
Posthumanist Entanglements: Language, Trees, and Politics

Kam Shapiro
Illinois State University, U.S.A

Introduction: Humanism and Posthumanism in the age of the Anthropocene

In the age of the ‘anthropocene’, the image of the human includes the entire planet, practically all of which, from bees and frogs to glaciers and ocean currents, is impacted by human technologies of production, consumption and war in advanced industrial economies. As the historical index “b.p.” (before present, or before physics) confirms, there is no (longer) a nonhuman nature.¹ Conversely, by variously transforming, fostering and decimating their fellows, human beings alter their own nature in countless ways, many of which have become matters of academic research, and increasingly of public concern.² Thus, an appreciation for these ecological entanglements both expands and decenters the image of the human, disclosing myriad relationships on which the species depends and by which it is quite literally composed.

In this context, the image of the human developed in modern, European intellectual traditions has been criticized as a dangerous falsification of our ecological interdependencies and even as the pernicious cause of environmental destruction. As postcolonial critics emphasized, modern images of the human long reflected the domination of European imperial states and their privileged philosophical discourses, which envisioned those states as the vanguards of reason and the custodians of its global historical destiny, rationalizing colonial violence, the administration of ‘developing’ countries, the subordination of those deemed sub-human, and the expropriation the bodies of those people deemed incapable of education to rational autonomy. Paying more attention

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1. The ‘present’ in BP refers to the period following the nuclear tests of the early Cold War, which changed the distribution of radiocarbon in the atmosphere. Further compounding the ecological implications, uranium used in the bomb developed in the Manhattan Project, and the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which marked the beginning of the ‘present’ era, was extracted from the Shinkolobwe mine in the Belgian Congo.
 2. Human beings can now manipulate DNA using CRISPR cas9 techniques, but we also ingest the plastics we produce through the linings of cans that preserve food and the sea creatures fished from polluted oceans, altering hormones, and so personalities. A profusion of scientific studies trace these recursive entanglements. See for example, ‘Early warning signs of endocrine disruption in adult fish from the ingestion of polyethylene with and without sorbed chemical pollutants from the marine environment’, *Science of The Total Environment*, V. 493, No.15 September 2014: 656-661.

to deforestation and pollution, environmentalists have taken humanism to task for reducing nature to an object of rational knowledge and as “resources” for (Eurocentric, patriarchal) human self-realization. Theorists of environmental justice combine these criticisms, emphasizing the highly unequal distributions of environmental degradation across populations distinguished by intersecting lines of class, geography, gender and ethnicity. However, as feminist ecologists have argued, patriarchy, racism, and anthropocentrism were always mutually informed; gendered and racialized others were figured as sub- or non-human, and nature writ large was feminized.³

The ecological entanglements of modern politics and humanist philosophy can also be approached from the other direction. In retrospect, it appears that the political and economic dominance of European states and the self-aggrandizing presumptions of human exceptionalism rested not only upon military technologies and primitive accumulation but also upon relatively stable and hospitable ecologies.⁴ In turn, as rising oceans, burning forests and collapsing fisheries amplify militarized competitions among states, corporations, classes and ethnic groups, they also drive a search for new modes of thought, representation and social organization by which human beings orient themselves to the biological and planetary infrastructures of their embodied lives.

Under these pressures, the language of humanism has evolved. Prominent theorists of global justice and U.N. agencies advocate for the conservation and redistribution of natural resources for the benefit of peripheral regions and indigenous peoples in the name of ‘human capabilities’ or ‘human security’.⁵ However, my concern here is with a more radical and marginal set of thinkers who align ecological politics with the displacement of the idea of the human itself. For the sake of simplicity, I here group such thinkers under the sign of posthumanism, with the caution that in not all those I include in this category so describe themselves. Posthumanism, as its proponents have explained, refers not to the material reality of ecological entanglement, which preceded and enabled both the human and ‘humanism’, but rather to a perspectival orientation that represents and cognizes the human as a relational, hybrid or ‘cyborg’ composition without essential form or purpose.⁶

3. See Ynestra King, ‘The Ecology of Feminism and the Feminism of Ecology’ (1995) in Mary Heather MacKinnon and Moni McIntyre, Eds., *Readings in Ecology and Feminist Theology*, 1995, pp.150-159.

4. Recent studies in the fields of history and archaeology have begun to take account the entanglements of human ethical and political life with bacteria, animals, insects and weather patterns. Consider the following headline from The New York Times: ‘Volcanoes Helped Violent Revolts Erupt in Ancient Egypt’. By Nicholas St. Fleur NYTimes 10/24/17. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/17/science/volcanoes-ancient-egypt-revolts.html> (accessed 10/24/17) Cf. Kyle Harper. *The Fate of Rome*. Princeton. Princeton University Press, 2017.

