
Critical Exchange

The nonhuman condition: Radical democracy through new materialist lenses

Hans Asenbaum

University of Canberra, Canberra, ACT 2617, Australia
hans.asenbaum@canberra.edu.au

Amanda Machin

University of Agder, 4604 Kristiansand, Norway
amanda.machin@uia.no

Jean-Paul Gagnon

University of Canberra, Canberra, ACT 2617, Australia
jean-paul.gagnon@canberra.edu.au

Diana Leong

San Diego State University, San Diego, CA 92182, USA
dleong@sdsu.edu

Melissa Orlie

University of Illinois, Urbana, IL 61801, USA
orlie@illinois.edu

James Louis Smith

University College Cork, Cork T12K8AF, Ireland
james.smith@ucc.ie

Is radical democracy only for humans? From Pateman's (1970) workplace participation to Habermas' communicative rationality (1984) and Laclau and Mouffe's counter-hegemony (1985), radical democratic thinking has conventionally taken the human as the sole subject of politics. Whether through the formation of coalitions, citizens' assemblies, or social movement protest, it is the human who acts upon the world, and it is 'the human condition' (Arendt, 1958) that provides the possibility for democratic politics. More recently, however, democratic theorists have extended their attention beyond the human (Connolly, 2013). Questions are emerging regarding the political significance and potential agency of animals (Donaldson et al., 2021), natural events (Romero & Dryzek, 2021), rivers



(Smith, 2017), ecosystems (Winter, 2019), viruses (Parry et al., 2021), public things (Honig, 2017), material places (Parkinson, 2012), bodies (Machin, 2022a), digital technologies (Asenbaum, 2021a), and artificial intelligence (Alnemr, 2020). Radical democratic thinking is becoming intrigued by the material situatedness of its political agents and by the role of nonhuman participants in political interaction. At stake here is the displacement of narrow anthropocentrism that currently guides democratic theory and practice, and its repositioning into what we call ‘the nonhuman condition.’

Diverse contributions broadly captured by the term ‘new materialism’ have a lot to add to these discussions. They describe the world in terms of ‘vibrant matter’ that is not only acted upon by humans but is also itself active, productive, and unpredictable (Bennett, 2010a, 2010b; Connolly, 2013; Coole & Frost, 2010; Orlie, 2010). Humans are one component of assemblages, entanglements, and swarms that form diverse ecologies. To overlook this is to underestimate the rich plurality of political life and to preclude the possibility of true democratic inclusion. Yet hardly any cross-fertilization takes place between new materialist and radical democratic thinking.

Perhaps this is due to an apparent contradiction between the two schools. Radical democratic theory appears to new materialists as deeply anthropocentric as it depends upon the human subject as agent of emancipation. In their quest for inclusion, radical democrats neglect nonhuman life and more-than-human ways of knowing and being (Bennett, 2010b). Conversely, the new materialist counterproposal of living ecologies including material objects and artifacts, nonhuman animals, and socioecological crises is met with scepticism by radical democrats. For in this world of distributive agency, in which humans are ‘cyborgs’ (Haraway, 1991), social and political responsibility appears too easily conceded. New materialism, in this view, makes way for a post-political world unaffected by human democratic ambition (Boysen, 2018; Cudworth & Hobden, 2015; Krause, 2011).

This Critical Exchange explores the nonhuman condition. It asks: What are the implications of decentering the human subject via a new materialist reading of radical democracy? Does this reading dilute political agency? Or should this be seen, on the contrary, as an invitation for new voices and demands to enter into democratic assemblages? How might engagement with the more-than-human disrupt or extend theories of radical democracy? In our introductory contribution, we engage with the radical democratic human subject and explore new materialist thinking and its challenge to anthropocentrism. We offer a preliminary answer to how democratic agency is reconfigured under the nonhuman condition. While these questions have no final answers, we show that engaging with them opens a fruitful conversation about the limits and content of radical democracy.

Despite its long and varied lineage, from its origins in lands that became Syria, Iraq, and Iran, democracy has always stood for the idea that ‘the matter of who gets what, when and how should be permanently an open question’ (Keane, 2009, p.



xii). This openness is the starting point of ‘radical democracy’ as we see it, in which ‘radical’ signifies the return to the ‘roots’ of the practice of self-rule. This includes both transformations toward democratic utopias and the revitalization of political institutions to align them more closely with fundamental democratic values.

The term ‘radical democracy’ has been claimed by various strands of democratic theory including participatory (Pateman, 1989, p. 14), deliberative (Cohen & Fung, 2004), agonistic (Mouffe, 1989), and autonomist Marxist approaches (Deleixhe, 2018). We regard these various instantiations of radical democracy as non-exclusive and define radical democracy as the internally pluralist, transformative project of enacting democratic principles of freedom and equality (see Norval, 2001).

Despite its inclusive and participatory agenda, radical democracy has been targeted and augmented by various critiques. Feminists, for example, have not only demanded the extension of democracy to the private sphere including ‘the kitchen, the nursery and the bedroom’ (Pateman, 1989, p. 222; see also Young, 1990) but also the rethinking of the conceptions that had facilitated and *depended upon* the traditional exclusion of women from politics (Pateman, 1989, p. 14). Feminist democratic theory profoundly reforms radical democracy. Likewise, endeavors to decolonize radical democracy do not simply call for an expansion of the boundaries and internal equality of the demos by including peoples from the Majority World but call for a profound rethinking of its meaning and content (Banerjee, 2021; Singh, 2019).

Radical democracy now faces a new, not unrelated critique which targets the explicit disqualification of nonhumans from the demos (Bennett, 2010a, 2010b, p. 106). Scholars have drawn attention to Indigenous world views that highlight the interconnectedness of humans with their ecosystems (Whyte, 2017; Winter, 2019). This resonates with work exploring mechanisms of democratic inclusion for nonhuman animals and material objects. John Dryzek was among the first to call for ‘dismantling what is perhaps the biggest political boundary of them all: that between the human and the nonhuman world’ (Dryzek, 2000, p. 153). Observations of nonhuman animals’ democratic arrangements, for example the deliberations among honeybees about their best nesting option (Seeley, 2010), are extended into conceptions of interspecies democracy (Donaldson et al., 2021). From free spaces for nonhuman animals in cities as ‘animal agoras’ (Donaldson, 2020) to material deliberation between humans and seagulls (Meijer, 2019), interspecies democracy can take many forms.

Democratic inclusion does not need to stop at nonhuman animals. Von Redecker and Herzig (2020, p. 658) propose ‘an extended form of democracy that is radical in its most literal sense, namely: rooted to the soil.’ Observing the international peasant movement La Via Campesina’s close connection to and respect for the land, it becomes clear that ‘the soil, the environment, nature, the nonhuman ...



participate in the democratic project itself” (p. 666). Romero and Dryzek (2021) highlight the agency of events such as thunderstorms or hurricane eruptions. This argument directs our attention to inanimate objects and artifacts as participants in democracy. Investigating ‘public things’ such as libraries, public squares or hospitals, Bonnie Honig (2017, pp. 5–6) notices the agency of material objects without which ‘we have nothing or not much to deliberate about, constellate around, or agonistically contest.’

