer Ökologie, Critical Race Theory und Dekolonialität.

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What Lay in the Abyss – A Faint Light in the Dark of *Beyond the World's End – Arts of Living at the Crossing*

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T.J. Demos' latest publication *Beyond the World's End: Arts of Living at the Crossing* (2020), is a revised compilation of previously published articles, most of which first appeared in 2018 in edited volumes, online journals such as *e-flux*, and accompanying exhibition texts. Consistent with Demos' ongoing research methods and theoretical argumentation, these close readings of contemporary artworks act as case studies from which Demos develops and demonstrates his concept of *ecology-as-intersectionality*. Although Demos has mentioned this concept in previous texts, the iteration presented in *Beyond the World's End* is his most succinct description thus far.

The book is comprised of a rich introduction and seven subsequent chapters, each focusing on a constellation of different artists and their artworks, for instance, John Akonfrah's *Vertigo Sea*, Angela Melitopoulos' *Crossings*, Allora & Calzidilla's *Blackout*, Ursula Biemann's *Deep Weather*, Collectif Argos' *Climate Refugees*, Forensic Oceanography's *Liquid Traces: The Left-to-Die Boat Case*, Public Studio's *What We Lose in Metrics*, Laura Gustafsson and Terike Haapoja's *The Trial: State versus Perho Hunters*, Arthur Jafa's *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death*, as well as the aesthetics enactments of social movements such as Standing Rock's #No DAPL, Not an Alternative, and the Zad. Demos' trans-disciplinary analysis of said works is supported by a continuity he establishes through drawing references to previous artworks and tangential influences and discourses. In lieu of a summary of each individual chapter, which I believe, given the complexity of the web of interrelations Demos designs, cannot be abridged in this limited space in a meaningful way, I will instead focus on some of his most powerful convictions epitomized by the concept of *ecology-as-intersectionality*.

Demos' central ideas conjoin environmental devastation due to anthropogenic climate change with pervasive inequality, poverty, anti-migrant xenophobia, racism, state violence, and oppression. He perceives this socioecological breakdown as the germination of "past colonial genocides, ongoing corporate ecocides, and trans-atlantic slavery" (p. 1). Confronting this paradigm through highly layered arguments drawn from a variety of primary and secondary sources, ranging from journalism, legal documentation, video footage, and interviews to critical theory and philosophy, the reading list generated from Demos' *Notes* section, which spans 50 pages alone, affirms Demos' cross-disciplinary expertise and invites further scholarship. Demos works with the teachings of decoloniality theorists such as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Marisol de la Cadena, postcolonial theorists such as Achille Mbembe, black feminist theorists such as Kathryn Yusoff, and critical thinkers such as Elizabeth Povinelli, Naomi Klein, McKenzie Wark, Pheng Cheah, and Nick Estes, to name but a few. While carefully avoiding universalizing western historical perspectives, adopting instead a pluriversal position, Demos speculates how we might not only break free from the clutch of geontopower (Povinelli), but advance emancipatory, alternative modes of living, a task he says will take generations to see to fruition. He turns to visual culture for inspiration and instruction, primarily from artists who work outside of traditional, institutional art world constructs of commodification, in the mediums of multi-channel video installation, documentary-essay approaches to film, sculptural installation, performance, photography, gaming, interdisciplinary modes, and community-based projects.

Although Demos delineates three modeling methods that he utilizes throughout the text, *ecology-as-intersectionality* appears to be the common thread. While recognizing the predominantly Black feminist roots of the critical race theory of intersectionality, Demos' usage of the term is an act of synthesis and expansion. Demos writes that, "whereas intersectional critique now extends to virtually all forms of oppression— including homophobia, transphobia, ablism, religious bigotry, and class exploitation—it seldom if ever incorporates discussion of environmental discrimination or climatological violence [...]" (p. 12). Demos elaborates upon the limitations of several existing approaches, namely Marx's metabolic rift concept, Black and Indigenous decolonial practices, and mainstream or 'white' environmentalism also referred to as 'ecologies of affluence.' He points out that they each, in their own unique way, inadequately address the intersectional aspect of the environmental crisis, which carries with it the unfortunate consequence of antagonism and factioning between movements. His conjecture is

that this hinders solidarity efforts and alliance establishment crucial for effective change to take place. His critique of mainstream environmentalism's focus on carbon-emission reduction and conventional conservation is damning. Demos quotes Jaskiran Dhillon's statement that "mainstream environmental justice politics are inherently preoccupied with the maintenance of settler state sovereignty and settler futurity" (p. 12). Demos likewise criticizes the concept of posthumanism, and warns the reader of "eco-fascism's blending of organic purity with ethnonationalism," an indictment that echoes Demos' deep distrust of green capitalism (p. 12).

What stood out in *Beyond the World's End*, in comparison to previous publications of Demos, was the tone, one that I would describe as heightened anxiety. This is perhaps inevitable after four years of the Trump administration and, as Demos states, twenty-five years of broken promises by global governance bodies and mandates such as the United Nations Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Paris Accord (p. 169). The somber timbre of having passed a point of no return is palpable throughout, although despite its omnipresence, Demos' register is not entirely dystopic. What lay in the abyss? Demos certainly doesn't sugarcoat it, painting a picture of fast-approaching annihilation. In the face of such a stark picture of the near tomorrow, Demos' critique of select contemporary artworks provides a faint, although fading light in the dark. By contrast, in his earlier book *Decolonizing Natures - Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* (2015), his text radiated a more illuminating, optimistic outlook, specifically in its final chapter *Ways Forward - To Be Continued...*, where Demos details concrete strategies of degrowth, most emblematic in the "Great Transition" plan designed by the Tellus Institute.

Whereas, in 2015, Demos appears to have still believed in climate change mitigation if immediate global cultural behavioral change took place - even by means of widespread activist civil disobedience - in 2020, Demos is more of a realist, even a survivalist of sorts, and his call is for "futurability" and "collective ongoingness and livability" (p. 192-193). Although all his books themselves are a testament to what people can achieve together, in *Beyond the World's End*, Demos with sorrow admits, "these formations are having admittedly all too little effect on the actual conditions of carbon-based environmental transformation under petrocapiatist governance" (p. 167). That being said, as a rigorous critical piece, Demos delivers in spades. If you're suffering from climate depression or climate rage, this book will not be palliative, even though Demos' analysis is stunning and does harbor some hope in the possibilities offered by

the Green New Deal, which has finally reached the ears of the political elite. However, his hope for a decolonial Red Deal is perhaps too much to aspire to; then again, who can predict what kind of transformations may now be within reach, given the loosening of the Republican chokehold in the United States. Demos doesn't mince words, with calls for insurrection embedded in his text as a sense of urgency gathers momentum, *Beyond the World's End* is a five-alarm fire.