5. Amartya Sen’s emphasis on human ‘capabilities’, for instance, has influenced many discourses and institutions devoted to global justice. Sen advocates for a “‘people-centered’ approach, which puts human agency (rather than organizations such as markets or governments) at the centre of the stage.” Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen. *India: Development and Participation*. Oxford. Oxford University Press, 2002, p.6

6. Donna Haraway repudiated both masculinized images of the autonomous subject and feminized images of essential nature in favor of a ‘hybrid’ or cyborg image of gendered humanity, understood as a composition blending human and nonhuman animals and technologies. Donna Haraway, ‘A Cyborg Manifesto’ in Simians, Cyborgs and Women. New York. Routledge, 1991. Today, the term ‘posthumanism’ is perhaps most prominently associated with the ‘posthumanities’ book series at the University of Minnesota press, edited by Cary Wolfe, which includes authors with diverse philosophical inspirations. See Cary Wolfe. *What is Posthumanism?* Minneapolis. University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

One could assemble many thinkers under the sign of posthumanism so understood.⁷ Here, I will focus mainly on the works of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Drawing on thinkers such as Alfred North Whitehead, Gregory Bateson, and Gilbert Simondon, Deleuze and Guattari described nominal individuals and groups as more or less enduring configurations - ‘assemblages’ in their terminology - of diverse elements and processes.⁸ On their view, discrete individuals and groups emerge not from a formless “flux”, as their less careful readers sometimes imagine, but instead from intersecting networks and processes (chemical, social, linguistic, climactic, geological, etc.) with different durations. Further, they suppose ecological relations are always being assembled or “becoming” and shot through with more or less powerful tendencies to dis- and re-assemble, or de- and re-territorialize in other ways. Hence, “every ‘object’ presupposes the continuity of a flow, every flow, the fragmentation of the object.”⁹

While they made little reference to pollution, deforestation, or climate change, Deleuze and Guattari’s writings have been seen as well-suited to an ecological politics, a connection made explicitly in Guattari’s later writings.¹⁰ Highlighting Bateson’s influence, Robert Shaw writes, “... Guattari explores how a failure to recognize that subjectivity emerges from its relationship with the earth threatens both earth and subjectivity ... This emerges as an attempt to counter the increasingly precarious relationship between human, social and environmental ecologies... it is an ecosophy, which brings an ethico-political orientation of responsibility towards the earthed and worldly subjectivity.”¹¹ In this passage, Shaw expresses a common supposition regarding the ethical and political implications of posthumanist thought. This supposition finds a typical, which is to say simplified and exaggerated expression in a recent book by María Puig de la Bellacasa titled ‘matters of care’, in which she describes care as “a nonnormative necessity”.¹² She writes, “... to value care is to recognize the inevitable interdependency essential to the existence of reliant and vulnerable beings”, and in turn that “thinking with care as living-with inevitably exposes the limits of scientific

7. Indigenous cosmologies have also been taken as a precursor of monistic philosophies of nature and have served as a template for the inclusion of non-human being in political constitutions. In Ecuador, for instance. See Vilaca, Aparecida. 2005. ‘Chronically Unstable Bodies: Reflections on Amazonian Corporalities’. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* Vo. 11, No.3: 445-464; Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo Batalha. *Cannibal Metaphysics: For a Post-Structural Anthropology*. Trans. Peter Skafish. Minneapolis. University of Minnesota Press, 2014. Cf. Francis Ludlow, Lauren Baker, et. al. ‘The Double Binds of Indigeneity and Indigenous Resistance’ *Humanities* 2016, 5, 53: 1-19. According to a recent study of forest ‘degradation’, “The priority is to protect pristine forests with high carbon density. The most effective way of doing this, he said, was to support land rights for indigenous people. “Those living in the forest can make a difference,” Walker said.” <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/sep/28/alarm-as-study-reveals-worlds-tropical-forests-are-huge-carbon-emission-source> (accessed 10/31/17)

8. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (hereafter ATP). Minneapolis. University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

9. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983, p.6.

10. See Bernd Herzogenrath, ed. *An [Un]Likely Alliance: Thinking Environments with Deleuze and Guattari*. Newcastle upon Tyne. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008.

11. Robert Shaw: ‘Bringing Deleuze and Guattari Down to Earth Through Gregory Bateson: Plateaus, Rhizomes and Ecosophical Subjectivity’, *Theory, Culture & Society* 2015, Vol. 32(7–8) 151–171, pp.167-168 Shaw does not explain what it would mean to “counter” the precarious relationship in question.