At the very least, public things press us into relations with others. They are sites of attachment and meaning that occasion the inaugurations, conflicts, and contestations that underwrite everyday citizenship and democratic sovereignties.

In the digital age, the political significance of inanimate objects further increases. The lines between life and non-life blur as artificially intelligent agents enter everyday interaction. As early as 1984, Sherry Turkle conceptualized computers as evocative objects that call upon humans and co-create their identities. Evocative objects, while inanimate, are still lively: ‘The computer appears to have a psychology—it is a thing that is not quite a thing’ (Turkle, 1984, p. 54). Today, online bots increasingly influence the outcomes of elections and referenda and play a key role as facilitators of deliberative online forums (Alnemr, 2020).

The interactions and relations between humans, other animals, natural phenomena, artifacts, and evocative objects occasion a rethinking of democracy in terms of assemblages. Replacing the conception of democracy as a fixed set of institutions, democratic assemblages align diverse human and nonhuman encounters in ever evolving ways, always oriented toward the realization of freedom and equality (Asenbaum, 2022; Felicetti, 2021).

Building on feminist and decolonial critiques, the demand arising here, as we see it, is not to ‘add’ new subjects to democracy and ‘stir,’ nor is it to simplistically assign agency and representation to nonhumans. Instead, our suggestion is to examine the assumptions that have led to the omission of the nonhuman condition from democratic theory and to consider if, and how, challenging this omission might open the potential to extend, even rethink, radical democracy, or whether this ultimately depletes it of its capacities for empowerment and transformation.

This provokes the question how such distributive agency might impact conceptions of radical democracy. For many democrats, distributive agency is problematic: ‘In denying the link between agency and a subjectivity that is reflexive and individuated, albeit not sovereign, the new materialism threatens to eviscerate the ground for holding persons responsible. Consequently, it cannot sustain a model of agency that is viable to democratic politics’ (Krause, 2011, p. 317; see also Boysen, 2018). Projecting agency onto objects threatens to mask the human intentionality behind the creation of these objects. Consider smart devices which may appear as our friends, partners or helpers, but which are created



with the purpose of profit maximization and whose creators benefit from our dependency on them (Asenbaum, 2021a). If humans are simply elements in an assemblage, then they cannot act responsibly and freely: Hence, ‘new materialism ignores the unique specificity of human agency and the transformatory capabilities of our species’ (Cudworth & Hobden, 2015, p. 135).

New materialist lenses, in turn, caution that radical democratic thinking, for the most part, remains firmly rooted in anthropocentric views which obstruct it from engaging fully with the possibilities and problems of the world in which we live. Climate change, biodiversity loss, the rise of artificial intelligence, and sharpening economic inequality pose questions for the practices and theories of democracy and open opportunities for its reimagining (Machin, 2022b). We argue that the radical democratic exploration of the nonhuman condition may find fruitful ground in theories of new materialism that disturb limited assumptions about human rationality and mastery over nature (Coole & Frost, 2010, p. 10).

Overcoming the dilemma between radical democratic anthropocentrism and the new materialist lack of political responsibility requires a rethinking of democratic subjectivity. Rather than understanding the subject as coherent rational actor, as deliberative and participatory democrats would, or as discursively constructed, as proposed by agonists (Asenbaum, 2021b), new materialism allows for an understanding of the human subject itself as a decentered assemblage consisting of blood flows, hormones, bacteria, habits, values, personal interests, political affiliations, and identity performances. Our bodies are important parts of such ever becoming assemblages. Bodies possess agency, actively produce meaning, rupture established hierarchies and contribute creatively to political exchange (Coole, 2005; Grosz, 2004; Machin, 2022a). Our actions are not purely rational because they are facilitated, coordinated, and negotiated within human and nonhuman–human assemblages that affect who we are, what we say, and how we participate in democratic politics. As Honig argues (2017, p. 5) in democratic interaction ‘[p]ublic things... constitute us, complement us, limit us, thwart us, and interpellate us into democratic citizenship.’ Relatedly, Asenbaum (2023) develops a theory of democratic space, in which material objects, affective bodies, and performative expressions interact to constitute democratic subjects as ever evolving assemblages.

In such democratic space circumscribed by the nonhuman condition, the human is located and conditioned within a rich and dynamic plurality of identities, issues, objects, and events and is ‘entangled with diverse beings’. What this nonhuman condition means for collective identities and democratic boundaries becomes a contested political issue that heightens, rather than depresses, democratic possibilities (Machin, 2019). The political subject, then, is not deprived of intentionality but is rather assigned further responsibility. She might lose her sense of fullness and closure but gain a sense of connection and openness. Humans are not and cannot be ‘masters’ of their environments but they can strive to interact with their



surroundings, disassemble, reassemble, and limit them in accordance with their intentions to forge new coalitions and disrupt established power relations. These engagements invoke respect and humility for the dynamics of the ecologies on which humans depend. This does not dissolve the role of humans in demanding and affecting societal progress toward freedom and equality but opens space for human–nonhuman collaboration. It is precisely this radical rethinking of the ‘common good’ under the nonhuman condition that can potentially radicalize democracy.

This decentered, hybridized, multiplied, and contested kind of human agency is the focus of the contributions to this Critical Exchange. Jean-Paul Gagnon highlights the possibility of becoming through loss. In losing our anthropocentric arrogance—our understanding of being other and better than animal—we become more connected and discover our place in human–nonhuman (potentially democratic) assemblages. Melissa Orlie agrees that something can be gained through renouncing dominant human fantasies and presents a ‘radical democratic naturalism.’ By renouncing land violence and acknowledging nature’s subjectivity, we can further nonexploitative radical democratic politics. Both Gagnon and Orlie emphasize radical democracy’s openness to alternatives. This is where the notion of ‘tidalectic’ processes introduced by James L. Smith is helpful. Focusing on water and the Indigenous knowledges around rivers, he considers how democracy and community can be reimagined as plural, cyclical, and attentive to the nonhuman with which the human is inevitably entangled. Diana Leong offers a different approach. Considering the nonhuman from the perspective of Black Studies demands an awareness to how blackness has long been constituted as non- or partially human.

The depth and richness of the contributions to this Critical Exchange make clear that new materialist thinking does not simply add new insight to theories of radical democracy. Rather, new materialism profoundly disrupts and alters radical democratic ontologies. The awareness of our entanglement in networks and swarms, and the realization of our own human–nonhuman hybridity allows us to extend our understanding of human agency and responsibility. Our situatedness within the nonhuman condition engenders a radicalization of democratic thought and action.

Hans Asenbaum and Amanda Machin

Becoming through loss: A new materialist (un)rooting of radical democracy

Radical democracy has two types of roots (e.g., Lündstrom, 2023; Lloyd & Little, 2009; Lummis, 1996; Mouffe, 1989). First, its historical nature comprises a set of established roots. Second, its progressive nature involves what I call its ‘reaching



roots.’ I will focus on the progressive nature of radical democracy to determine what some of its reaching roots are reaching for. I argue that radical democracy reaches toward abolition, toward becoming through loss.

