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## Review symposium. *Nature Inc.*: environmental conservation in a neoliberal age

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### Introduction

*Nature<sup>TM</sup> Inc.: Environmental Conservation in a Neoliberal Age*, edited by Bram Büscher, Wolfram Dressler and Robert Fletcher, is a welcomed collection of deep case studies that work to expand critical understandings of neoliberal capitalism, targeting the claim that “the market” can “save” all forms of nature through conservation practice. The book’s contributions range across the intersections of nature and neoliberal capitalism from biodiversity (through derivatives), wetlands (through banking), ecosystems (through payment for services), and so on. This symposium includes commentaries from David Lansing at the University of Maryland Baltimore County; from Rosemary Collard at Concordia University, Jessica Dempsey at University of Victoria, and Juanita Sundberg at the University of British Columbia; and from myself, Nik Heynen, at the University of Georgia. Finally, the editors of *Nature<sup>TM</sup> Inc* provide a response to these commentaries.

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## Let's get real about nature

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This book is a provocative field guide to the mutant natures of neoliberal conservation that have come to move in, and through, the world in ever more creative ways. Digital photos of cute lion cubs, cartoonish billboards, equations and charts, derivative pricing schemes, and natural capital strategy documents: these signifiers of nature circulate through restaurants, student computers, the trading floor, and conference hallways, and are fast becoming as central to conservation practice as any real, carbon-infused tree. The editors deploy the metaphor of Nature™ Inc to understand the ongoing processes that produce these representations. For the editors, the proliferation of these abstractions signal a watershed moment in conservation, where “Nature™ Inc. has truly come of age with the recent development of innovative financial mechanisms that facilitate this abstraction, separating the creation of value from the connection to any particular environment, and thus allowing value to circulate freely around the globe as fully fungible stores of value” (p. 13). In other words, the rise of Nature™ Inc—the process—as a new paradigm in conservation entails a double shift: a shift of the object of conservation away from material natures toward circulating abstractions of nature, and the shift of realizing value not through production, but through the circulation of these fictitious natures.

There is a tremendous diversity of approaches in this book, both in the theories employed, and in the empirical objects the various essays analyze. All of the authors, however, share the same dissatisfaction (and often times indignation) towards the forward march Nature™ Inc. It is a process that obscures uneven power relations and forms of exploitation that are at work in this form of conservation (e.g. contributions by MacDonald and Corson, Brockington, Wilshusen, Matose, and Sullivan) while also managing to fail at achieving real, sustainable conservation (e.g. contributions by Dressler, Igoe, Lohmann). I found myself mostly nodding in agreement with these critiques, and the essays in this book are highly recommended. I found them to be creative, thought provoking, and required reading for anyone working in this field.

Commenting on such a diverse collection in this brief space inevitably runs the risk of painting these contributions with an overly broad brush, and failing to do justice to the nuance in each of these interventions. I figure that there is no avoiding this problem, so I might as well go all the way. What I would like to do in this review is take up Robert Fletcher's contribution in some detail, and read the rest of the essays through the theoretical lens he provides. I am doing this because I think Fletcher asks the key question of the book: if Nature™ Inc (the process) is so terrible, why is it so resilient? Fletcher's core thesis in answering this question is that the disjuncture between neoliberalism and nonhuman nature produces conceptual and material overflows that ultimately serve to strengthen the power of neoliberal ideology. I wish to suggest that this idea is the key connecting thread through most of the other essays in this book. It is also an approach that is simultaneously the book's biggest strength and weakness.

Drawing on Lacan and Žižek's writings, Fletcher locates the resilience of neoliberal ideology in the power of the fetishistic disavowal. This is the idea that the act of exposing how our fantasies about the world do not match up with reality only serves to further reinforce the fantasy. At the heart of this idea is the Lacanian triad of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and the Real. For Fletcher, neoliberal ideology is the Symbolic order imposed on the Real: the undefinable, ontologically slippery core of the world that resists representation. Any such Symbolic order inevitably fails in its attempt at placing order on the Real, and creates a gap, or as Fletcher puts it, an “‘irreducible excess' overflowing our illusions of order and coherence” (p. 90).

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The result is that the Imaginary is needed to smelter shut the eruptions of the Real that appear when the Symbolic order of neoliberal markets fail to function as intended. Thus, the manifest failures of neoliberalism lead not to a reckoning and its rejection, but instead, to redoubled efforts at imposing the fantasy of “getting the markets right”. This is a fantasy that will never be realized, yet paradoxically, it is neoliberalism’s own impossibility that renders it something we must continually strive for. I found this to be a startlingly resonant explanation for the resilience of neoliberal ideology, an increasingly important topic since the financial crisis of 2008 has demonstrated neoliberalism’s incredible durability. Fletcher readily admits that this approach to understanding the resilience of neoliberal conservation is not the whole story (I agree), but is an important piece for understanding the kinds of actions we see in the service of maintaining the power of these ideas.

As Fletcher points out, the logical conclusion to this analysis is that dominant modes of critique found in the social sciences—that is, critique meant to unmask and expose the “real” working of the world—is doomed to fail at producing change. To see this process in action, one need only to look to Peter Wilshusen’s contribution, where he discusses how Pierre Bourdieu’s idea of social capital was a critique of economic thought, yet the concept was quickly colonized by economic thought itself, and became a cornerstone idea in the now ubiquitous “livelihoods” approach to development. Instead of unmasking, Fletcher calls on Žižek’s invocation to expose the ambiguity and bias of the Real. Fletcher argues that the practices of representation and abstraction that are at the heart of Nature™ Inc. derive from their incompatibility with the Real of nonhuman nature. And as such, we should look at the ways that the Real of nonhuman nature disrupt the Symbolic and Imaginary of neoliberalism.