12. María Puig de la Bellacasa. *Matters of Care*. Minneapolis. University of Minnesota Press, 2017, p.70.

and academic settings to create more caring worlds”.¹³ More cautiously, Jeffrey Nealon suggests that taking “plant life” as an ontological model - understood in Deleuzian terms as a territorial, rhizomatic assemblage rather than as set of individuated animal organisms - “will hopefully” attune us better to ecological coimplications crucial in our “dark ecological times” (Timothy Morton’s phrase).¹⁴ By contrast, he claims, “the animal territory for thematizing life... tend to focus our attention on the biopolitical competition among individual organisms to the detriment of this robust sense of distributed, interconnected life”.¹⁵

It is not far-fetched to suggest that the ideal of rational autonomy and faith in providential nature played a part in colonial destructions of indigenous peoples and ecosystems, nor that environmental ethics or politics might find affinities with a rhizomatic perspective, according to which social differences and political antagonisms emerge from complex bio-social ecologies subject to more or less abrupt transformation. On the latter view, an anti-essentialist philosophical critique of social identities and antagonisms is, paradoxically, grounded in a nature without essences. Quoting Rutzky, Cary Wolfe writes, “...to become posthuman means to participate in – and find a mode of thought adequate to - ‘processes which can never be entirely reduced to patterns or standards, codes or information’”.¹⁶ As Wolfe notes, we have always been posthuman in the first sense, inasmuch as human beings are participants in processes that make and undo them, iteratively composed and recomposed by shifting relations, never the independent authors of their being or experience. What would it mean, though, to find a mode of thought “adequate” to inadequacy?¹⁷ If we adopt the view that human ideas and sensibilities are ecologically entangled, it follows that posthumanist philosophies are also entangled, that is, they not more or less adequately represent, but rather participate in and intersect with other ecological processes.

What is the nature, so to speak, of this participation? Adopting a Hegelian conceit, some thinkers take a short-cut between ontology and politics, conceiving posthumanist philosophy as simultaneously of and for our time. That is, they suppose that contemporary configuration of human and nonhuman ecologies promulgate human philosophies of ecological entanglements and ethico-

13. Ibid. 70, 92.

14. Jeffrey Nealon. *Plant Theory; Biopower and Vegetable life*. Stanford. Stanford University Press, 2016, pp.118-119. “The animal territory for thematizing life... tend to focus our attention on the biopolitical competition among individual organisms to the detriment of this robust sense of distributed, interconnected life”. Nealon, *Plant* 119 Jane Bennet draws a line from a recognition of “horizontal” interaction among human and nonhuman agents to sensibilities, and to ecological politics. She writes, “...to note this fact explicitly which is also to begin to experience the relationship between persons and other materialities more horizontally, is to take a step toward a more ecological sensibility”. Jane Bennett. *Vibrant Matter*. Durham. Duke University Press, 2010, 10.

15. Nealon, *Plant* 119.

16. Wolfe, *Posthumanism*, xviii

17. Wolfe discerns such modes of thought in Derrida and Luhmann, who reconcile individuation with potentiation or creativity, whereas Deleuze and others, he suggests, posit a conflict between “open” indeterminacy and “closed” systems. This does not prevent Wolfe from freely borrowing concepts from the same thinkers, including Deleuze’s notion of the virtual. Wolfe insists the virtual is also “real”, an odd qualification, given that Deleuze defined the virtual precisely as being “real without being actual, ideal without being abstract”. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*. New York. Columbia University Press, 1994, p. 208

political dispositions, and by implication, that their own thought expresses the promulgation by environmental crises of their own political solutions.¹⁸ Along these lines, for instance, Richard Grusin suggests that a theory of ‘radical mediation’ – which understands relational processes as ontologically prior to identities and differences – is appropriate to the specific historical circumstances of *both* contemporary technosciences that operate on multiple scales of matter, and to contemporary crises, which blend social and biological or ecological activities.¹⁹ Along similar lines, Steven Shaviro declares “The future is Whiteheadian.”²⁰

Must it be, though? A cursory glance at contemporary ideological and political struggles surrounding environmental crises suggests a less certain future. Looking more closely and carefully, Rob Nixon comes to nearly the opposite conclusions of thinkers such as Grusin and Shaviro. The increasing volatility of ecological conditions associated with the ‘great acceleration’ of the Anthropocene, he notes, coincided with the rapid growth of ‘networked’ perception and cognition, which transforms neural networks by which global material processes are thought and felt.²¹ Rather than promote planetary ethical sensibilities, the accelerated circulation of information has overwhelmed human capacities for attention and responsiveness, making it all the more difficult to address the attritional or “slow” violence environmental degradations, the costs of which are disproportionately born by the least “connected”. Countless studies have documented the deleterious effects of web surfing on attention spans, critical analysis and empathy, and for those not immediately affected, attention to the complex relationships between consumer practices and planetary biophysics is at best partial and glancing. However, the complex interdependencies sustaining human communities have always vastly outstripped human knowledge and sensibilities, and long before the advent of the internet, critics such as Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin argued that the intensification of global networks coincided with the attenuation of sensory and affective powers.²²

What good is caring, when knowledge concerning the interdependencies in question is so restricted? Walter Lippmann, who devoted the bulk of his studies of public opinion to documenting the frailty of popular knowing in modern interconnected societies, mocked the moralist who supposed the public could be guided instead by a moral disposition: “When I am tempted to think that men can be fitted out to deal with the modern world simply by teaching morals, manners and patriotism, I try to remember the fable of the pensive professor walking in the woods at twilight. He stumbled

18. Along similar lines, Paolo Virno suggests that post-fordist models of “flexible” labor, and the corresponding precariousness of employment, embodied especially in the figure of the migrant, “reflect in historically determined ways the original lack of a uniform and predictable habitat.” Paolo Virno. *When the Word Becomes Flesh*. Cambridge. MIT Press, 2015, p.206.