To lose many things and become something else through those losses is to create an assemblage of entwined values, materials, and destinies. For example, in denying myself the consumption of meat, I find myself requesting others to, at least, be the ones to kill the animal whose flesh they wish to consume and to not eat or prepare meat around me. This request often starts a conversation about whether meat should ever be consumed and, in cases of protein scarcity, that meat should be treated as a sacred gift. Indeed, certain Indigenous lifeways (inclusive of near extinct native European customs suppressed as paganism by Christian colonists) teach us how to take a life responsibly but also how to honor that gift (Wall-Kimmerer, 2013).

The loss of consumption of industrialized meat leads to uncomfortable silences with meat eaters but also to a growing ethically robust change toward ‘the better’—and it is such change through loss and growth that radical democracy is undergoing. The assemblage of losing and becoming is a route/root for radical democracy with no end point that, as I will elaborate, comes from the importation of new materialist considerations into radical democratic theory.

Michael Marder’s (2013) philosophy of ‘vegetal life’ and ‘plant-thinking’ allows us to consider the genesis of radical democracy in a seed logic. As Marder writes: ‘the starting point [of] our inquiry [has] to do with the basic signification of [concepts] as motion and the rather counterintuitive attribution of this sense of living to plants’ (p. 36). A plant, from seed, succeeds in ‘two types of movement—growth and decay—and for the absorption of nutrients’ (p. 36). In this way, the ideas of radical democracy have their seed moments at various historical points.

One of the seed moments concerns socialists advocating worker’s liberation in the nineteenth century through council democracy (Muldoon, 2018). But a recent surge in planting radical democracy’s seeds only began in the 1970s with thinkers like Carole Pateman (1970), C. B. Macpherson (1977) and later Ernesto Laclau (1983), Chantal Mouffe (1989), and Slavoj Žižek (1992). In reading from Pateman to Žižek, we can, for instance, witness an intellectual motion that feeds on the decaying logics of mid-twentieth century political thought but also on traditional social structures to find the poisons in our understandings of reality. Drawing strength from the nutrients of their moment, their context, and capacity, they grow radical democratic theories into the soils of their concerns so that they become seedlings with lives of their own.

In this way, theories of radical democracy grow to encompass insights that are more characteristic of our present moment. These insights come from feminism, decoloniality and new materialism—or the embrace of ‘a non-anthropocentric realism grounded in a shift from epistemology to ontology and the recognition of matter’s intrinsic activity’ (Gamble et al., 2019, p. 118). An important point comes



from Žižek (2014, pp. 1–2), whose vital enrichment of Hegel’s *absoluter Gegenstoß* (absolute recoil) explains how a thing can emerge ‘out of its own loss.’ For Žižek, becoming through loss happens when a cause—here, arrogant human progress—‘acts against itself’ and becomes anew through its own willful and conscious undoing (p. 2). I find this idea both provocative and entirely apt for describing new materialism’s effect on radical democratic theories.

My concern here is into what radical democracy grows when it interfaces with new materialist thinking and faces loss. One of radical democracy’s theoretical roots is the development of a norm of relationality between people (individuals, groups, identities, cultures) and embodied materials (such as through quantum biology/physics (see McFadden & Al-Khalili, 2014), entanglement theory, and the web of life framework). The influence of new materialism is the cause of this development.

Understanding the nonhuman condition and how humans are situated, embodied and webbed in nonhumans whom they also affect (usually destructively), gives rise to opportunities for growth through losing the arrogant human mores and institutions that bind and direct so many of us. What limits us are the notions that we are better than animals, wiser than the mountain, masters of nature. Rejecting these claims, as Jane Bennett (2010a, 2010b) makes clear, gives us the opportunity to be less destructive toward nonhumans, our own bodies and those items that have hitherto been seen as ‘consumables.’ It offers the potential for sensing and grasping what Melissa Orlie in this Critical Exchange calls ‘animal mindedness.’

These are distinctly different concerns to the original concerns of radical democracy: more opportunities for all humans to participate in politics, the diffusion of power from centralized systems and the liberation of (human) subalterns from intolerance and oppression. These original aims of radical democracy focused on power and its constructions of policy, law and rights, finance, gender, sexuality, as well as differentiated access to and unjust concentration of power. Now, as new materialism is imported into radical democratic theories, these dynamics seed the desire to reconfigure what ‘being human’ means through reconfiguring our relationship with nonhumans whom we continue to tyrannize in shockingly brutal and callous ways.

This is what is at stake in the acknowledgment of the nonhuman condition. It is an abolition of the habits (political, economic, legal, social) whose practices maintain the reign of abuse, totalitarian control, terror, and destruction of nonhuman entities whom the Barasana—an Indigenous people in and of the Amazon—believe to be humans in different form (Davis, 2009, p. 108). The idea here is that we can emerge from our own, intentional ‘loss’ to grow into wiser peoples and a restrained, humbler, and less destructive species. This dynamic is an autotelic mission of contemporary radical democratic theories to politically challenge human arrogance (e.g., Hytten & Stemhagen, 2021).



Such a move is evident in a cross-reading of the emergent literature that reformulates radical democracy through applications of new materialism. It raises the political questions of how we are to become through loss and what is radical about this. Thomas Lemke (2018) takes Bennett to say that a posthuman politics is afoot that seeks to ‘open up the demos for more than human encounters’ (p. 42) and for this to be done through ‘associations and assemblages instead of individuals and isolated actors’ (p. 46). Simon Schleusener (2021) also draws from Bennett to posit that ‘old’ radical democracy and materialism can be re-read through a new materialist lens to ‘emphasize the complex intermingling of human and nonhuman actors.’ David Schlosberg and Romand Coles (2015, p. 161) argue that we must take ‘concern with power, politics, and sustainability represented in material flows through both human and nonhuman communities.’ And Robyn Eckersley (2020, p. 230) avers that a second form of ecological democracy has emerged which focuses on ‘connecting ecology and democracy by building resonance between environmental issues and publics via the material practices of everyday life.’

And yet, missing in this literature is a consideration of what experiential price is to be paid for these changes to manifest, for this new materialist root to grow out of radical democratic theories and into radical democratic politics. Such consideration requires reexamining access to animal products, changing one’s understanding of urban and suburban ‘green beauty,’ repairing one’s materials or making do with used goods instead of discarding and replacing them (‘respect materialism’), growing one’s own food or growing our food together, shrinking or removing one’s carbon and water ‘footprints,’ understanding the provenance of one’s consumables, sustaining public services as opposed to private privileges, decolonizing by giving land back to Indigenous peoples, moving from unsustainable mass industrialization to sustainable micro-industrialization, and foregoing certain pleasures such as travel—some parts of the world require rest from us, while in other parts of the world we are not welcome unless invited (e.g., Hawaii). All of this requires agitating for undoing, voting for retreat, campaigning for restrictions, and creating public policy for loss. But what is lost decays, what decays becomes nutrient, and what is nutrient is fed upon by new becomings.