Despite the diversity of approaches in this book, I believe the thesis that Fletcher makes explicit in his account—that nonhuman nature is the Real that the Symbolic and Imaginary of neoliberal conservation cannot fully capture—can be read as the *ur*-thesis for many of the accounts in the book. This idea runs through the triptych of essays by Büscher, Igoe, and Sullivan, in which they map out an understanding of the rise of fictitious conservation (Büscher, Igoe), and potential alternatives to it (Sullivan). Büscher, for example, locates the rise of “fictitious conservation” in the disjuncture between capitalist value and the nontransformation of nature that conservation requires. To conserve a forest means that it must remain as such, a rather inconvenient fact for the realization of surplus value, for how do you realize value without production? Büscher argues that this core contradiction leads to ever more creative efforts at pulling nature away from the materiality of the world and into a dream land of derivatives, risk equations, bonds, and other representations, so that nature may become liquid and circulate as fictitious capital. Here, value is no longer grounded in actual production, and material nature becomes “nature”—signs and other abstractions that are free from the biophysical constraints of the world. Or, to put it in the language employed by Fletcher, the disjuncture between the Real of saving nature and the Symbolic order of value requires the Imaginary of fictitious conservation.

Other contributors to the book can be read in a similar way, in which the gap between the Real of nonhuman nature and the Symbolic of neoliberal order need to become sutured through the proliferation of spectacular and abstract representations of nature (contributions by Igoe, Brockington, and Dressler). Such sutures, however, often lead to further forms of dispossession and future environmental harms (contributions by Matose, Wilshusen, and Dressler). I realize that by reading the other selections through the theoretical lens of one author that I am on somewhat dangerous ground. To be clear, Fletcher’s contribution is the only one that specifically draws on the Lacanian triad. Nevertheless, if there is a recurring theme across these diverse essays, it is that of excess and containment, where new abstractions of nature serve to mop up the overflows of the world that neoliberal orderings of nature fail to contain.

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I feel that this golden thread is both strength and weakness for the book. It is strength because the contributors insightfully deploy this idea in diverse ways to help us understand how and why the excess of nature comes to be contained through new concoctions of finance, spectacle, and image. This analytic approach, however, is also a weakness in that much of the careful attention that is given to the overflows of the Real of nonhuman nature do not extend to the how the Real of action and communication—what Michel Callon (1998) calls “the economic”—also exceeds efforts at imposing capitalist order. For many of the contributors, the realm of the economic is treated as an already formed process that is acting on a recalcitrant world in ever more creative ways, rather than a process that itself resists our fantasies of representation, and must be also be continually brought into being.

In fairness, some essays do take up this notion. Most notable is Larry Lohmann’s contribution, in which he shows how the various assumptions of adequation that are embedded within carbon offset trading translate into market practices that are fundamentally unable to actually keep carbon in the ground. Lohmann’s analysis shows how the inability to contain emissions derives not from the qualities of carbon, but through the process making markets itself. Similarly, MacDonald and Corson’s “event ethnography” describes how conference strategy documents help perform a future economy in which speculative ideas around “natural capital” come to have real force in the world. While I think these authors are right to train their sights on how economic objects are born of contingent practices, I think these interventions can go further in highlighting the instabilities of this process. Or, to put it in the theoretical language employed by Fletcher, there is a something of a missed opportunity here to show how the Real of the economy comes to produce its own gap with the Symbolic ordering of capitalist value.

Lohmann’s empirical object of analysis—carbon offsets—can give a flavor of what I mean by this. Carbon offsetting is a process that requires the production of various technical reports, equations, measurements, and the creation of a certified emissions reduction. These abstractions help pull nature into the realm of fictitious capital. In so doing, however, they also perform incredible work in traversing a number of irreconcilable moments that are central to the realization of capitalist value. For example, the production of a certified emissions reduction allows the next 20 years of carbon storage to be realized today. And the actual certificate performs important work by bridging the gap between use and exchange value. The certificate allows for exchange to occur, but does so by becoming the useful thing for the consumer of an offset, for it is the certification, and not the actual carbon in the ground, that allows a consumer to meet regulatory compliance, and continue polluting like normal. In this way, an offset becomes valuable by traversing a seemingly impossible path: the future is promised to the present, the material forest becomes an abstraction, and this abstraction takes on a materiality of its own, allowing it to circulate and be exchanged in ways that transform the tree’s carbon into something useful for someone far away.

In short, the processes of Nature™ Inc share the same pathology of capital itself, which is that it lives on future promises that it can never pay off.<sup>1</sup> And the effect of the many signifiers of nature discussed in this book is that they transform a future goal of protection into an already accomplished present. This magic trick requires the production of signifiers that, in their circulation, also take on a materiality that allow them to have the effects that they do. Rather than thinking of these abstractions as a false Imaginary of neoliberalism that hides the Real of nonhuman nature, an alternative would be to examine the antinomies found within the Real of exchange that give rise to these circulating referents. Such an approach would show how these material-semiotic objects circulate not in the service of fitting unruly socionatures

<sup>1</sup> Many have made a version of this point, but here, I am specifically drawing on Karatani’s (2005) explication of this idea.

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into the already ready logics of capital, but instead would show how they are born in the gaps and aporias found in the contradictions of capital's own moments of becoming.

I think that attention to how economic exchange resists representation and control, and produces its own excess, would expose Nature™ Inc as less of an unstoppable force than it is sometimes portrayed in the book, and more of an unstable process that is ripe to be exploited for better ends. This may sound blasphemous, but if the “Vital Alternatives” to Nature™ Inc that the editors call for are going to occur, it is worth thinking about how they will not be an alternative *to* this ideology, but an alternative *through* it. This is not the place to expand on this idea, so I will merely note that it is not mine, nor is it a new one. It is a piece of Ferguson's (2009) call to go beyond denouncing neoliberalism, and instead, consider how, through neoliberalism, we can get what we really want. This approach can also be found in recent work on ecosystem service payments by Dempsey and Robertson (2012), as well as Fletcher and Breitling (2012), both of whom suggest that ecosystem service payments are a neoliberal concept and practice that is rife with its own internal contradictions that could, in the right context, lead to forms of socially just conservation.

I greatly enjoyed the essays of this book, and highly recommend them. However, I was left disappointed in the sense that the critiques in the book seemed to give all of the creative energy to capital, and never quite asked the question I wanted it to: what if—through all of these schemes of natural capital, carbon offsets, celebrity environmentalism, and ecotourism—there was a non-capitalist vitality sitting right there, and we just need to take it? Taken as a critique, this question is unfair—no book can do it all, and this book does plenty—instead, I think that in searching for an alternative to Nature™ Inc, this question suggests that we need not look very far.