19. Richard Grusin. ‘Radical Mediation’, *Critical Inquiry* 42 (Autumn, 2015): 124-148, p. 147-8

20. Steven Shaviro. *The Universe of Things* (2014). Minneapolis. University of Minnesota Press, p.44. Cf. Shaviro. *Without Criteria*. Cambridge. MIT Press, 2009, p. 4.

21. Rob Nixon. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge. Harvard University Press, 2011, pp. 11-12

22. See Simmel, Georg. ‘The Metropolis and Mental Life’. *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. Kurt Wolff, ed and trans. Glencoe. The Free Press, 1950; Walter Benjamin, ‘Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility’, Third Edition. Jennings, ed. *Selected Writings*. V.4 Cambridge. Harvard University Press, 2003.

into a tree. This experience compelled him to act. Being a man of honor and breeding, he raised his hat, bowed deeply to the tree, and exclaimed with sincere regret: ‘Excuse me, sir, I thought you were a tree.’”²³ No misanthropist, Lippmann adds, “In some degree the whole animate world seems to share the inexpertness of the thoughtful professor.”²⁴

Emphasizing the sharing, Jane Bennett has argued, anthropomorphism can “catalyze” an appreciation for distributed agency and horizontal ontologies of human and nonhuman beings.²⁵ However, as Bennet recognizes, even if we are less cynical concerning the political value of hospitable dispositions, it is readily apparent that expansive concerns and sympathies are not the inevitable, or even the most likely response to a recognition of interdependence and vulnerability. Quite the contrary, an ecological awareness of interdependency is readily harnessed to what Roberto Esposito has called the ‘immunitary’ logic of biological security and a corresponding ‘militarization’ of the environment.²⁶ To use Deleuze and Guattari’s terms, the de-territorializing image of post- or transhuman philosophy can be re-territorialized in commercial and political power struggles. Michael Mikulak writes, “in the same way that Darwinism became used to justify fascistic and nationalistic forms of power, rhizomatic theory is very amenable to reconfigurations of bios within biotechnological discourses of life”.²⁷

The lesson here is not that a fatalistic or nihilistic posthumanism is more historically apt than a wishful posthumanism, nor, *a la* Lippmann, that ecological politics should be left to supposed experts.²⁸ Rather, it is that the relationships among posthumanist philosophical ideas, ethical dispositions and political practices are neither logically nor historically “inevitable”, but rather contingent on a set of evolving discursive, social and ecological entanglements. My interest, here, is in the way such entanglements are discursively described, figured, and staged by posthumanist writers. With which beings and processes do these writers place us in contact, in what manner, and to what effect? How do they extend ethical and political concerns beyond the dispossession of the proletariat to the related destruction of ecosystems? In what follows, I explore these entanglements in connection with images of interactions between human beings and trees.

Trees figure more or less prominently in the works of nearly all posthumanist philosophies. They stand, so to speak, variously for individuations (Deleuze and Guattari), for rhizomatic ecological relationships (Kohn, Haskell), and for independence of material being from human knowing (Harman).²⁹ Or rather, it might be interjected, they are so figured, represented or described.

23. Walter Lippmann. *The Phantom Public*. New York. MacMillan, 1930, p.28

24. Ibid. 29-20.

25. Bennet, *Vibrant*, 99.

26. See Roberto Esposito. *Bios*. Minneapolis. University of Minnesota Press, 2008. Cf. Robert Marzec. *Militarizing the Environment*. Minneapolis. University of Minnesota Press, 2015

27. Michael Mikulak, ‘The Rhizomatics of Domination: From Darwin to Biotechnology’, in Bernd Herzogenrath, ed. *An [Un]Likely Alliance: Thinking Environments with Deleuze and Guattari*, p.81

28. Bruno Latour has effectively criticized Lippmann’s reasoning in favor of a more participatory public that includes human and nonhuman beings. See Bruno Latour. *Politics of Nature*. Cambridge. Harvard University Press, 2004.

