

(IN)SENSIBLE ECOLOGIES: EXPANDING RELATIONALITY THROUGH IMAGINATION

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ABSTRACT: If we are to move beyond the instrumentalization of nature-as-resource, we must develop ways of being in the world that challenge anthropocentric perspectives that tend to reduce nature to its utilitarian value. This essay is an exploration of the imagination as one such means by which we can move beyond a vision of nature as something that is to be catalogued, classified or otherwise “improved” – a perspective that tends to frame the environmental crisis as primarily a set of problems requiring solutions that can be fully articulated through empirically verifiable modalities of calculative rationality. The imagination is herein articulated as the “organ of perception” (Goethe) capable of giving expression to otherwise insensible phenomena and expanding the realm of relationality to include the more-than-human. A uniquely “telluric” imagination will be articulated as an ethical response to the current ecological moment that moves beyond models of the imagination as being merely mimetic, productive or parodic (Kearney). It differentiates itself from these subjective modalities by emphasizing the process-relational aspect of the imagination as emergent from the space *between* subject and object. The essay concludes with a brief examination of Adam Dickinson’s “Metabolic Poetics” as an expression of the telluric imagination that responds to the “invitation” at the heart of the environmental crisis not by providing solutions, but by gesturing beyond sensible nature towards the latent possibilities therein.

KEYWORDS: Imagination; Poetics; Sensibility; Relationality

What does it mean to allow oneself to inhabit that which is strange, nonintuitive, insensible—that which is remote from human comprehension or intelligibility—like phytoplankton, seeds, fungi, geological epochs, or multicelled organisms at the beginnings of time? This is not some micro/macro limit experience at the chapel of extreme environmentalism, but a way to think about how that which makes us comfortable reinforces the boundaries of the human, rather than exposing them.

(Yusoff, 2013, p. 225)

The more generous the scale at which imagination is exerted, the healthier and more humane the community will be.

(Robinson, 2012, p. 21)

INTRODUCTION

This essay is a response to Yusoff's (2013) call for a "mode of relating that is indifferent to "us"" that also enacts a "loosening of a notion of agency as the basis for social action without a parallel disavowal of responsibility" (p. 210). In what follows, the imagination will be articulated as that which gives expression to otherwise insensible phenomena that thereby "releases other modes of being into being" and provides a way into an "expanded realm of relationality" (p. 208). The possibilities of an earthly "telluric" imagination are further explored as a specifically ethical response to the current ecological moment that seeks to move beyond models of the imagination as being merely mimetic, productive or parodic (Kearney, 1988). It differentiates itself from these subjective modalities by emphasizing the process-relational aspect of the imagination as emergent from the space *between* subject and object.

If we are to move beyond the instrumentalization of nature as mere "standing reserve" (Heidegger, 1977), we must develop ways of being in the world that challenge anthropocentric and logocentric perspectives that ultimately reduce nature to its utilitarian value. Whether nature is understood as something to be catalogued, classified, improved, fixed, captured, dominated, stewarded etc., we are here enacting an evaluative framework from within an ideology of progress that is (often tacitly) framed by a telos of "improvement". This logic tends to frame the environmental crisis as primarily a set of problems requiring solutions that can be fully articulated through empirically verifiable modalities of calculative rationality. Our understanding of this problem-solution binary is thus obtained in accord with an ethical comportment that measures all things in terms of their value for us while instantiating the human subject as transcendent to the "rest of" nature.

As the limitations of anthropocentric perspectives become ever more apparent in our inability to deal with the multiple cascading feedback loops of the environmental crisis, it behooves us to seek ways of resonating with that which

exceed sensibility (that is always “configured with directionality” (Yusoff, 2013, p. 217)). The “symptoms” of the environmental crisis (whether climate change, biodiversity loss, ocean acidification etc.) that we attempt redress through reform environmentalisms¹ are so massively distributed through time and space so as to transcend locality and resist sensibility². They exist in other words, at the threshold of (in)sensibility and beckon a sense of our interconnectedness, vulnerability and ultimately our very being as cosmic agents. Grosz (1999) similarly refers to this “excess” of nature as a profusion of causes, which no longer produces singular or even complex effect(s) but generates events (p. 4) and it is here that we are summoned to develop a “virtual ecology” that is “beyond the relations of actualized forces” that “will not simply attempt to preserve the endangered species of cultural life, but equally to engender conditions for the creation and development of unprecedented formations of subjectivity that have never been seen and never felt” (Guattari, 1995, p. 91).