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## Disentangling the multiple and contradictory logics of *Nature™ Inc.*<sup>2</sup>

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Our undergraduate students are worried about this era's environmental injustices. Sometimes, they are outraged, their anger directed at particular actors, institutions, and structures. More than anything, they are perplexed, looking for orientation in a political world that seems ever-impossible to reconfigure. We have introduced students to the promise of 'selling nature to save it' (McAfee, 1999), the spectre of economic valuations to make nature visible in 21st century political-economic life. For the most part, our students react to these initiatives with distaste: "it cheapens nature", they say. Or, "it's using the Master's tools." For a final essay project, one of us asked students to evaluate a Canadian government initiative to account for natural capital (a fake initiative, lest you think the current Harper government is capable of such a policy shift). Almost every student handed in an essay pointing to problems with the initiative (from technical to political to ethical), while concluding that it is our only shot at a liveable planet given our constrained times. A shot that is still enormously difficult to materialize. We read *Nature™ Inc.* with this student response in mind, at a time when what is seen as the only way, the so-called pragmatic option, is challenging to implement, at least in countries such as Canada.

Meanwhile, the situation is more terrifying every day: we are monoculturing the planet. Indeed, a recent WWF (2014) Living Planet study found that 50% of the world's vertebrates disappeared over the last 40 years. This trend is correlated with astonishing declines in linguistic diversity. Two indicators of a planet becoming more the same, less diverse, less vibrant, and less wild (Harmon and Lo, 2014). Thus, we also read *Nature™ Inc.* asking what this collection offers to orient us through this political-ecological terrain. What does the book seek to achieve? And, to what end? We consider these questions with an eye towards future research on neoliberal conservation.

### **The objectives and achievements of *Nature™ Inc.***

Editors Bram Büscher, Wolfram Dressler, and Robert Fletcher describe *Nature™ Inc.* as "the first comprehensive critical overview of the full range of contemporary debates concerning neoliberal environmental conservation" (p. 10). The book is structured along three main lines of critical analysis: (1) how neoliberal principles (e.g. commodification, competition, financialization, market discipline) articulate with earlier conservation strategies and local dynamics to produce novel changes; (2) how representations of neoliberal conservation work to sell novel relations; and (3) how "natural capital" is abstracted and circulated. The dynamics of neoliberal conservation, the editors suggest, "have produced a truly global conservation frontier: a suite of networks, activities, and regulations that are rapidly changing the relations between people and nature worldwide" (p. 5). The book's chapters trace the "new frontiers of neoliberal conservation" (p. 5) in time and place.

<sup>2</sup> When "Nature™ Inc." is not in italics, we are referring to the concept of capitalized nature/conservation, and when we use italics "*Nature™ Inc.*" we are referring to the book.

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Certainly, conducting research at what are perceived to be new frontiers is attractive and exciting. Perhaps because, as researchers, we are motivated to intervene in emerging trends, possibly even before they are able to fully take root and thus are more fragile and easier to curtail or topple. But how do we determine novelty, and what are the implications of proclaiming it? Although it sounds simple, the question of Nature™ Inc's newness is not a trifling one. Claims of novelty can work to obscure continuities, to deny the ongoing dominance of "old" conservation. In framing research into potentially new modes of *neoliberal* conservation, it behooves us to keep an eye on older logics, forms of accumulations, and struggles that have paved the way for emerging processes, and which may persist robustly in the "new". As Peluso (2012: 99) writes, "how nature and capitalism come into being, join together, or become undone is ambiguous on a global scale. Locally, it is contingent on histories, trajectories and articulated moments; it needs to be untangled empirically." For Peluso (2012: 10), tracing the specifics of empirical entangling is necessary to "enable such stories to have more than one ending." Likewise, in his chapter, Larry Lohmann argues that catchy slogans like "Our earth is not for sale" and "Nature™ Inc." need "extensive explication" (p. 159) lest they become "throwaway phrases" that are "too abstract to give much idea of where to locate the challenges and opportunities... or of where and how to make critical interventions" (p. 159).

Correspondingly, this collection is most compelling and convincing when its contributors offer analyses of specific principles, narratives, and mechanisms *in action* and *in relation* to analyses of the institutional logics or specific political configurations that bring commodifications of nature into being. Such analyses not only provide snapshots of key moments, but also situate such moments in relation to particular histories and globe-stretching politics of access, anti-enclosure, and colonial resistance that have always swirled around conservation initiatives. For example, Jim Igoe's chapter points to the long history of abstracting nature into spectacle for consumption, from films to parks, as a condition of possibility for Nature™ Inc., or nature turned "into money for contemplation *and* speculation" (p. 206, emphasis in original). (This process of abstraction is explored in Dressler's chapter as well.) Igoe argues that nature-as-spectacle paves the way to viewing nature as "eco-functional": something that can be disassembled, moved around, and calibrated through expert management to optimize health and growth, that is, the very basis of nature's financialization.

For their part, Ken MacDonald and Catherine Corson draw our attention to the "continual (re) alignment of actors, labor, and instruments" required to produce "natural capital" and the "abstractions upon which it depends" (p. 45). These institutional, discursive, technical, and political alignments, they suggest, must be orchestrated and brought into being and therefore require considerable effort. Along these lines, Lohmann's chapter walks us through a series of what he calls performative equations that help us conceptualize *how* a historically rooted problem such as climate change becomes one of market-mechanisms, molecules, and chemistry; *how* the performative equations layer on top of each other, along with more and more exclusions and contradictions until the entire carbon market project implodes. Even as the project fails to achieve expected carbon emissions, Lohmann shows how it is sustained, not only because of big bad polluters, but also "through the repetition and accretion of thousands of quotidian technical practices surrounding commodity construction and operation" (p. 177). His argument about such contradictory practices and outcomes is clear, accessible, and convincing, something we would gladly assign to students. Convincing or collecting allies requires *specification*, but also clarity.

