

Afterword

 **Anna Guttman** | Lakehead University

 **Veronica J. Austen** | St. Jerome's University

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Ruptured Commons

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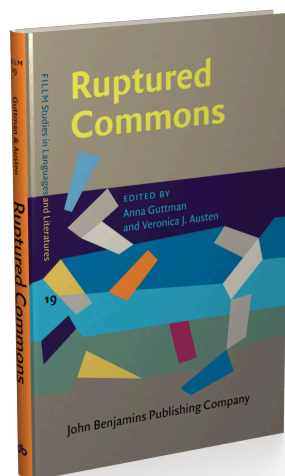
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Afterword

Anna Guttman & Veronica J. Austen

Lakehead University | St. Jerome's University

As we were completing this manuscript, the claim that extraterrestrial craft had reached earth was receiving renewed attention.¹ While it is beyond the scope of this book to adjudicate such a claim, the debate in and of itself recalls earlier images of, and debates about, the commons. To imagine life elsewhere in the universe is to conceptualize the entirety of the earth itself as a kind of commons, a space shared, but limited in space and resources. This conceptualization, too, has an aesthetic and narrative basis, as Ursula K. Heise, discussing the 1972 *The Blue Marble* photograph (Figure 12), explains:

The influence of the image of the Blue Planet floating in space is palpable in these conceptualizations of Earth as a spaceship with finite resources for survival, an allegory that highlights the sophistication and fragility of this extremely complex system as much as its self-enclosure.²

As much as this image can be taken to visually construct the earth's possibility as a commons, how to treat the earth as such in practice is a problem yet to be solved. Ironically, this seminal image of the earth as finite and bounded could only be captured by leaving its literal and metaphorical gravitational field. Enclosure, then, can never be total and complete, but is always already primed for the possibility of escape, rupture, and/or disruption.

The Blue Marble became, as Benjamin Hennig argues, “a symbol for environmental activism showing our planet's frailty, vulnerability, and isolation amid the vast expanse of space.”³ Nevertheless, it was also a photo reflective of U.S. space exploration, and as such, the broader discourse of discovery, wherein the end result is not to share, but to gain power through possession. The symbolic weight of this image may have in fact compromised our ability to conceive of the earth

1. See, for example Adam Gambatt, “US Urged to Reveal UFO Evidence after Claim that it Has Intact Alien Vehicles,” *The Guardian*, June 6, 2023.

2. Ursula K. Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 25.

3. Benjamin Hennig, “Earth at Night,” *Geographical* 87, no. 8 (2015): 10.



Figure 12. *The Blue Marble*, taken by the Apollo 17 crew in 1972

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apollo_17#Crew_and_key_Mission_Control_personnel

as a commons to share and thus to care for. As Lekan argues, “The conflation of Whole Earth environmentalism with U.S. hegemony over resources has stalled cross-national cooperation again and again since 1972, especially when it comes to biodiversity protection, the law of the seas, and cross-boundary air pollution.”⁴

One may recall that this was not the first image of the earth from space; the first, known as *Earthrise* (Figure 13), was taken by the Apollo 8 mission in December 1968,⁵ the same year, in fact, in which Garrett Hardin coined the term and theorized the “tragedy of the commons.” This photo is markedly different from *The Blue Marble*. In it, the earth, while the focus, is not the sole participant in the visual field; a portion of the moon appears at the bottom. The earth itself does not appear as a whole sphere; its bottom half remains in shadow. That this photo shows the earth in relation to its surroundings – namely, that it functions within a solar system wherein each part impacts another – is in stark contrast to the centralization of the earth, to the exclusion of all else but empty darkness, in *The Blue Marble* photograph. One wonders what was lost as *The Blue Marble* became the dominant image of the earth, and the earth’s position in a complex system of relations was subse-

4. Thomas M. Lekan, “Fractal Eearth: Visualizing the Global Environment in the Anthropocene,” *Environmental Humanities* 5, no. 1 (2014): 182–83.

5. Lekan, “Fractal,” 173.

quently obscured. *The Blue Marble*, as a symbol of the triumph of humankind – and more specifically, of the United States – becomes a foreboding signal that centralizes the human and celebrates its ability to exceed bounds, all while symbolically showcasing that this centralization obscures and neglects humanity's responsibility for and dependency on its relationships with the elements of its surroundings.



Figure 13. *Earthrise*, taken on December 24, 1968, by Apollo 8 astronaut William Anders
Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apollo_8

Earthrise speaks a different message. Unplanned,⁶ it is a candid snapshot, not the fulfillment of a preconceived possibility and design. As such, it captures its subject in motion, in relation, and in its imperfection. *Earthrise* thus speaks of a moment of wonder out of which there may have grown the possibility of a global commons. By the time of *The Blue Marble*, that possibility seems already closed. Commander Frank Borman's words regarding *Earthrise* are telling:

I happened to glance out of one of the still-clear windows just at the moment the Earth appeared over the lunar horizon. It was the most beautiful, heart-catching sight of my life, one that sent a torrent of ... sheer homesickness surging through me Raging nationalistic interests, famines, wars, pestilences don't show from that distance.⁷

6. Lekan, 181.

7. Quoted in Lekan, 181.

As noted by Thomas M. Lekan, Borman later would conclude that “We are one hunk of ground, water, air, clouds, floating around in space. From out there it really is ‘one world.’”⁸ His use of pronouns is noteworthy: “it” may be “one world,” but “we,” as imagined here, are not humans, or not solely humans; we are the environment itself and thus inseparable from it. Borman’s comments may be made from a place of privilege – those famines and wars and such continued on even if he could not see them from space – but his vision of a “we” enmeshed with its surroundings – a vision always already central to Indigenous worldviews – speaks a promise yet to be broadly realized.

Throughout this volume, the quality of relations – between histories, peoples, species, identities, and spaces – has been a central focus. We conclude now by recalling and revising Emmanouela Mandalaki and Marianna Fotaki’s description of Hardin’s work; as they synthesize, Hardin engages with the dilemma of the “search[] for technical solutions to what appears to be a problem of humanity.”⁹ We ask: What if the focus is no longer on the problem of humanity, but on the imaginative potential of humanity? According to the oft-repeated slogan, usually attributed to Silvia Federici, there can be “no commons without community”:

But ‘community’ has to be intended not as a gated reality, a grouping of people joined by exclusive interests separating them from others, as with communities formed on the basis of religion or ethnicity, but rather as a quality of relations, a principle of cooperation and of responsibility to each other and to the earth, the forests, the seas, the animals.

Certainly, the achievement of such community, like the collectivization of our everyday work of reproduction, can only be a beginning.¹⁰




Creative texts, and our reading of them, move the parameters of what is, and might be, real, beyond the gates into the realm of potentiality and possibility. To deny the inevitability of tragedy, and to continue to imagine otherwise, is the only hope for redress, and for human survival. This is a beginning among beginnings.

8. Lekan, 181.

9. Emmanouela Mandalaki and Marianna Fotaki, “The Bodies of the Commons: Towards a Relational Embodied Ethics of the Commons,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 166, no. 4 (2020): 747.

10. Silvia Federici, “Feminism and the Politics of the Commons,” in *Uses of a Whirlwind: Movement, Movements, and Contemporary Radical Currents in the United States*, ed. Craig Hughes, Stevie Peace, and Kevin Van Meter for the Team Colors Collective (Oakland: AK Press, 2010), 289.

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