The realization of new becomings through loss first came to me through an Anishinaabeg teaching of creation (recordings of this teaching were provided by the ‘Royal Botanical Gardens’ Anishinaabe Waadiziwin Trail, in *Kanadario* (or Ontario in settler-colonist speech). For at least certain Anishinaabeg (a group of Indigenous nations in so-called ‘Canada’ and the ‘United States’), the Creator had made Turtle Island (‘North and Central America’), or the material world, before humans were brought to it. In descending the human, the Sky Woman (for more see Wall-Kimmerer, 2013 and Horn-Miller, 2009), to earth, the Creator asked all the animals and plants: ‘who among you will care for this vulnerable one?’ Each animal and plant offered some measure of service to the human who, full of gratitude, saw nonhumans as her elders. As her descent to life on Turtle Island



continued, she pointed her toes downward—almost like a plant—to avoid crushing or destroying any of them. As an Anishinaabeg teacher from Manitoulin Island once said: ‘all of creation can live without us, but we cannot live without all of creation.’ The Anishinaabeg are not the only ones who see humans as coming after nonhumans: this staging is seen in the genesis stories of dozens of cultures from across the globe—all, notably, non-western.

For the arrogant gaze of mass industry, dominion, and destructive unidirectional consumption, the human comes first, the nonhuman second. In this view, the nonhuman is ensnared as resource over which humans hold a sadistic and total claim (see Donaldson et al., 2021). But in the Anishinaabeg Creation story, humans come second—they are part of the nonhuman *condition*. In an Anishinaabeg cosmology, the nonhuman condition is one in which humans reconfigure their relations with nonhumans, to understand that humans are part of a ‘democracy of species’ (Wall-Kimmerer, 2021), and that it is their lot to learn from, subsist with, and care for *both* nonhumans and humans.

In losing our ‘first position’ arrogance, we ‘become more’ in second place. Here, we are not victors of some grand game of life, entitled to its spoils. We become instead humbled participants entitled only to conserving the web of life and becoming anew in its possibilities. In the exploration of this relationality, we gain understanding of how intimately our lives depend on the welfare of nonhumans, who we presently ruin as we rush down consumer corridors that lead nowhere. Our fate is inseparable from theirs.

Willfully losing the pre-eminence of the human species has serious implications for radical democrats whose theories were, and in large part remain, the seed moments of people like me: those born into and indoctrinated by harmful western (imperial, colonist, capitalist), Christian (man hath dominion over all life), and patriarchal (males know best) orthodoxies. The changes radical democrats are reaching for, rooting for, to achieve becoming through loss include nothing less than the undoing of mass industrialization. We must retreat our pressures on nonhumans. And we must learn how to reconfigure our relations with animate life and materials bearing animations of their own. It is through this process that we can both understand what it means to be in the nonhuman condition and to enact a politics of becoming through loss. There is growth in this loss—the sort that comes from accommodating other knowledges (see, for example, Smith’s account in this Critical Exchange of how the Barbadian poet Kamau Brathwaite transformed ‘dialectics’ into ‘tidalectics’). It is a pervasive politics that must affect most things: laws, economies, lifestyles, and public institutions are only some of them. This is the undeniable influence of new materialism upon radical democracy: it offers a route/root of intentional losses which act as nutrient for new becomings.

Jean-Paul Gagnon



Radical democratic naturalism and the nonhuman condition

Lately, I have been imagining what it was like to be a passenger pigeon, ensconced in a swarm, dominating our way to extinction.

I imagine feeling a sense of unstoppable power as we carry on in ‘contempt of miles and seasons.’ A ‘biological storm,’ we roar ‘up, down, and across the continent,’ burning the ‘laden fruits’ of forest and prairie ‘in a traveling blast of life.’ Going with the swarm serves me; indeed, I may feel there is no alternative. Yet the palpable power of our swarming obscures actual conditions of threat and vulnerability (Leopold, 2013, pp. 97–99).

My imaginings of the psychic life of animals are indebted to the land conservationist Aldo Leopold. Where scientific materialism erases the realities of animal mindedness and regards nature as without consciousness (Nagel, 2012, p. 35), Leopold’s writings are replete with speculative imaginings of the motivated collective life of humans, fauna, flora, waters, and soils. My fascination with the passenger pigeon turns upon the apparent powerlessness at the heart of its efficacy. Human modernity can feel like that—mass aggregating power and no alternative (Orlie, 2006, 2009). An individual passenger pigeon, unable to check its course, symbolizes our ‘democratic condition’ at this time.

In Jill Frank’s helpful formulation, a democratic condition ‘confronts citizens with the necessity of developing human capacities for what Arendt calls “building, preserving, and caring” if there is to be a common world of politics, and seems at the same time to produce a longing for an authority that will obviate that necessity’ (Frank, 2018, p. 49). I would extend Frank’s claim to the capacities of all animals. Indeed, as materialist sciences progressively erase human subjectivity, we may become the least self-governing animal. While new materialisms perceive a problem with modern materialist ontology when they sense ‘agentic’ possibility beyond our ken (see Asenbaum and Machin, also Smith in this Critical Exchange), we must stop identifying with the authority of modern materialisms and, *pace* Jane Bennett (2013), turn toward nature, internally and externally.

The root of Matter is *materia*, which, like the route of modern materialist civilization, apprehends earthly life as ‘timber, stuff of which a thing is made’ (O.E.D., 1973). This commodity form imagination presses, often violently, to abandon subjectivity. Is it any wonder when there is practically no imagination of others as subjects themselves? One root of Nature (*nasci*) is ‘to be born’ (O.E.D., 1973). Nature’s animals are dependent and interdependent, but also inescapably subjectively minded, self-moving, and needing self-governing.

With passenger pigeons in mind, I imagine how the potency of the swarm overtakes individual judgment such that quantity falsely presents itself as quality. On a continuum of animal mindedness—from misapprehending actual conditions to awareness of things to innovative conduct, the capacity of passenger pigeons



seems to have been narrowly bound, especially compared to other nonhuman animals who continue to survive (de Waal, 2016). I do not blame passenger pigeons for being unable to amend their ways of living. Rather, their situation evokes the terms of all animal life, including our own. Each animal must find the wherewithal to meet its conditions, and the internal and external resources available for doing so are an evolutionary inheritance which is itself a ‘memorialization’ (Loewald, 2000, pp. 148–173) of the ecological insights and innovations of past such moments. Authoritative evolutionary biology imagines these adaptive processes as systemic and automatic, not generated by agonistic cooperative action among singularly minded animals. But while some animals are self-governing and self-changing, other animals behave more like a ‘chain reaction’ which can ‘survive no diminution’ of their ‘own furious intensity’ (Leopold, 2013, p. 99). Where humans land on that spectrum is an ongoing inquiry.