In addition, the book is successful when authors analyze how current forms of pragmatic, market-oriented environmentalism maintain legitimacy despite enormous contradictions and even failures. This is an important line of questioning, one taken up through a psychoanalytic lens in Fletcher's chapter. Dan Brockington's contribution on celebrity activism adds to this discussion, showing how businesses, big NGOs, and increasingly UN agencies seek out celebrities to raise awareness while promoting their brands and maintaining legitimacy with

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a public obsessed with celebrity culture. (We are writing this review just after many heads of State gathered at the UN to talk about climate change; circulating on our facebook feeds was none other than Hollywood actor Leonardo DiCaprio's opening speech.) Brockington provides a sense of how this works, offering a nuanced analysis that is critical but also attuned to our times: unless someone bombs Hollywood, celebrities are not going away. Brockington notes that, despite our hesitations, perhaps there is a role for celebrities in radical politics. (Remember the Russell Brand take-down of liberal democracies on BBC in November 2013?)

### **Questions for *Nature™ Inc.***

The editors state that a primary purpose of this collection is to “push critical analysis into new directions” and “map new arenas for future research beyond the bounds of further study” (p. 5). This is a bold and exciting claim; yet, we are not convinced it has been achieved, especially since most of the book's contents have been published already as journal articles. Thus, what this specific collection achieves beyond aggregating previous material remains an unanswered question.

Indeed, many themes in this collection echo those laid out in Smith's (2007) essay, “Nature as Accumulation Strategy.” While Smith and *Nature™ Inc.* offer important insights into the contradictions of ‘selling nature to save it’, their analyses also exemplify a capital-centric tendency to understanding our times. Of course attempts to ‘sell nature to save it’ (McAfee, 1999) cannot be separated from capitalist social relations. But we mention capital-centrism to indicate a tendency to explain the contemporary moment of *neoliberal conservation* as a logical result of the unfolding of “capital, and capital only, in the world” (Mann, 2013: 46). As we see it, the problem with this tendency is not only one of reductiveness, or lack of attention to “non-capitalist” spaces (cf. Gibson-Graham, 1996). The problem also derives from advancing an understanding of capitalism that neglects other logics, beyond the capital-logic. Following Mann (2013: 47), who is drawing from Poulantzas, “capitalism is founded... on a suite of logics.” So the initiatives, projects, and social formations that this book's authors term *Nature™ Inc.* are steeped in capitalism, yes, but a capitalism forged from multiple logics that do not simply reflect the singular pursuit of new forms of natural capital accumulation.

These multiple logics are not reflected consistently in the book. For example, the editors' introduction suggests the significance of *Nature™ Inc.* lies in the novel ways “capitalism is endeavoring to accumulate not merely in spite of but rather precisely through the negation of its own negative impacts..., proposing itself as a solution to the very problems it creates” (p. 14). Buscher's chapter expands slightly, suggesting that neoliberal conservation exemplifies “the capitalist system increasingly accepting the effects of the second contradiction yet trying to deal with it by making it part and parcel of the system, by giving ‘value’ to the conservation of nature. It does this in the only way it knows how to give things value: by taking them as commodities in capital circulation, by finding new ways to guarantee ‘nature on the move’” (p. 184). The personification of capital and capitalism in these examples amounts to an abstraction. Who are the actors “giving value”, here; where are they located; how are they networked together; on what resources, models, ideas are they drawing; what motivations do they have? It also implies the unfolding of a predefined and unified, singular (“the only way it knows how”) logic of capital accumulation. Ultimately, both of these moves leave us with little direction as to how and where to intervene politically.

We agree with the editors of *Nature™ Inc.*: we cannot understand the trends in conservation outside of capitalism. We agree, too, that capitalism is a hegemonic or dominant mode of production on planet earth and cannot be separated from conservation in its old and new formations. And yet, not all that happens, even in the neoliberal conservation world that *Nature™ Inc.* represents, is a consequence of or response to the unfolding logic of capital.

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For instance, we wonder how state and scientific institutions are enrolled in the project of Nature™ Inc., along with actors like bureaucrats and ecologists. These institutions rarely appear other than as vehicles for capital's incessant drive, while individual actors merely pump the gas. Scientists remain shadowy presences in the book, despite their central role in crafting the very models, equations, and algorithms upon which the Nature™ Inc. enterprise often rests. The state also is a peripheral figure, skirting around the edges of the book's pages, but implicitly appearing as synonymous with capital, or its handmaiden.

Robertson's (2006) work is a helpful counterpoint. He argues that the production of a wetland banking credit requires translation between different logics and rationales, between the law, science, and the market. Haraway, whose thinking around the ™ reminds us of the complex webs of connection and exploitation that constitute it, also points to the ways capitalist productions of nature are always comprised of but not reducible to patriarchal, humanist, colonial, and techno-scientific projects. The "instrumentalization of life" proceeds, Haraway says (1997: 134), "by means of cultural practices—sociopolitical, epistemological, technical". Sian Sullivan's concluding *Nature™ Inc.* chapter points especially to the primacy of an Enlightenment dream of human mastery—of a culture that is separate from and transcendent of nature—in nature's commodification and financialization. And these imaginaries and practices are not all enrolled solely in the service of capital. To go back to Mann (2013), the institutions, relations, and ideologies that make up our deeply capitalist social formation have "relative autonomy". This means that accounting for the success and failures of market environmentalism requires more than locating them in the contradictions of capital alone. As Mann argues, the contradictions are "contained in, lived in, managed... in structures, institutions, relations, ideologies... that are *relatively autonomous* from capital" (p. 47).

A final point that links to this. The book's introduction and some of its chapters suggest the great speed with which neoliberal conservation initiatives are whipping around the globe and refashioning conservation practice writ large. Just as it is critical to be attentive to continuities between "new" and "old", we think it is essential to consider how neoliberal conservation attempts might *not* be circulating rapidly, how they stumble, rather than rising speedily to "global ascendance" (14).

For example, MacDonald and Corson's chapter investigates the rise of "The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity" (TEEB) within the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). The chapter excels at tracing the orchestrations of elites, academics, international organizations, businesses, and governments in international negotiations to further produce and elaborate the notion of natural capital. Yet, the reader is left thinking that the 192 Parties (government signatories) to the CBD have become, as MacDonald and Corson write, "strong proponents of market-based mechanisms through which nature is being increasingly privatized, commercialized, commodified, commoditized, and ultimately enclosed" (p. 45). But at the 10th Conference of the Parties (COP 10), the site of MacDonald and Corson's analysis, which one of us also attended, the official government negotiations (meaning, state-to-state decision making) stalled entirely around the very notion of market mechanisms and even private financing of conservation. Many governments, especially those in the Global South, saw market mechanisms as counter to the principles of "common but differentiated responsibilities," which underline the CBD and the other Rio Multilateral Environmental Agreements. To put this in plain language, these governments saw right through attempts to make new market mechanisms that would effectively relieve governments of the Global North from their duty to pay for the problems they created, their "ecological debts". Governments ended up *not* passing a decision on market mechanisms; they could not achieve consensus amongst all the governments.