(IN)SENSIBILITY

In Yusoff’s (2013) essay *Insensible worlds: Postrelational ethics, indeterminacy and the (k)nots of relating*, the insensible is explored as “a realm of possibility within the praxis of social and affective norms of sense that may release other modes of being into being” (p. 208). “Thinking along the cusp of the insensible” is articulated as a means to expand the realm of relationality and address the current ecological moment through the creation of “new practices of sensations and new sensibilities formed around such diffuse, recalcitrant, and dislocated issues as biodiversity loss, new forms of biotechnological life, and climate change” (p. 213). Yusoff further suggests that before we can ask ourselves *how* to respond to these issues we must first ask ourselves *what is response?*² and further examine how responsibility is raised as a sensible question. The ethical orientation of her argument is towards “a response that is not configured through a mode of auto-affection, but through a mode of relating that is indifferent to ‘us’ and holds fast to that indifference” (p. 209). For while that which is nonrelational to “us” cannot

¹ Measures that are for the most part advocated “within the given terms of capitalist industrial society” (Clark, 2011, p. 2) (e.g., ‘sustainable development’, carbon offset schemes, resource management, geo-engineering, energy efficiency measures etc.)

² What Morton (2013) has referred to elsewhere as hyperobjects, further described as being viscous, molten, nonlocal, phased and inter-objective.

appear as empirical sense-event, it may nonetheless be disclosed through an imaginative attunement to and expression of that which is at the threshold of (in)sensibility.

In taking up this challenge to think-with the insensible, Yusoff invites us to (for example) “notice that which the insect pays attention to” and to “think about how we might be discriminating against this worlding by the use of chlorinated pesticides” - to “stretch out and accompany the sense of another, even as it becomes strange” (p. 216). Our imaginative forays into these insensibilities are necessary in order to begin to illuminate worlds that are “invisibly sutured to ours through all sorts of biochemical interferences and material recombinations, but which remain insensible to the priorities of our sensibilities” (p. 216). For Yusoff this effort to “address the surplus that falls short of sense” becomes an “ecological necessity”, as the effects of PCB’s and POP’s³ in the environment (for example) are “carried forward without immediate disclosure” unless otherwise made sensible (p. 218).

In thinking-with Derrida, Yusoff stresses that any true justice (environmental or otherwise) must be responsible beyond the present and include modes of relation beyond the sensible. And while this may be difficult to negotiate in “fields of practice, and in policy-based ecology... ...where attribution requires stabilised entities for contractual obligations” (p. 212), it is necessary for moving beyond mere reform environmentalisms that respond only to anthropocentric categorizations given to sense. What is required is a means of perceiving and expressing otherwise (in)sensible earthly phenomena in such a way that they “stretch out into the untimely insensible spaces of many differently configured others [as] an experiment, a practice, and a test of our sense of ourselves” (p. 225).

THE TELLURIC IMAGINATION

If we are to challenge this anthropocentric “sense of ourselves”, we must develop ways of entering into dynamic participation with nature not only as an empirically verifiable collection of (conceptual) objects but also as a “materio-semiotic network of human and nonhuman agents incessantly generating the

³ Polychlorinated biphenyls and persistent organic pollutants (a small selection of that which Dickinson poetically explores below).

world's embodiments and events" (Iovino & Opperman, 2014, p. 3). This requires us to be able to account for the meaning-full, felt dimensions of experience not as merely epiphenomenal but rather as being just as "real" as (so called) "objective" reality. For Mathews (2009) this is a shift that the current ecological crisis demands of us that is "no less profound in its existential consequences than the pre-Socratic shift towards reason" (p. 2).

In Mathews' (2009) vision of onto-poetics, "the presuppositions and beliefs we bring to our encounter with the world act as a kind of *invocation* – they call up reality under a particular aspect or aspects [that are revealed] to us in the course of the encounter" (p. 3). Nature is in other words *communicative* and reveals itself meaningfully in response to our invocations (whether tacit or explicit). In our comportment towards nature we must take care that we do not reduce the complex becomings of the more-than-human world to a mere "standing reserve" through an overcommitment to "correct determinations" at the expense of "truth" (Heidegger, 1977, p. 13)⁴. Mathews' onto-poetic perspective discloses a complex intra-activity (Barad, 2007) through which we enact an epistemic shift from "correct determinations" towards the meaningfully imaginative. Rather than "insisting on sole authorship of our lives" we are invited to "offer ourselves up as terrain for poetic inscription" (Mathews, 2009, p. 4) and thus engender our response-ability to the sym-poeisis (Haraway, 2016) of the more-than-human world. This does not require that we eschew conceptualization, calculative rationality and logical analysis, but only that we open ourselves to the latent possibility of an imagination that can "become absorbed in the generative source of the present" (Mathews, 2007, p. 12).