29. See Eduardo Kohn. *How Forests Think*. Berkeley. University of California Press, 2013; Graham Harman, ‘I am Also of the Opinion That Materialism Must be Destroyed’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 28. No.5 (2010),

However, as posthumanists will be quick to point out, trees participate in thought, sensibilities and political practices not only by way of human language but also through biological interactions including, most obviously, symbiotic exchanges of oxygen and carbon dioxide. Human life literally depends upon trees, which not only afford a host of human technologies of production, but also sustain the atmosphere on which we depend.³⁰ Trees also frequently serve in human imaginaries as figures for bios, or creation as such. Thus, human relations with trees involve ecological interdependencies, symbolism, and aesthetics, all of which are intertwined. In some instances, the same trees both figuratively and literally ‘inspire’ human observers whose aesthetic responses and intellectual reflections are energized by the oxygen their inhale. However, again, there is no short-cut between material, symbolic, aesthetic and political dimensions of trees. Rather than formulate a general theory of trees – as task as fruitful as a search for a general theory of holes – we may instead explore some of complications and entanglements as they are theorized and enacted by posthumanist writers.

Trees are not Trees: Deleuze and Guattari on the Arborescent and the Rhizomatic

Deleuze and Guattari are well known for prioritizing networked processes over discrete beings, or in the botanical terms they deploy, rhizomes over trees. The former signify assemblages formed by conjuncture, “and...and...and,” the latter the teleological unfolding of an individual being. By replacing teleological and anthropocentric models of production with decentered processes of assemblage, Deleuze and Guattari part ways both with Hegel, and with Hegelian Marxism. In their terms, human beings neither realize spiritual purposes nor give form to raw materials, but instead “plug in” to all sorts of other “machines.”³¹ In their introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus*, they declare “nothing is beautiful or loving or political aside from underground stems and aerial roots, adventitious growths and rhizomes.”³² However, it would be a mistake to presume that the arborescent and the rhizomatic refer to mutually exclusive, opposite forms of life.³³ Rather, they represent different tendencies that operate simultaneously at various levels, variously composing and decomposing complex assemblages – a term that encompasses everything from biological cells to political collectives. Conceived as assemblages, all beings are distinguished by different degrees of closure, different rates of change, or different distributions of suppleness and rigidity. Thus, “... assemblages swing between a territorial closure that tends to stratify them and a deterritorializing

p.788, qtd. in Steven Shavira, ‘Consequences of Panpsychism’ in Grusin, ed. *The Nonhuman Turn*. Minneapolis. University of Minnesota Press, 2015, 38. I discuss the place of trees in Deleuze and Guattari’s writings below.

30. Deforestation has been estimated to contribute to around three billion tons of atmospheric carbon per year, or around 10% of the total global contributions, as much as all cars and trucks on the planet <https://www.ucsusa.org/global-warming/solutions/stop-deforestation/deforestation-global-warming-carbon-emissions.html#.W7FoLxNKjkK> (accessed 9.28.18)

31. See ATP 435. As I argued in Chapter one, Benjamin similarly extends productive powers to non-human nature.

32. ATP 15

33. “The important point is that the root-tree and canal-rhizome are not two opposed models.” ATP 20.

movement that on the contrary connects them with the Cosmos.”³⁴ By the same token, it would be a mistake to take Deleuze and Guattari’s figures literally. Trees are also machines that interact with and transform others – fungi, bacteria, deer, sunlight, beetles - and play a part in human processes, not least that of respiration. As the fortuitously named David Wood succinctly puts it, “If Deleuze and Guattari are right about trees, then trees are not trees,” a formulation Deleuze and Guattari would no doubt have enjoyed.³⁵

Nonetheless, given Deleuze and Guattari’s metaphorical bias, it is surprising to find that their first example of schizophrenic experience involves the coupling of man and tree. They take the image of this coupling from Georg Büchner’s 1836 novella, *Lenz*, a fictionalized account of a trip taken by the 18th century dramatist and likely schizophrenic Jakob Michael Reinhold Lenz to visit the reformist Lutheran pastor, Johan Friedrich Oberlin in the village of Waldbach (actually the Alsatian town of Waldersbach).³⁶ In particular, Deleuze and Guattari highlight the opening scenes, which dramatically narrate Lenz’s perceptions and sensations as he walks through mountains and forests surrounding the village. In Deleuze and Guattari’s summary of these passages, Lenz couples with “celestial machines, the stars or rainbows in the sky, alpine machines [...] To be a chlorophyll- or a photosynthesis-machine, or at least slip his body into such machines as one part among the others. Lenz has projected himself back to a time before the nature-man dichotomy.”³⁷ Yet Lenz is not just any part. For Deleuze and Guattari, Lenz exemplifies the human who, in their terms, is not master but rather attendant or “custodian” (*préposé*) of fellow machines, “not man as the king of creation, but rather as the being who is in intimate contact with the profound life of all forms or all types of beings, who is responsible even for the stars and animal life, and who ceaselessly plugs an organ-machine into an energy-machine, a tree into his body, a breast into his mouth, the sun into his asshole: the eternal custodian of the machines of the universe.”³⁸