We make this point not to deny the power of the TEEB, or the discursive trend towards natural capital, but rather to temper the generalized claim, to quote Corson and MacDonald,

that governments are “granting their authority not just to private investors but to speculators, who, desperate for a new and profitable investment frontier, are sinking their capital into the promise of nature” (p. 63). This failure to pass a decision on new financial mechanisms at the CBD negotiations is informed by calls for historical accountability and responsibility, as propelled by colonial legacies, national developmentalist self-interest, and geopolitical positioning. Not all is subject to “Inc.,” although nothing in this sphere can be understood outside of the Inc. either.

Elsewhere in their article, MacDonald and Corson write that initiatives like the TEEB are crucial for “legitimizing ... new speculative nature markets” (p. 63). We wondered at this point, but also elsewhere in the collection: what markets? What mechanisms? How big are they? Or even, to what extent is conservation becoming financialized? While the book abounds with empirical material, we wondered how to develop a sense of the scale and scope of Nature™ Inc. Is it rapidly ascending or just limping along? How might we ascertain this? In a tantalizing footnote, Brockington notes that “mundane revenue streams have yet to materialize with respect to natural capital” (p. 126). This footnote suggests that financialized ecosystem services are not yet very advanced. That this book did not engage such scholarly tensions head on is truly a missed opportunity. If much neoliberal conservation is failing to materialize, by which we mean it is not drawing return-oriented investment dollars, then it is crucial to recognize this (i.e. Fletcher and Breitling, 2012). If researchers do not address these failures, we risk overstating the status of Nature™ Inc., a move that has performative implications of the kind Gibson-Graham noted in 1996.

These are some of the edges of and debates in neoliberal conservation worth spending careful time on; edges and debates that might require new interlocutors and research approaches. We, like our students, are thirsty for guides that help us understand the alliances that are forged—or not—between diverse logics and actors within a conservation–capitalism that has long roots and wide reach, and that is operating within an increasingly monocultured world. Who specifically comes together in order to bring financialized conservation initiatives into being? What logics have to articulate? Where are these initiatives getting stuck, and where do they circulate more smoothly? As Peluso notes, these questions have to be empirically untangled. We all need Nature™ Inc. to have more than one ending.

Invoking Foucault, Sullivan notes that ascending and empowered discourses always hold within them openings for intervention and breakdown. Carefully identifying how multiple logics are brought into articulation is essential to finding, as Lohmann notes, “where to locate the challenges and opportunities...or of where and how to make critical interventions” (p. 159). Identifying where precisely these are in Nature™ Inc. remains an open question, and one we hope future researchers will take on.

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## The vagaries of integrative neoliberal conservation

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In the summer of 2014, through a much unexpected set of circumstances, I agreed to serve as the Director and Graduate Coordinator of the University of Georgia's Integrative Conservation (ICON) PhD Program. The creation of this program was initiated in 2009 through the efforts of an interdisciplinary set of approaches to nature/society research and teaching, including those of cultural anthropologists, ecologists, natural resource management scholars, and you guessed it, geographers. During the early days and months of developing what now is considered a successful interdisciplinary PhD program (~45 students in), I was heard to say "but I don't ever use the word 'conservation' in anything I do, why do I keep finding myself around the table with you people?" Despite the omnipresence of "conservation" in much of what we have done together as a group, the reason I found myself so often surrounded by these scholars was actually always clear to me. The fact is that their different ways of thinking, especially the great students involved, have pushed my own conceptualizations about "nature", "political ecology", "uneven development", and yes, even "conservation" in significant ways. I would say the same of this collection.

One clear change I can see in myself, having taken on these administrative tasks that are so centrally identified with notions of "conversation", is that I pay much closer attention to the different ways nature/society research is framed. By all accounts, my new appreciation, coupled with more careful reading as of late, helps me appreciate the contributions of this book much more than I suspect I might have otherwise done in years past; even if I would like to believe I still would have appreciated this volume plenty before. With this more nuanced appreciation, it is easy to say that this is clearly a valuable book filled with important theoretical contributions that bridge timely historical-geographical empirical case studies that matter for "N"ature, "n"ature "socationature," "political ecology," "neoliberal conservation," and other concepts.

It is always difficult to satisfactorily capture even a fraction of the theory and practice that provides the foundation for collections like this. While it is not always explicitly addressed, the introductory framing of the book by Fletcher, Dressler and Büscher encapsulates and signals various important threads of accumulated societal ferment and the socionatural consequences contained within "neoliberal conservation". Also, it usefully illustrates why the idea of "neoliberal conservation" is such an important notion in need of continued empirical elucidation as well as political mobilization. For instance, in their framing I can hear echoes of Leopold's ominous warning in the closing pages of *A Sand County Almanac* (1949: 225) when he suggests: "The evolution of a land ethic is an intellectual as well as emotional process. Conservation is paved with good intentions which prove to be futile, or even dangerous, because they are devoid of critical understanding either of land, or of economic land-use. I think it is a truism that as the ethical frontier advances from the individual to the community, its intellectual content increases." Likewise, and proceeding from Leopold's "conservation classic," but better foreshadowing the menace and majesty of the market, we can feel (and see direct references to) Polanyi's brilliant "double movement" in which he became one of the very first to warn us of what today we think of as "neoliberal conservation" when he says (1944: 132): "The social history of our time is the result of a double movement: The one is the principle of economic liberalism, aiming at the establishment of a self-regulating market; the other is the principle of social protection aiming at the conservation of man and nature as well as productive organization."