Nietzsche once suggested that only a beheaded frog reacts as matter (Nietzsche, 1992, p. 563). While I once saw affinities between his thinking and new materialisms (Orlie, 2010), Nietzsche declared himself ‘the sternest opponent of all materialism’ (Nietzsche, 1992, p. 565). Because he insists on rediscovering the subjectivity of nature, I now describe Nietzsche’s approach as ‘radical democratic naturalism.’ It resonates not only with Leopold (Orlie, 2014a), but also with Montesquieu, Arendt and the psychoanalysts Hans Loewald, Marion Milner and D.W. Winnicott. None of them ever altogether abandons what Loewald glosses as that ‘old philosophy’ of *natura naturans* for which the core sensible conviction is of ‘Nature’s Subjectivity’ (Loewald, 2000, pp. 515–517). This is to say that ‘matter’ (soma) and ‘mind’ (psyche), rather than binary ontological registers, are differently minded ways of ordering experience (Loewald, 2000, pp. 472–473). Here is a still viable theoretical path intimated in Montesquieu’s notion of the ‘spirit of the laws.’ Theory aspires to apprehend the ‘law-like structure of all things and beings,’ but no relational whole can be meaningfully described by ‘universal laws valid for all phenomena, for all time, and for all circumstance’ (Wolin, 1989, pp. 104–109). Theorizing in abstraction from the particulars of always being placed cannot do justice to the complex relations and moderations of power that enable beings and things to persist.

Radical democratic naturalism poses an existential choice between mastery as domination and mastery as interplay of responsive asserting and receptive yielding (Loewald, 1988, p. 51). Mastery as domination manifests a ‘conqueror’s mentality’ which believes it knows the value of things and what is needed, but truly knows neither (Leopold, 2013, pp. 171–172). By contrast, radical democratic naturalism surmises that actuality is ‘biota so complex, so conditioned by interwoven cooperations and competitions, that no man can say where utility begins and ends... The only sure conclusion is that the biota as a whole is useful’ (Leopold, 2013, p. 489).



Earthly life builds up or erodes according to the acuity of animal perception and activity, where ‘Nature’s subjectivity’ symbolizes the self-governing activity of living forms discerning the difference between good land-use and bad. Of course, that is human idiom. Yet we might aspire to become more like our still surviving nonhuman animal brethren and do our part to conserve earthly life by learning ‘how to tell the difference between good land-use and bad,’ and then using ‘our own land accordingly and [refusing] aid and comfort to those who do not’ (Leopold, 2013, p. 477). That is the decisive political guidance of radical democratic naturalism.

New materialisms are both anti-Cartesian and keen to disassemble modern notions of self-creation and self-authorization. By now, most scientific materialisms share with new materialisms the presumption that there are neither objects nor subjects. Instead, from the neural to the planetary, each and all are imagined as systems composed of other systems with varying degrees of emergent complexity. However, unless we stop erasing the psychic life of subjectivity seeking objectivity, imagining systems rather than objects still pictures nature as *res extensa*. When mindedness and its workings are disavowed, the ‘conqueror’s mentality’ rules objectively, by being unknown to itself. Mass industrialization and its libidinal economy of antiblackness may appear practically without alternative when idioms of abstraction obscure the details of places occupied by singularly minded, self-moving animals (see Leong in this Critical Exchange).

For radical democratic naturalism, nature is a unity only as a word. But this word nonetheless symbolizes earthly life as an orderly whole into which all other wholes and parts must responsively fit. If it is here, it plays a part—though for radical democratic naturalists, the shape of all wholes and parts is always changing. Not only are parts and the wholes they compose defiant of fixed identity, any sense of ontological hierarchy begins to unravel. The sense of human primacy gives way to accepting that nonhuman condition upon which all earthly life depends.

Our trouble is not the utilization of nature exactly, but the sheer violence of that use. There is historical record of ‘Man and beast, plant and soil [living] on and with each other in mutual toleration, to the mutual benefit of all’ (Leopold, 2013, p. 88). But then came the commodity economy which ignores the complex interactions among soils, waters, flora and animals that sustain the resilience of a landscape. Using land in self-renewing ways offers limited opportunities for those external commodity inputs which are the means of capital accumulation. Land violence is, thus, a requirement of capital accumulation. While Marx compellingly revealed the commodity form, he did not grasp this as the root of its disordering of our knowing nature. Indeed, Marx celebrates dispossession as the condition of human emancipation (Orlie, 2014b, pp. 467–483).

The modern human condition is at once to undergo and carry forward the extirpation of land and people, commencing with domestic dispossessions and displacements feeding settler colonialism (Brooks, 2013, pp. 23–48). The loss of a place in the world from which nature’s givens are regularly, sensually accessible is



the beginning of every modern catastrophe (Arendt, 1973, pp. 142, 135–147, 1958, pp. 1–21, 248–264). A casualty of the triumph of the commodity form's colonialism is the human without perceptual sense of always being placed somewhere in particular and knowing the particulars that matter. Concerns that swarm on 'smart devices,' from the truly alarming to banal, create conditions in which it is difficult to muster generative attention and sustained awareness of our intimate participation in the destruction of earthly life.

Continuing in destructive ways as if without alternative, or waiting for alternatives to come from 'the authorities,' is contrary to radical democratic vision and politics. It is also a sign of an animal who has misplaced its wits. Psyche–soma (Winnicott, 1958), 'will to power' as 'form giving forces' (Nietzsche, 1992, p. 515), the unconscious—these are among the names for living as creative–destructive activity (Loewald, 1988, p. 49). Each animal begins in some degree of dependence and 'feeling joined up' with the whole upon which it depends. Yet living also requires coming to some 'feeling of separation' (Milner, 1987, p. 280) and going forward with one's ecological–evolutionary inheritance as a singular animal. Each animal must respond to conditions as they are unfolding, not only asserting wants but also amending them in response to how things are going. Surviving and thriving depend upon a fitting balance of feeling joined up and feeling separate.

If this sounds fanciful, consider the two young house finches outside my study window who beseeched the adults to feed them. Suddenly, a Cooper's hawk flew over the wooded area and all the animals scattered to cover—except the two young birds, who freeze for some moments. Finally, they come into feeling more separate, as they must, for only they can fly themselves to cover. And so they do. Yet even the more mature animals around the feeders are balancing feeling separate with feeling joined up for they rely upon attuning to interspecies communication to gauge threat (Young, 2012).

There is animal psychic life wherever there is turning inward on the way to relating outwardly, because perception is evaluative and interpretive and thereby motivated—which is not to say conscious (Loewald, 2000, pp. 69–73). Consider that beheaded frog. 'The actual physiological cause of *ressentiment*, vengeance and the like,' says Nietzsche, 'is not to be sought in defensive retaliation, a mere reactive protective measure, a "reflex movement" set off by sudden injury or peril, such as even a beheaded frog still makes to shake off a corrosive acid' (Nietzsche, 1992, p. 563). Unless a frog is dead, the happenings of its body are not sufficiently explained as a physiological reflex arc. Even frogs are creatures of 'will to power,' turning inward as they hunger toward, or recoil from, what comes from beyond their skin. A beheaded frog no longer singularly shapes the conditions conditioning it. But any living animal, including you or me, is always placed, conditioned by place, and conditioning place in turn.