As Deleuze and Guattari explain, they treat schizophrenia not only as a privileged mode of experience but also as a model of exposition. Their texts enact a rhizomatic or schizophrenic logic of conjunction, linking theories of language with biology, geology, mathematics, etc. However, apart from a few passing metaphors, they had little to say about past or present conjunctures of trees and human beings. How might the perspective they adopt be brought to bear on such conjunctures? Consider a recent book by David George Haskell, titled ‘The Songs of Trees’, which introduces readers to a series of multispecies ecologies in which human beings and trees are co-participants, one tree species at a time. Like Deleuze and Guattari, Haskell asserts the priority of

34. ATP, 337

35. David Wood. ‘Truth and Trees; or, Why We Are All Really Druidic,’ *Rethinking Nature: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*. Ed. Bruce V. Foltz and Robert Frodean. Albany. SUNY press, 2004, 38. Deleuze and Guattari write, “the question is whether plant life in its specificity is not entirely rhizomatic.” ATP 6. Nealon gathers other relevant references in the course of a lucid analysis of the figure of the rhizome in *A Thousand Plateaus*. See Jeffrey Nealon. *Plant Theory*, ch.4

36. See Smith, Matthew Wilson, ed. *Georg Büchner, The Major Works*. New York. Norton, 2012 (hereafter Büchner).

37. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983 (hereafter AO), 2

38. AO 4; Cf. Deleuze and Guattari. *L’Anti-Oedipe*. Paris. Les Editions de Minuit. 1972/3, p. 10.

relation over individual being, revealing interlaced ramifications of trees, insects, bacteria, fungi, and human communities. He writes, “The Chert-root tree seems an exemplar of individuality, its vertical trunk the antithesis of reticulation”, yet “like all trees, the fir’s separation is also an illusion... Every needle and root is a composite of plat bacterial and fungal cells, a weave that cannot be unknotted.”³⁹ In his telling, trees are both components of relational entanglement between human and nonhuman beings, and models of entanglement generally. We are both connected, and alike in our incompleteness. As his title promises, Haskell’s prose is riddled with extravagant anthropomorphisms. Not only do trees sing, but they also have mouths, blood, etc. However, as Haskell emphasizes, the songs he describes are also literal, comprised by sonic vibrations emanating from trunks, roots, leaves, and the ‘chorus’ they form with other beings, from rain on leaves to the rumble soil displaced by roots and their fungal conspirators, or the vibrations of a woodpecker’s hammering in the bodies of insects. Haskell tunes into these songs by means of electronic instruments that amplify and translate subtle vibrations into the register of human audition. He then joins the chorus, placing his readers in contact with the multispecies ecologies he attends, translating amplified ‘songs’ into lyrical prose.⁴⁰

As Haskell emphasizes, it is impossible to disentangle the literal and the metaphorical dimensions of influence and listening. Yet even as he eloquently ventriloquizes for his readers, he laments that ‘knowledge gained through extended, bodily relationship with the forest... is more robust’ than “ideas and statutes that live only in disembodied intellect”.⁴¹ Carried away by the music, he forgets that dichotomies between embodied and mediated knowing are unsustainable not only in practice but also on his own terms, which confirm that all ideas are embodied, and all language sensuous.⁴² Regarding another poet in the woods in his lecture on *Symbolism*, Whitehead wrote, “Both the word itself and trees themselves enter into our experience on equal terms... Thus, for the poet in his ecstasy – or perhaps agony – of composition the trees are the symbols and the words are the meaning... For us, the words are the symbols which enable us to capture the rapture of the poet in the forest.”⁴³ Whitehead described the reciprocal “correlation” between trees and words in his example of sylvan poetry as “the most fundamental exemplification of symbolism”. As in all symbolism, language correlates experiences, tying sounds to images, smells, what have you, or vice versa. Returning these figures in *Process and Reality*, he wrote, “the word ‘forest’ may suggest memories of forests, but equally the sight of a forest, or memories of forests, may suggest the word, ‘forest.’”⁴⁴ Dissolving the difference between human and nonhuman beings, Whitehead ascribed experience, even “enjoyment”

39. David George Haskell. *The Songs of Trees*. New York. Penguin Books, 2017, p.45.

40. Haskell. *Songs*, ix. Haskell can be seen to realize a task proposed by Bennett, namely that we “devise new procedures, technologies and regimes of perception that enable us to consult nonhumans more closely, or to listen and respond more carefully to their outbreaks, objections, testimonies and propositions.” Bennett, *Vibrant*, 108.