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While there are lots of important observations that come out of the book that I could continue to celebrate, it feels more useful to think about how this collection, and the research in it allows us to keep pushing, expanding and better exposing the socionatural contradictions inherent to neoliberal capitalism as it continues reshape conservation practice globally. While I am likely more sensitive to Castree's (2008a, 2008b) arguments published in this same journal than others having been cut by their razor sharp edge, his now well-known critiques concerning the disconnection and incommensurability of the "neoliberal natures" literature came quickly to mind when I read this book. Invoking Castree, I think it is important to continue to ask the question: what *really* connects these chapters and the larger intellectual project they represent? Is talking about commodification, marketization, financialization, regulation, and deregulation enough, given the wildly different approaches and empirical contexts throughout the book? What more cohesive logics and unified political rationalities can be taken away from these case studies? What commensurable lessons can we stitch together to push harder toward the kind resolve and solidarity that would stand a chance of resisting the seductive advances of these tangled, but often times very unique, neoliberal economic processes? I re-ask these questions of this book, just as I am haunted by them in previous work that I have done, because they are really important questions that to my mind have not yet been adequately answered.

Given these important gaps persist, making headway on connections should be an objective of the next rounds of intellectual pondering and collaborative proposal writing to my mind, because as rich as these studies are individually, their collective value, just as the collective value of the papers in Heynen et al. (2007) that in part were the initial target of Castree's critique, remains, perhaps, murky. To quote Castree (2005: 544), as he was just sharpening his scalpel in 2005, "[g]reater clarity in defining objects of analysis is required both theoretically and empirically; questions about levels and scales of abstraction need to be addressed in a sophisticated way; and, finally, the translation-rules for comparing apparently similar (or different) cases need to be established." So in the context of this book, how do we relate Dressler's interesting discussion of "first to third nature" to MacDonald and Corson's exciting essay about TEEB (The Economics of Ecosystems and Diversity), that are within the same section of the book, beyond some broad strokes? Or, how do we "translate" across even more challenging gaps between Brockington's insightful critique of celebrity conservation politics and Sullivan's animist move on culture/nature dichotomies? Certainly, I could gesture toward some comparative statements, but in line with the substantive epistemological problems Castree has exposed, these chapters seem quite diffuse. My point is not dwell on this, because it is a very common feature of most edited collections. Rather, I want to encourage the *Nature<sup>TM</sup> Inc* crew, who now have an impressive collective track record, to keep pushing toward these "translation rules," moving forward. Of course, this is a very selfish request as I have also been trying how to figure out how they do the very same thing!

This question of heterogeneity gets me to the other main observation I will have space to make in this essay. I think this collection can help "us" continue to think through how to better engage, and politically seek solidarity with dissimilar and diverse social-movement actors, defined broadly, who continue to struggle against neoliberal conservation practice. However, I think this move necessitates bolder conceptualizations geared toward radical embodiment and the question of who just exactly "us" is and could be. There are key spots in the book where important episodes of social movement action and political endeavor are discussed, whether it be in the overt empirical examples provided by Matose's discussion about grassroots responses to Zimbabwean forest politics or Lohmann's more subtle mention of climate activists in the Niger Delta, Alberta, Ecuador, South Africa and Appalachia. Other aspects, though, are just as useful here like the way in which Brockington discusses the

situated spectrum of celebrity politics, as well as the ways in which Sullivan importantly brings in one of the only instances of ecofeminist politics into the book in her postscript.

Here, I see opportunities to springboard from recent insights from Mollett and Faria (2013) to help “us” imagine a more expansive basis for developing what I have referred to elsewhere as “heterodox ethico-political praxis” (see Burke and Heynen, 2014). Mollett and Faria (2013) work to integrate logics from feminist geography and critical race scholarship toward a “postcolonial intersectional analysis”; their goal is to “mess” with gender by “doing race”. By pushing feminist political ecology in the innovative ways they do, building on, but going beyond, the gendered production of access to nature and knowledge about nature, Mollett and Faria insistently push neoliberal conservation (and neoliberal natures more broadly) to take more seriously how other forms of difference beyond class, including ethnicity, kinship, caste, nature, and race must be named and how, in that naming, they can help us better articulate not only socionatural problems, but also solutions (see also for useful insights Asher, 2009; Gezon, 2006; Gururani, 2002; Harris, 2006; Nightingale, 2011; Sultana, 2009; Sundberg, 2003).

Books, once published and put into the world, require us to think about how they push us to better articulate and engage the messiness of uneven development, nature and conservation. This book, because of its careful attention to complex conservation case studies, elucidates many important issues and processes inherent to the continued dominance of market rationality over/in nature and conservation. This book also exposes the gaps that persist both in logic (i.e. Castree’s “translation rules”) and inclusive politics (i.e. the acknowledged lack of attention to gender relations (p. 21), to which I would add race relations). In closing, to fully show my cards, I have shared this book with many of the PhD students in the Integrated Conservations (ICON) PhD Program, both as an example of the state of art discussion surrounding neoliberal conservation and beyond, but also to illustrate where much more work is required to continue understanding and combatting dangerous and destructive capitalist processes that more and more shape conservation practice.

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**Reply to reviews, Environment and Planning A symposium on Nature™ Inc: Environmental conservation in the neoliberal age (UAP, 2014)**

**Nature™ Inc Redux: Towards a dialectic of logics and excess**

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In the 2004 and 2009 follow-up analyses to their famous book *Empire*, Hardt and Negri argue that despite the deeply colonizing logic of contemporary global capitalism, we can at the same time discern a different, more democratic and hopeful alternative logic in the multitude that emphasizes the wealth and world we have in common. Like many scholars, Hardt and Negri struggle with balancing the logics of (semi-)autonomous spaces beyond the logic of capital and the logics of the utter domination of capital. Where does capital stop? And where should a capital-centric approach to studying the dominance of capital in any field end? These are tricky questions that Hardt and Negri had difficulty answering (if this is even at all possible), and they also animate our response to the insightful reviews on our edited volume *Nature™ Inc: Environmental Conservation in the Neoliberal Age*.