We who are reading these words are no different from any other species in needing to use nature aggressively (Winnicott, 1939) in pursuit of what we imagine will be esthetically pleasing. Any animal's perceptions are at least partially projective, which is why we may call those perceptions 'esthetic judgments' (Orlie, 2014a). If you think that the esthetic is ephemeral to the economic (Leopold, 2013, p. 424), you still operate within a materialist erasure of the constitutive work of animal psyche–soma. What any animal deems pragmatic is an interpretive evaluative judgment. Part of being an animal may be to see what one wants to see, what appears significant, pleasing, even wished for one's kind and oneself (Leopold, 2013, pp. 5–7). Knowing singular desire in sensual detail is a condition of innovations in satisfaction, but so is perceiving what is wanted in the light—or the shadow—of how things are going now. Any animal is doomed without some measure of that broader awareness. Even animal swarms are psychic events, though swarms may be unable to manage danger if assertive projections overpower receptivity. Receiving reverberating intimations which disrupt given perceptions and attune to actuality is vital prelude to reorganizing what we are doing as conditions beckon. When we can imagine no alternative, wishing and actuality likely become sundered (Loewald, 2000, pp. 31–32) and potentially self-governing animals may become more like a 'chain reaction' (Leopold, 2013, p. 99). There is an alternative: 'We understand something about nature and reality, know something about them, by being open to their workings in us and the rest of nature as unconscious life, that openness being what we call consciousness' (Loewald, 1988, p. 50).

What might we gain by leaving the swarm and imagining our condition aware of always being placed in singular land communities, even as we rival migratory birds landing in many places across the earth? We may begin to feel our own mindedness as we also notice mindedness around us. When we start to feel placed, our body amidst other bodies, not only may we begin to sense our own presence here but also a reverberating receiving of possibilities with other animals about us. Settling down, we can feel nature going on and learn how we influence which way it goes and could go for the better.

The active diffusion of one's anthropocentrism (Gagnon in this Critical Exchange) is needed and warranted. The lovely paradox is that surrendering to one's narcissistic wound and avowing loss of one's earthly centrality are losses from which great gains can arise in connectedness and aliveness.

A further paradox is that when one's fantasy of human omniscience and omnipotence is undone, the opposite of a self-negating embrace of some ethos of dispossession may be required. Using power democratically and well means being aware of being in places of and by which we are sufficiently possessed to facilitate knowing and caring activity. Of course, the possession any animal may claim, at any time, has been and will always be temporary. But when land community is the



imaginative and practical medium of political action, democratic power might become more ample, less fugitive (Wolin, 2016).

If gains in animal awareness are to manifest beneficially, we must affirm desire for power, possession, and use of aggression as a dimension of erotic responsive care for all land communities with which living entangles us. Radical democratic power is ontologically primary because of its fittingness to earthly life: it is mutual and reciprocal (Arendt, 1963, pp. 255–258, 260–281) and generated among bodies bound by a mutual aim. Mutuality includes and contends with competition and inequality as well as cooperation and conviviality. But only particularist, contextually attuned uses of power can do justice to the complex moderations of power enabling beings and things to persist. Such democratic acting in concert needs passionate attachment and generative use of assertion, which turns on perpetual practical inquiry into what differentiates life-affirming creative–destructive activity from violent and hateful use (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 329). Land communities persist by such radically democratic power relations (Leopold, 2013, pp. 171–189, 476–482). Knowing the ways of radical democratic power can arise as incarnate awareness in any animal not so externally disoriented or inwardly unbalanced as to hallucinate that dominating a landscape is for well-being.

Nature is going on, and forms of life go on with it and for it—or not—and depending on how astute the balancing is of aesthetic self-assertion and awareness of how things are going. The whole evolutionary-ecological drama is right here. When you recognize that so much turns on this thin reed of animal awareness, the daunting may also become inspiring. Each part, every whole, depending on self-governing and the psychic life of animals.

Passenger pigeons were not a swarm. They died as all animals do: one by one.

Melissa A. Orlie

Radical democracy and epistemic pluralism: The case of water

Water teaches a great deal beyond its apparent scope because it is a flashpoint of negotiations over human and nonhuman knowledge, practices and modes of democracy, and the relationship between knowledge traditions. It reflects the conflicts, lacunae, and possibilities inherent in both radical democracy and a more inclusive understanding of the nonhuman. Focusing on water, I will tease out one possible contribution of new materialist thinking to theories of radical democracy in a world of upheavals: the suppression of non-western ways of knowing and living, the degradation and pollution of the biosphere, the growing threat of climate crisis, and the manifold crises of democratic inclusion and action in a fast-changing world. The material dynamics of water also suggest flexible and materially apt modes of understanding political life and human agency as non-teleological and incomplete. These are the kind of flexible and endlessly renegotiated dynamics, an



unfolding or progressing (see Gagnon in this Critical Exchange) that radical democracy requires. Water frames this discussion because it cannot be rigid by its very nature, and this highlights both old problems and new modes of thinking and being.

Listening to water, moving with its material inspirations, and seeing the precedents generated by its contestation and imagination allows something unique to emerge about the relationship of the nonhuman and radical democracy. Fluid language and thinking have already proven generative for post-colonial thought and literatures. Water is tidalectic—a move of inquiry devised by the Barbadian poet and academic Kamau Brathwaite that moves with the circular eddies and flows of discourse rather than striking the linear and deterministic course of the dialectic. The process is described by Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2007, p. 2) as a ‘geopoetic model of history’ that creates a circular rhythm, a shifting entanglement like that of sea and land, never fully cyclical but always in motion. It walks across the water, enabling what Stefanie Hessler (2018, p. 32) characterizes as ‘nodal nexuses enabling a complex thinking that transcends separation.’ The practice of tidalectic reasoning assumes an unresolved cycle that does not ‘assume how people’s lives should be’ (Brathwaite, 1999, p. 34), as western epistemology does, but embraces the flux and the motions of the tides to make meaning (for more, see Smith and Mentz, 2020). Tidalectic reasoning is never a line but a constant renegotiation.

Fluidly navigating agency and becoming are modes of exploration of the nonhuman condition. Such fluidity swims into the foreground of the Anthropocene, the ‘age of the human’ diagnosed by geologists in which boundaries between the human and nature become difficult to maintain. As Amanda Machin (2019, p. 3) notices, the Anthropocene puts the *anthropos* and the *demos* as the bounded subject and carrier of democratic authority into an uneasy renegotiation of scale. Machin proposes that ‘[b]y drawing attention to the boundaries of the *demos*, the *anthropos* demands we continually agonize over the inevitable yet contingent exclusions of democratic politics.’ The more-than-human frame of water provides a specific example of this renegotiation. Change and new arrangements are possible yet require an understanding of multiple currents of knowledge from different intellectual traditions. To glimpse the contours of the *anthropos*, an admixture of ideas is necessary.

This contribution proposes an endlessly iterative rhythm leading to democratic co-habitation with the nonhuman that disrupts and augments theories of radical democracy. Water management demands the pluriversal ontological design of institutions and norms that do not reproduce neocolonialism (Barcham, 2022) and enable a productive pluralization of democracy into new identities and mutually supportive relationships. The case of water offers inspiration for—and indeed is fundamentally part of—debates over radical democracy and radical democratic pluralism. The intellectual endeavor to reimagine water and the environment in less anthropocentric terms, as well as the ongoing struggle to reconceptualize an



emancipatory human subject of radical democracy unfold together. This enables the emergence of new identities that blur categories of being and incorporate the complexities of nonhuman agency.