41. *Ibid.* 121

42. Haskell, *Songs*, 191-3.

43. Whitehead, Alfred North. *Symbolism*. New York. Fordham University Press, 1927, p. 11

44. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*. New York. The Free Press, 1978 (1929), p.182

to all entities, every one of which is comprised by its relationships with, or regard for others.⁴⁵ He put the ‘mentalism’ in environmentalism. At the same time, he emphasized the multimedia, intersensory aspect of language, noting that the written word can suggest the spoken, the sound meaning, etc.⁴⁶ Language elicits not only cognitive meaning, but also “enveloping suggestiveness and an emotional efficacy.”⁴⁷ Hence, “it is a mistake to think of words as primarily the vehicle of thoughts.”⁴⁸

Whitehead understood his philosophy in the same manner, that is, not as a set of ideas more or less representative of the world, but rather as an intervention in processes of interaction, or as he put it, a “lure” for correlated feelings and dispositions.⁴⁹ He described representational thinking, or what he called “presentational immediacy”, as a partial and derivative mode of experience, one that reduces manifold embodied influences of “causal efficacy” to the discrete interactions of objects and subjects. Inasmuch as it places us in profound solidarity with all other entities, Shaviro notes, “there is more than a hint of romanticism in Whitehead’s notion of causal efficacy.”⁵⁰ Indeed, Whitehead found the efficacy of the world aptly communicated by the language of the Romantic poets Byron, Shelley and Wordsworth.⁵¹ In Shaviro’s words, the romantics showed that “nature cannot be divorced from its aesthetic values.”⁵² However, as Whitehead’s offhand remark about ecstasy or agony suggests, the aesthetic values of nature, or encounters with forests, are highly variable. Wordsworth and Shelley, he noted, differently figured nature, either as a background of permanence on one hand, and as endless change on the other, a difference he traced to the contrasting landscapes in which they composed their writings.⁵³

Inasmuch as all symbols elicit multisensory correlations, Whitehead suggests that “certain aesthetic experiences which are easy to produce make better symbols than do words.”⁵⁴ He mentions the use of incense to evoke religious emotions.⁵⁵ What might we say about trees? In Whitehead’s example of the poet in the forest, trees were nonlinguistic symbols. Elaborating on this suggestion, we might inquire into the aesthetic, and even ethico-political agency of trees. Trees operate act on human beings at a variety of levels. They exert causal influences, of course, variously mitigate

45. Ibid., p.13. Indeed, for Whitehead, one does not so much have experiences as one is a path of experiences. He writes, “we assign to the percipient an activity in the production of its own experience, although that moment of experience, in its character of being that one occasion, is the percipient itself.” Whitehead, *Symbolism*, 9.

46. Whitehead, *Symbolism*, 11.

47. Ibid., 67.

48. Whitehead, *Process*, 182.

49. Isabelle Stengers describes Whitehead’s thought in his own terms as a discursive technique “to induce empirically felt variations in the way our experience matters.” See Stengers, ‘A Constructivist Reading of Process and Reality’ in Nicholas Gaskill and A. J. Nocek, Eds. *The Lure of Whitehead*. Minneapolis. University of Minnesota Press, 2014, p.48

50. Shaviro, *Universe*, 56.

51. He writes of Wordsworth’s Prelude, “It would hardly be possible to express more clearly a feeling for nature, as exhibiting entwined prehensive unities, each suffused with modal presences of others.” Whitehead. *Science and the Modern World*, New York, Macmillan, 1948/1925, 85)

52. Shaviro, *Universe* 60.

53. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*. New York. MacMillan 1948 (1925), p.87.

54. Whitehead, *Process*, 183.

55. Ibid.

atmospheric concentrations of carbon and modulate human experiences of elevated temperatures.⁵⁶ However, they can also elicit objects of concern and induce sensibilities and dispositions. Various studies have shown, for instance, that green spaces can remediate human sensibilities attenuated by the overstimulations of urban life, inducing more calm, reflective dispositions.⁵⁷ Might trees also imbue human beings with a sense of belonging and custodial care? In short, might they be agents of posthumanist perspectives? The question can be asked in earnest. Piers Stephens, for instance, suggests that the ‘vitality’ of encounters with nature depends upon “the extent to which they grant possibilities of new perception through non-instrumentalized immediate experience.”⁵⁸ Thus, for instance, “the calm perception of a spider’s web-work bridging two shrubs” can induce modes of attentiveness detached from the narrowing focus of instrumental consciousness, the kind of experience William James distinguished from habits.⁵⁹

Like James, Henri Bergson, Whitehead and Deleuze privileged such moments, when instrumental bearings between subject and object are momentarily suspended in favor of sensations of indeterminate origin and location. The tenor of such experiences, vary drastically, however, ranging from ecstasy to agony, or, as Whitehead suggest in other places, “terror”.⁶⁰ As he flatly put it, “feelings, divorced from immediate sensa, are pleasant, or unpleasant, according to mood.”⁶¹ Moods, in turn, are shaped by embodied encounters and symbolic correlations. The thoughts and sensations evoked by a given symbol will not be the same for every person, or in every context. Not all are calmed by the sight of spiders at work amongst their shrubs. Whitehead remarks, “... meanings are often shifting and indeterminate. This happens even in the case of words: other people misunderstand their import.”⁶² Inasmuch they enter our experience “on equal terms”, the same can be said for trees. Their aesthetic, and so their ethic-political value, will vary along with the territories, broadly understood, in which they are encountered.