The three reviews raise a variety of points and arguments that are important to engage with, and we believe that this diversity of responses is important in its own right. But if there is one overarching critique of our book, it is that the three reviews believe it was too ‘capital-centric’ or that we placed too much emphasis on the ‘incorporated’ part of *Nature™ Inc*. As Lansing notes, we might have framed “Nature™ Inc as less of an unstoppable force than it is sometimes portrayed in the book, and more of an unstable process that is ripe to be exploited for better ends.” Heynen believes, after reading the book, that “much more work is required to continue understanding and combatting dangerous and destructive capitalist processes that more and more shape conservation practice.” Collard et al. (2015) are perhaps most forceful on this point in asserting that “the initiatives, projects, and social formations that this book’s authors term Nature™ Inc. are steeped in capitalism, yes, but a capitalism forged from multiple logics that do not simply reflect the singular pursuit of new forms of natural capital accumulation. These multiple logics are not reflected consistently in the book”. They also suggest that “not all that happens, even in the neoliberal conservation world that Nature™ Inc. represents, is a consequence of or response to the unfolding logic of capital.”

This point is an important one. It reminds us of the related argument that forceful critique can make the subject of critical analysis seem more important, forceful or coherent than it is in practice (Gibson-Graham, 2006). On the one hand, then, we agree that the book emphasizes the capital-centric side of *Nature™ Inc* perhaps more than the tensions, cracks, alternatives and contradictions in the neoliberal order. However, we were not blind to the latter. Quite to the contrary: in the introduction, for instance, we make clear that we view *Nature™ Inc*. as a confluence of complementary logics: a particular form of capitalism and particular governmentality intended to operate not merely within the realm of the economy but throughout the socio-political sphere.

Our designation of the first section *Nature™ Inc—Society Entanglements* was precisely to emphasize the ways in which, as Collard et al. (2015) point out, “potentially new modes of neoliberal conservation” are predicated “on older logics, forms of accumulations, and struggles that have paved the way for emerging processes, and which may persist robustly in

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the ‘new’” (cf. Büscher and Dressler, 2012). Chapters by Matose, Dressler, and Sullivan, in particular, highlight these dynamics. Fletcher’s chapter, meanwhile, sought to call attention to the same gap between vision and execution in neoliberal conservation to which Lansing and Collard et al. point in observing that “financialized ecosystem services are not yet very advanced” (Collard et al., 2015) and that “ecosystem service payments are a neoliberal concept and practice that is rife with its own internal contradictions” (Lansing), drawing on the same analysis of Costa Rica’s vaunted PES (Payment for Environmental Services) programme (Fletcher and Breitling, 2012) that both reviews reference in making their respective claims.

### **Nature™ Inc Redux**

On the other hand, we might also pass the ball back to the reviewers and ask whether we have actually emphasized the logic of capital *enough*. Here, we echo Dean in asserting contra Gibson-Graham that “in a world where one bond trader can bring down a bank in a matter of minutes... the dominance of capitalism, the capitalist system, is material” (2012, page 4). So let’s be clear: *Nature™ Inc* is on the offensive. It is enthusiastically promoted by a growing network of conservation actors, intergovernmental agencies and private sector players in global governance fora and on-the-ground practice aiming “to establish conservation as an asset class” (Credit Suisse, WWF and McKinsey and Company, 2014, page 6). As we look at the (conservation) world around us, it seems that for all the cracks, fragilities, autonomies and all the unevenness of *Nature™ Inc* - which are all there and need to be emphasized - there is equally an increase in brutal force, heavy domination, violent power-plays and harsh, top-down bureaucratization, all deepening neoliberal policies and ways of being in conservation and beyond. Among the contributors to the book, at least all three of us editors have recently started turning our attention to the worrying levels of violence increasingly employed in protecting neoliberal conservation models (and associated forms of capital) (Dressler and Guieb, 2015; Büscher and Ramutsindela, 2015), as part of a trend documented more widely (see, for example, Duffy, 2014; Lunstrum, 2014; and a forthcoming *Geoforum* special issue edited by Alice Kelly and Megan Ybarra on conservation and securitization).

This leads us to a broader reflection: if every analysis is always partial and incomplete in how it gives credit to and takes up alternatives to the logic that centrally animates it in its pursuit of understanding, why must this partiality or incompleteness (almost always) sit on the side away from the dominant logic? Any academic who has ever tried to analyze ‘dominant logics’ inevitably receives the questions: What are the alternatives? What are the cracks in the logic(s) you are trying to describe and understand? Might there be other logics at play here? These are absolutely central and important questions that always need to be asked. But should answers to these questions necessarily lead us to emphasize (the importance of or agency in) opposing/alternative logics? In this case, non-capital-centric logics? Perhaps. But perhaps also not. Maybe alternative, exceeding or opposing logics could equally work to strengthen core logics of capital, especially when these are defended with increasing violence.

Take, for example, the ‘green violence’ or ‘green militarization’ in response to the South African rhino-poaching crisis. This violence is clearly spurred by (racial, emotional, bodily, sensory and other) logics that exceed those of capital and that under other circumstances might have provided cracks in the latter’s edifice. But in the conservation context of the urgent defense of rhinos, it has become a prime way in which the neoliberal conservation status quo of a privatized park dominated by and for whites in South Africa is defended and indeed strengthened. Without question, neoliberal conservation histories are replete with empirical case studies in diverse geographies where the logic of violence to ‘defend’ conservation is inextricable linked to maintaining associated markets at ‘all costs’, whether for forests, Rhinos or otherwise.

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The point we want to emphasize is the relation between logics and material circumstances. Yes, cracks, alternatives and other logics are always there, embedded within daily practices that exceed the logics of capital, or perhaps are (relatively) autonomous to capital altogether. But how do these relate to dominant material circumstances that are heavily influenced by the logic of capital? This resembles an argument that Peck (2010) unearthed from the legacy of Milton Friedman, the great ideologue of neoliberal reason. Friedman believed that alternative ideas to the dominant logic need to be ready for when material circumstances change and that in the meantime one needs to chip away at the dominant logic through sustained critique. This is not necessarily the most satisfying and certainly not the only way to go about one's academic business. But it is an insightful *political* move, one that could perhaps be replicated in pursuing the opposite ends for which Friedman fought.

This, it seems, is Sodikoff's (2012) preferred strategy when she insists that it is no use coming up with 'solutions' or 'alternatives' so long as the material circumstances (in favor of capital) have not changed. More worrisome, however, is that a demand for immediate articulation of "alternatives" is one of the most common tactics to try to silence critique. To quote Dean (2012: 4) again: "Historically, in theory and in practice, critical analysis of capitalist exploitation has been a powerful weapon in collective struggle." In this sense, we see our book both as an analytical project and a political tool: one with a prime purpose of presenting a critical analysis of the dominant logic of neoliberal conservation and where this logic might be heading. In doing so, we hope to have added to other scholarly endeavours—including those of the reviewers—that show that the assumptions behind the dominant logics have major weaknesses and dangers that must be understood and confronted.