For Goethe (1971), the "organ of perception" that enacts this creative dynamic is precisely the imagination. It is that which participates "upstream" with the coming into being of nature (*natura naturans*) and the act of seeing itself, as opposed to beginning "downstream" with the manifest phenomena of nature (*natura naturata*) and that which is seen (Bortoft, 2012). This form of "delicate empiricism" is enacted through a process of "exact sensorial imagination" whereby intimate and sustained engagement with the dynamic materiality of nature is followed by

⁴ Heidegger (1977) continues here: "where this ordering holds sway, it drives out every other possibility of revealing", and we move closer to the "supreme danger" that we ourselves will also have to be taken as standing-reserve (p. 14).

retreat into the revelatory disclosures of the personal imagination where what has been empirically engaged continues to unfold ⁵:

“[Imagination] finds its field of activity in what is becoming, the intellect in what is finished... ...[Imagination] delights in *ongoing development*; the intellect tries to hold everything fast so that it can be put to use.” (Goethe as cited in Steiner, 2000, p. 55)

For while concepts of intellectual origin are “immediately clear”, by beginning in, and remaining in imaginative ambiguity, we are compelled to think beyond the human and in this way become attuned not to categories known in advance, but to nature emerging in perception.

The imagination thus cannot be reduced to a mere re-presentation of reality, nor to a localized subjective phenomenon. Kearney (1988) traces a genealogy of the imagination through the premodern paradigm of mimesis, the modern paradigm of production and the postmodern paradigm of parody⁶. Each “relates to a general disposition of understanding which governs a specific period and informs the specific way people conceptualize the relationship between imagination and reality” (p. 17) and from each we learn some “basic truth”:

From the mimetic paradigm of onto-theology we learn that imagination is “always a response to the demands of an other existing beyond the self”. From the productive paradigm we learn that it must “never abdicate a personal responsibility for invention, decision and action”. And from the parodic paradigm we learn that we are “living in a common Civilization of images”. (p. 390)

The task for our current ecological moment is to develop a sense of the imagination that learns from its own history while also looking towards futures that can accommodate both human and more-than-human relations. What the mimetic, productive and parodic models of the imagination lack is an explicit articulation of the imagination as generated both from without *and* within, as *between* the sensible and the insensible. By locating the source of imagination in transcendent forms (mimetic), in a subjectively generative source (productive), or

⁵ An approach that is described by Robbins (2006) as being: (i) participatory (it results from intimate engagement with a given phenomenon), (ii) morally-responsive (it dissolves subject-object boundaries to enable identification with phenomena beyond abstract categories), (iii) holistic (it perceives not a unity in multiplicity but rather a multiplicity in unity), and (iv) dynamic (it is a process that never “arrives” but rather continually opens itself as ongoing event).

⁶ Kearney employs here the metaphors of the “referential figure” of the mirror (premodern), the “expressive figure” of the lamp (modern) and the “reflexive figure” of a labyrinth of looking glasses (postmodern).

the floating play of signifiers (parodic) we tend to overlook the relational aspect of the imagination occurring in the materio-semiotic space at the threshold of (in)sensibility.

In looking to name this nascent sense of the imagination we may draw a useful metaphor from an earthly process existing at the threshold of (in)sensibility. A telluric current (or earth current) is an electric current which moves through the earth and/or its bodies of water caused by the complex intra-activity of a myriad variety of forces including atmospheric, oceanic, terrestrial, solar, volcanic, biological, radioactive and metabolic phenomena (Helman, 2013). The resultant currents operate beyond human sensibility and exist below the threshold of perception typically at very low frequencies. They can however occasionally manifest in dramatic ways, including earthquakes (Trenkin, 2015), damages to infrastructure (Helman, 2013) and disruptions to electronic communications (Avakyan & Namgaladze, 2012). While they largely result *from* natural causes, telluric currents can also be induced *by* human agents in order to palpate the earth and discern what is hidden beneath the surface. They are in this way cultural-natural hybrids, both in the sense that their appearance results from the complex intra-activity of human and more-than-human events and in the sense that we engage with telluric currents via participative investigations. In Yusoff's (2013) words (describing the insensible) they are "between – as agitator, contagion, and never as presence as such – only as force or motivation oscillating between the material and virtual, inhuman and human, organic and nonorganic, time and the untimely" (p. 213). We thus both effect and are affected by currents operating in the realm of the insensible from which we can disclose earthly knowledge. A telluric imagination then is the process by which expression is given to otherwise insensible relations through attentive awareness, active participation and dynamic expression.