While trees have no intrinsic aesthetic value, they can nonetheless be vital components of landscapes of concern or indifference, of care and of terror. In his study of “slow violence”, for instance, Rob Nixon describes several intersecting dimensions along which trees contribute to

56. See Nicholas H. Wolff, Yuta J. Masuda, et. al. Impacts of tropical deforestation on local temperature and human well-being perceptions. *Global Environmental Change*. Volume 52, September 2018, Pages 181-189.

57. Thus, “research findings suggest that individuals’ desire for contact with nature is not just the result of a romanticised view of nature, but is an important adaptive process, which appears to aid optimum functioning”. Joe Barton and Mike Rogerson, ‘The Importance of Greenspace for Mental Health’. *BJPsych Int*. 2017 Nov; 14(4): 79–81.

58. Piers Stephens, ‘Liberalisms Old and New’. *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Political Theory*. Oxford. Oxford University Press, , p.66

59. Ibid.

60. Whitehead, “An inhibition of familiar sensa is very apt to leave us a prey to vague terrors respecting a circumambient world of causal operations... the presentations of sense fade away, and we are left with the vague feeling of influences from vague things around us”. Whitehead *Process*, 176; Cf. Whitehead *Symbolism*, 43 on inhibition of sense data yielding “a terrifying sense of vague presences.” Deleuze and Guattari find a terror of this kind articulated by H.P. Lovecraft. “‘Merging with nothingness is peaceful oblivion; but to be aware of existence and yet to know that one is no longer a definite being distinguished from other beings,’ nor from all of the beings running through us, ‘that is the nameless summit of agony and dread.’” Deleuze and Guattari, *ATP*, 240.

61. Whitehead *Process*, 176.

62. Whitehead, *Process*, 183

human environmental politics. As he notes, the Green Belt Movement formed by Wangari Maathai to combat deforestation and forced displacements in Kenya – one of Nixon’s privileged examples of the environmentalism of the poor - illuminated the reverberation of tree ecosystems in social and military conflicts. In this movement, he argues, trees served a “theatrical” as well as a strategic function, playing a part in what he calls “aesthetic activism”.⁶³ He writes, “Tree planting served not only as a practical response to an attritional environmental calamity but... in addition, a symbolic hub for political resistance and for media coverage of an otherwise amorphous issue”.⁶⁴

As these examples indicate, trees not only play a crucial role as connectors and as symbols of rhizomatic entanglement, but they also situate human communities in time, or educate human temporal perspectives. They comprise a kind of slow anti-violence, thematizing the trans-generational temporality of sustainable ecologies. Trees have often played a central role in marking the durations as well as the territorial locations of trans-generational human societies. In a study of the landscapes of American activism, Daegan Miller notes the significance of “witness trees” in American colonial settlements.⁶⁵ Those trees with annual ‘rings’ have served as important sources for measurements of environmental change in human history. More broadly, it might be argued that the temporal perspective proper to trees is well suited to the ethical and political imaginaries of posthumanist thinkers. Deleuze and Guattari, for instance, argued that the terror which can generate hostile reactions to transversal relationships (which alter those who enter into them) should be ameliorated by retaining ‘small plots’, a phrase that can indicate both spatial and temporal stabilities.⁶⁶ The lifecycles of trees might serve as a mediator of sorts between the turbulence of contemporary social and ecological processes and the geological perspective implied by the term ‘Anthropocene’, which situates human history in long durations or “cycles” of climatological and biological change.⁶⁷

I cannot elaborate on these speculations here, but only note, again, that none of this is inevitable, or even likely, and that the ethical or political function of posthumanist philosophies will depend upon their creative deployment in changing historical and ecological circumstances. As we explore their possibilities, we will be well served by the lessons of the canon of the humanities, which has been distinguished from that of the sciences not by the aim of discovering the essence and purposes of the human - with all its attendant exclusions and hierarchies - but rather by self-conscious attention to rhetorical, stylistic and figural dimensions of language through which ideas are communicated, and gain purchase in sensibilities and practices.⁶⁸

63. The relevant section of his book is titled ‘The Theater of the Tree’. Nixon, *Slow* 132.

64. *Ibid.*

65. Daegan Miller. *This Radical Land*. Chicago. The University of Chicago Press, 2018, 2.

66. Deleuze and Guattari *ATP*, 160-161.

67. A similar temporal perspective is involved in descriptions the present as the era of the ‘6th extinction’, which human beings are at once living through, and substantially causing. See Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction*. New York. Henry Holt, 2014.

68. As I have argued elsewhere, Wordsworth sought to replicate “critical feelings” with his poetry, which he suggested might contribute to a remediation of a modern sensorium, and even improve inter-class social relations. See Shapiro, ‘Critical Feelings and Pleasurable Associations’. *Theory & Event* 13.4 December, 2010.