Aotearoa New Zealand stands out as an example of progress in action for radical democracy and nonhuman agency. The 2017 *Te Awa Tupua (Whanganui River Claims Settlement) Act* provides a productive framework for future engagement and action for the enactment of a nonhuman version of radical democracy (de Froideville & Bowling, 2022). It is not a solution, but a frame for a new conversation that respects a parity of esteem between knowledges. Structural racism and the centrality of instrumental worldviews have long driven environmental exploitation and degradation, and only a fundamental epistemic shift can reconcile historic injustices. Legal precedent alone is insufficient. As Mihnea Tănăsescu (2020, p. 452) observes, ‘the rights of nature are not an end state, but rather a historically contingent experiment in the ongoing pursuit of greater Indigenous political authority.’ Human–nonhuman democracy does not emerge automatically from a river becoming a rights bearer, and context matters: how and why were rights granted? (see also Smith, 2017)

The case of the Whanganui River and the Māori Whanganui Iwi tribal community, the river’s custodians, set the world-changing precedent that its *taniwha*: a generative life essence of people and place, which entitles the river to the rights of a legal person (Strang, 2014). This remediates the harm done to river and Iwi by centuries of degrading Pākehā (White settler colonial) land and water management and offers a new and enriched toolkit for more capacious democratic engagement. However, lasting results depend on how the Settlement came to be: the Settlement is the beginning of a new and more expansive dialogue based on an established foundation for the respect and recognition required for future progress. The Māori example also shows that developments in Aotearoa New Zealand are a situated and culturally specific manifestation of an ongoing global process.

The Settlement is an applied example of Māori *kaitiakitanga* (guardianship and resource management) translating between settler and Indigenous spheres of knowledge. This process is also in evidence in legal discourses surrounding Te Urewera (Mount Taranaki) (Marras Tate & Rapatahana, 2022, p. 2). An epistemic pluralist embrace of multiple ontologies does not ignore the influence of structural inequalities and the slow violence of settler colonialism. Instead, it argues for learning from a Pasifika-led push to ‘code-switch’ fluently between knowledges in institutional, governmental, and legal spaces (Marras Tate & Rapatahana, 2022). In a world where languages—Te Reo Māori in the case of Aotearoa New Zealand—and knowledges have been violently suppressed, parity of esteem and authority between cultures, languages, knowledges, and categories of being is the only ethical future for democracy as a radical movement. A new sense of shared dialogue from a place of mutually held esteem is the only way for Western thought to move back and forth fluently between languages and modes of thinking.



This contribution suggests some of what can be learned through a more pluralist ontological perspective on radical democracy. Rosiek et al. (2019, p. 13) conclude that ‘there is no path to the amelioration agent ontologies make possible that does not include sustained engagement with agent ontologies found in Indigenous Studies literature and Indigenous traditions of thought.’ This is where radical democracy must begin: in common, without hierarchy or privileging, in a tidalectically circuitous manner without straight lines, artificial instrumentality, or center. Together, these ideas can inform democratic designs that free the human subject to be imagined anew in a state of becoming (Asenbaum, 2023).

Democratic thought must urgently conceptualize entities beyond the human scope of reason, such as climate change—entities which Timothy Morton calls hyperobjects (2013). It must also grapple with emerging Anthropocene hyposubjectivities, states of fluid and incomplete being that make use of and react to hyperobjectivity (Chandler, 2020). By following the ‘aesthetic turn’ that McKay (2017, p. 78) describes as a mode to ‘think about politics in a more creative way, as the disclosure of the new, of as-yet unrealized ways of being,’ one can experience differing political agencies as if contemplating art. Ryan and Finders (2018) likewise advocate a greater embrace of aesthetics within the study and practice of democracy. This understanding of politics functions through the ‘galvanization of emotion, inspiration and political hope’ rather than argumentation, logic and ossified precedent (McKay, 2017, p. 78). An aesthetic experience of the democracy of personhood and materialism is a tidalectic mode of radicality. As Asenbaum and Hanusch (2021) have pointed out, there is room for more playgrounds and ateliers, and fewer laboratories, for the development of democracy.

Reforming human–nonhuman relationships is a difficult easy task that can never be complete: anthropocentrism is deeply ingrained into western liberal democracy and liberal democratic norms are not easily defined, let alone set aside. Cultivating an ontologically pluripotent and epistemically agile political imagination allows receptivity to the possibilities that exist and have existed for centuries within the intellectual histories of First Peoples, together with their twenty-first century adaptations. If water, for example, is seen as a resource, an economic entity, as H₂O measurable in cubic liters, then it cannot be reimaged (see Smith, 2017). Epistemic pluralism emerges by virtue of water’s role as a flashpoint for renegotiations of knowledges spread across multiple epistemic traditions, past and present (see also Morgan & Smith, 2013).

To identify the boundaries of the emancipatory human subject, democratic thinkers must find a voice of the nonhuman that takes seriously the ontological diversity of human–nonhuman relationships and learn to live attenuated across a wider assemblage of actors in the demos (Smith, 2017). This is Machin’s (2019) *anthropos* in action, working to shape and influence the demos. Ceding control of (putative) epistemic mastery over water and the nonhuman requires a notion of agency that is multi-polar and multi-directional. This is strongly tied to radical



democratic contentions that there is ‘no essentially given and no historically privileged subject’ (Clarke & Foweraker, 2003, p. 727). If the arrangements that govern human cultures—a ‘people,’ a ‘nation-state’ or a ‘class’—are under constant radical redefinition and contestation, then cultures with understandings of agency and interconnectivity excluded from classic Western democratic theory are a natural ingredient in the new becomings and states of being engendered by radical democracy. More intellectual plurality, plasticity, and agility are required: an epistemic polymorphism with profound effects for democracy. The result is a tidalectic churn of ideas and perspectives.

Certain critics of new materialism (e.g., Boysen, 2018) see claims about the vibrancy and agency of matter as bad historical materialism, because they diffuse responsibility for human political actions. This is a crucial reminder that using nonhuman agency as an excuse for human inaction is undesirable. At the same time, this criticism sees the problem as internal to new materialism as a form of western thinking, implying that the problem emerges and should be addressed in the history of western thought. Other modes of knowledge are externalities in the history of ideas. This critique also fails to account for the importance of Indigenous knowledges and their resonances with new materialism. To claim that ‘personal and political responsibility becomes difficult to sustain, when agency is situated in bodies and material assemblages rather than in conscious, spontaneous, and reflexive human subjects’ (Boyson 2018, p. 226), is to say that those who have practiced a politics based on nonhuman agencies are not participating in democracy.

Spreading agency across a spectrum of ontologies leads to what Karen Barad (2003, p. 803) describes as ‘intra-actions’ between entangled categories of being—human and nonhuman, material and intellectual. This means that human knowledge is created through participation in and interaction with the world, not from an ostensibly ‘objective’ external point of view. Barad (2003, p. 830) proposes that ‘we do not obtain knowledge by standing outside of the world; we know because “we” are of the world.’ Thus, there can be no distinction between assemblages, material agency, and reflexive human subjects, as Boyson has parsed them. Ethical responsibility is not diluted or placed outside of the human sphere, since ethics is not constituted by the human alone. Barad’s (2007) work defines this notion as ‘agential realism,’ a principle identified by Rosiek et al., (2019, p. 2) as agency that exists not only as a human capacity, but in all aspects of reality. It is agency spread across the life-world, ‘highlighting our responsibility for the role we play in constituting the world through our representational activity.’