METABOLIC POETICS

As an example of the telluric imagination we turn now towards Canadian poet-philosopher Adam Dickinson who focuses on the "intersections between poetry and science as a way of exploring new ecocritical perspectives and alternative

modes of poetic composition”⁷. His “Metabolic Poetics” in particular is concerned with:

shifting the frames and scales of conventional forms of signification in order to bring into focus the often inscrutable biological and cultural writings intrinsic to the Anthropocene, especially as this is reflected in the inextricable link between the metabolic processes of human and nonhuman bodies and the global metabolism of energy and capital. (2019, p. 175)

This effort to render insensible relations through imaginative participation is most directly expressed in his poetic works *The Polymers* (2013) and *Anatomic* (2018). In both, Dickinson explores the myriad ways petrochemicals move through materio-semiotic spaces as intractable hyperobjects. As “experiments and entanglements with nonhuman others” these works provide the “much needed riposte to the recognition of nonhumans in capitalist systems of valuation” that Yusoff (2013, p. 210) calls for. *The Polymers* (2013) begins with a “Hail” from plastic itself:

Hello from inside
the albatross
with a windproof lighter
and Japanese police tape
(p. 7)

and we are immediately beckoned towards the complex entanglements of culture-nature, biotic-abiotic and materio-semiotic relations. The inscrutable pervasiveness of plastic as a “tool and as physical and chemical pollution, makes it an organizing principle” (p. 1) and by imaginatively rendering these relations Dickinson brings to sensibility that which typically eludes it.

There still remains the challenge however of securing these forms of recognition as “lasting commitments” that enable an understanding of the “durability of intra-actions beyond the intra-action itself” (Yusoff, 2013, p. 210) and of promoting ethical response. In *Anatomic* (2018) Dickinson goes beyond the imaginative “sequencing” of *The Polymers* to dramatically include his own body and by so doing secures a site of corporeal sensibility in which to explore

⁷ Information obtained from Brock University faculty website available at: <https://brocku.ca/humanities/english-language-and-literature/faculty/adam-dickinson/>

the intra-activity (and durability) of otherwise insensible relations. The poems in *Anatomic* emerge from a sustained biomonitoring regime during which Dickinson drew blood, swabbed bacteria and tested his feces to measure the chemical and microbial diversity of his body. What he discovered there was a complex of pesticides, polymers and endocrine disruptors that not only negatively affect health, but also regulate mood and personality. The resultant collection of poems draws attention to the “coextensive and intra-active nature of the body with its environment and the consequent implications for linking the human to the non-human and the personal to the global in environmental ethics (2019, p. 174).

In *Mono-(3-carboxypropyl) phthalate (Urine): 11.8 ng/mL* we find that not only do grasses, succulents, date palm, rhubarb and parsley “defend themselves” with “tannins, terpenes and alkaloids”, but also that “dead plants defend themselves rearranged into plastics”. We find “estrogens in air fresheners, shower curtains, detergents, cosmetics” and estrogens that “accumulate like sensible heat” (Dickinson, 2019, pp. 174-175). These phthalates and endocrine disruptors transform not only the chemical composition of our bodies, but also our moods and behaviour. The insensibilities of polymers and petrochemicals has been made sensible through an imaginative (and literal) embodiment-expression of their affective potential. Their intra-agency is not merely represented in imagination but has rather been *enacted through* a telluric imagination that moves within the materio-semiotic space at the threshold of (in)sensibility.

This complex interweaving of the sensible and insensible is but one possible response to Yusoff’s (2013) call for a better understanding of the “interiorities and exteriorities of the knots we tie” that may thus allow us to “pass through particular configurations of the human to a more ethically enduring political and material philosophy” (p. 214). We might further consider it here in terms of what Guattari (1995) has identified as a necessary “aesthetic paradigm” – the “creation and composition of mutant percepts and affects that has become the paradigm for every possible form of liberation” (p. 91). Either way, as a dramatic expression of telluric imagination Dickinson’s *Metabolic Poetics* responds to the “invitation” at the heart of the environmental crisis not by providing solutions, but by gesturing beyond sensible nature towards the latent possibilities therein.

CONCLUSION

The work of the telluric imagination is ongoing. We do not step in the same river twice and indeed the river seems to be changing its course more rapidly than ever. As we attempt to move towards healthier and more humane communities, we must enact the imagination in ways that ethically resonate with the more-than-human world. There is no still point in the river from which to begin and we find ourselves perpetually *in media res* - within temporalities extending beyond ourselves, causalities we cannot fully map, and a sense of meaning that continually recedes on the horizon. It is from this very excess of nature however that we constitute ourselves and by deeply listening to, and actively imagining at the threshold of (in)sensibility we convoke those worlds that are “invisibly sutured to ours... ..but which remain insensible to the priorities of our sensibilities” (Yusoff, 2013, p. 216) and so expand the realm of relationality to include the more-than-human becomings of a perpetually nascent earth.

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