This different reading of what we could call the 'dialectic of logics and excess' could also provide another way of engaging the volume. This is particularly so in terms of its focus on the dominant logic of capital and the complex, varied social logics and material circumstances that actors negotiate in changing circumstances. Chapters by Matose and Dressler show in some detail how the social realities of marginalized groups are rapidly being reconfigured, despite collective efforts of resistance, due to the transformative impact of market-based conservation and agrarian change converging in specific locales. Striking is that this process spans multiple scales and does indeed have a strong element of inevitability: annually, millions of hectares of forestland are being converted to boom crops, roads and tourism infrastructure for the 'economic good' in the apparent 'green economy'. In the Philippines, for example, capital investment in and expansion of such enterprise are certainly met with sustained resistance based on alternative/other logics, but this resistance is increasingly violently repressed by paramilitary who defend the flow of capital at all costs (Dressler and Guieb, 2015). Powerful state officials and corporate allies (also in conservation) usually believe there is no alternative to capital. In many Southeast Asian countries, government agencies see 'sloping lands' in productive, biodiverse ancestral forest fallow—actively used and part of indigenous collective memory—as idle, unproductive and laying in waste, thus needing to be rendered productive with green alternatives that savage the land: palm oil, cassava, rubber and teak plantations usually beyond the remit of family economies.

These are the material realities—colonizing, universalizing, deeply anthropocentric—with which a "manifesto for abundant futures" seeking to confront "colonial-capitalist ruins, enact pluriversality rather than universality, and recognize animal autonomy" (Collard et al., 2015: 1) must reckon. They cannot simply be explained away as residue of capital-centric thinking or by unearthing everyday forms of resistance to dominant logics. Do we need to leave it at that? No, of course not. The reviews rightfully point out that we could and should have done more. In pointing out the debates beyond *Nature™ Inc*, we tried to make a start in the volume's conclusion, but this was certainly not enough. But this not enough was in two directions: in the directions that the reviewers would have liked us to go into and in the

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other direction: that empirical dynamics could (and indeed have) also turn(ed) for the worse, especially through increasing violence in the defense of the dominant logic.

### Concluding thoughts

One of the most perplexing episodes in the history of poststructuralist thought has long been Foucault's (1999) fleeting praise of the 1979 Iranian Revolution as a force of progressive action—this from a man famous for seeing submission to power where others celebrated resistance (e.g. his critique of sexual “liberation”). With hindsight, it is easy to understand the seduction of this perspective. At that historical moment, standing on the brink of the neoliberal onslaught he so presciently foretold (Foucault, 2008), having witnessed the bitter failure of previous attempts to cast the Soviet Union in a progressive light and dissipation of the '68 euphoria, it must have appeared, as it did to Horkheimer and Adorno (1998: xi) some three decades earlier in the midst of World War II, that “mankind [sic], instead of entering into a truly human condition, [was] sinking into a new kind of barbarism” once again. At that point, it would have been difficult not to succumb to the siren song of any movement that might offer a ray of hope in the gathering darkness. Similarly misplaced optimism has afflicted otherwise even-keeled critical analysts time and again, from disavowal of Soviet atrocities by Cold War communist sympathizers to Žižek's (2008) recent praise of Chavez's Venezuela in the face of growing evidence of that regime's totalitarian impulses.

The simple argument here is of course to remember to look before we leap. Hence, while we share Lansing's enthusiasm in asking “what if—through all of these schemes of natural capital, carbon offsets, celebrity environmentalism, and ecotourism—there was a non-capitalist vitality sitting right there, and we just need to take it?”, we remain cautious of imparting excessive efficacy to such dynamics. After all, what some see as autonomous action, others often find less compelling. Ferguson's (2010) identification of productive “uses of neoliberalism” in South Africa's version of a conditional cash transfer (CCT) approach that others view as merely more variegated business-as-usual (Peck and Theodore, 2010), and Gibson-Graham's (2006) lauding as potentially “post-capitalist” a rise in the self-employment that can equally be seen as one of neoliberalism's most quintessential work forms (Samers, 2005) are but two examples pertinent to this discussion.

We are all impatient. We all thirst for some respite from an increasingly stifling zombie capitalism. Yet, the three of us believe that it is important to resist the urge to jump too quickly to identification of so-called “autonomous” alternatives and instead heed Hegel's call to continue to “tarry with the negative” (Žižek, 1993) for as long as the material forms of the dominant logic remain dominant. This was one of our prime intentions in assembling *Nature™ Inc.* But dominant does not mean determinant. Indeed, if cracks in and alternatives to the dominant logic may strengthen rather than weaken the dominant logic, so we may find in the very material substance of this logic, rather than (only) in its ‘alternatives’, the seeds for something that may surpass it. This is one of the lessons that Hardt and Negri (2004, 2009) teach us, and it is a lesson that goes back to Marx himself. It also resonates with Lansing's idea that ‘non-capitalist vitalities may be sitting right there’, although what we have argued is that we cannot ‘just take it’ for this does not take seriously (enough) the material dominance of the logic of capital. We may push it, explore it, and yearn for it, but the “taking” will always be a long, hard, difficult and contradictory struggle wherein the destination is uncertain and unknown, and perhaps not even necessarily an improvement on current conditions. We should of course hope that it is, but outcomes in complex material struggles can never be guaranteed.

It is here that we return to the main point raised by the three reviews. Part of the value in emphasizing alternative logics is surely in them providing and sustaining this hope in the face of the daunting reality of continued capitalist intensification that we must at the same

time fully acknowledge. It is this paradoxical stance that we believe is essential to progressive scholarship. From this perspective, our volume certainly could have done more to highlight this dialectic, and to “incorporate” this into the various analyses, and hence we are grateful to the reviewers for pressing us on this point. It is in this spirit that we share Collard et al.’s aspiration that “new interlocutors and research approaches” will continue this vital work.

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