The forms of ethical responsibility described by agential realism resonate with discourses in Indigenous Studies about the rights of water and the plurality of human epistemes and ontologies. It is not possible to be ‘outside’ the *demos*, dispassionately observing it, because human subjectivity is generated by participation in it. Thus, stepping outside of one silo of knowledge does not amount to



stepping outside but rather stepping into a different silo, because one can only know through engagement. This notion is as crucial to democracy as it is to environmental thinking, because it acknowledges Indigenous ontologies as the origin of many of the most developed and sophisticated accounts of agential realism. As Rosiek et al., (2019, p. 2) put it, it is crucial that ‘different literatures on agent ontologies do not remain isolated from one another, but instead inform one another, extend their respective influence, and bring what benefits are latent within them to local and global communities.’ This takes on additional meaning when imagining democratic theory and environmental agency as informing and supporting each other.

The result is a form of communing that brings knowledges and states of being together in confluence and interaction. Bond et al. (2020, p. 11) describe commoning as a practice of activist political ‘care for others near and far, human and non-human, thereby generating responsibility for justice that can enable the creation of spaces for vibrant debate, action, and change, and maintain hope for more just and care-full futures.’ This sense of the commons is antithetical to notions of delimitation and enclosure. It is a notion of radical and plural ontological flexibility and freedom that, in the context of water, is articulated by Astrida Neimanis (2009) in the form of ‘hydro-commons.’ ‘If we seek to counter the trends to privatize, enclose or otherwise remove the earth’s geophysical bodies of water from their amniotic relation with other bodies of water’ Neimanis proposes, ‘then we must acknowledge that our bodies are active, productive and integral aspects of whatever commons we seek to cultivate’ (p. 178). The resulting community is ‘reimagined’ to include the human and nonhuman (Strang, 2018), and relies on interspecies ethnography and ethnology and respectful engagement (Rosiek et al., 2019).

By taking on a plurality of visions for the democratic subject, the potential and efficacy of democracy itself grow. Thinking flexibly and tidalectically makes room to think in circuits and flows that never fully coalesce: dynamic cycles without disequilibrium. This occurs by recognizing that a new subjectivity which displaces a singular human subject is emancipatory. It releases Western thought from the prison of its own rigid agential and democratic precepts and teaches that a sustainable radical democratic plurilogue requires sustaining and nourishing a healthy understanding of plural agential realism.

James Louis Smith

Conjunctive being: Antiblackness, radical democracy, and the nonhuman

Following the 1992 acquittal of the officers charged with the beating of Rodney King, Black Studies scholar Sylvia Wynter penned an open letter to her colleagues



that called for a re-examination of how racial blackness has shaped the category of the human. The title of her letter, ‘No Humans Involved,’ was drawn from the internal code (i.e., N.H.I.) then used by the Los Angeles Police Department to identify cases involving Black males. How, Wynter asks, have we come to ‘conceive of what it means to be both human and North American in the kinds of terms (i.e., to be White, of Euroamerican culture and descent, middle-class, college-educated and suburban) in which young Black males can be perceived, and therefore behaved toward, only as the Lack of the human?’ (1994, pp. 1–2). In response, she points to two fallacies around which our current conceptions of the human are structured. The first is that human behavior is driven primarily by the need to secure the survival of the species rather than an imperative to secure the (religious, social, political) conditions necessary for reproducing a culture’s ‘represented conception of the Self’ (Wynter, 1994, p. 4). In the second fallacy, this historically and culturally specific representation is mistaken for the totality of the human. As evidenced by the ‘No Humans Involved’ code, this ethno-class version of the human, or ‘Man’ in Wynter’s terms, is not only constituted through and against racial blackness, but also establishes the symbolic order it needs to ‘perceive and know itself *as if it were* a purely natural organism in complete continuity with organic life’ (1994, p. 4; italics in original). Despite its overrepresentation across the western philosophical, scientific, and political traditions, Man is neither equivalent to the human nor representative of the human species.

Together, the ‘No Humans Involved’ code and Wynter’s letter illustrate what a Black Studies approach might offer to explorations of the nonhuman condition: if, as Black Studies scholars have argued, Black bodies have historically provided the standards against which the human subject and nonhuman matter are measured, then the nonhuman condition is intimately bound up with political and ontological claims about blackness (Jackson, 2015; Karera, 2019; King, 2017). As such, any attempt to incorporate the nonhuman into radical democracy must reckon simultaneously with the ongoing exclusion of Black people from the category of the human. To be sure, new materialist scholarship is increasingly attuned to the legacies of slavery, colonialism, and imperialism (Ravenscroft, 2018; TallBear, 2017). Without such attunements, as Jean-Paul Gagnon and James Smith point out in this Critical Exchange, we often overlook Indigenous or non-western cosmologies that can reconfigure human and nonhuman relations along more ethical lines. These investigations have done much to redress an earlier tendency of new materialist scholarship to represent the human as an abstract figure that, via a universalization of whiteness, seems capable of transcending race (Barchiesi, 2019; Yusoff, 2020). So, too, by focusing explicitly on issues of power and difference, radical democratic thinkers advocate concepts of the human that reflect its contested and plural construction (Mouffe, 1995). As this Critical Exchange



proposes, understanding how the nonhuman condition bears on radical democracy requires a re-evaluation of the (non)human as subject and agent of emancipation.

From a Black Studies perspective, this re-evaluation suggests the possibility for a nonhuman version of radical democracy to articulate a shared emancipation for those humans and nonhumans deemed other to Man. In her follow-up essay to 'No Humans Involved,' Wynter (2003) claims that as the constitutive outside to Man, Black people have been made to 'reoccupy the signifying place of medieval/Latin-Christian Europe's fallen, degraded, and thereby nonmoving Earth' (Wynter, 2003, p. 319). The nonhuman beings, matter, and forces of the earth have been blackened, forced into an association with all that blackness has come to signify (e.g., stasis, lack, inferiority), to maintain the classificatory system that ranks (human) beings according to their distance from blackness. In this way, whether racial blackness takes the form of an object (i.e., fungible property), nonhuman animal (i.e., chattel or beast), or more-than-human being (i.e., the supernatural), Man's place of privilege is assured. In this view, an affirmation of blackness or a willingness to be blackened appear as a necessary step toward shared emancipation (Leong, 2016b). Such affirmation or willingness, Jared Sexton (2012) notes, would involve nothing less than the 'refusal to distance oneself from blackness,' even if it means 'pay[ing] whatever social costs accrue to being black' (para. 12).

For Wynter, these costs are associated with a libidinal or conjunctive mode of being (hereafter conjunctive being) that has so far constrained attempts to re-evaluate the human and depose Man. Despite more than two centuries of challenges to Man's symbolic and racializing orders, we continue to perceive, think, and act 'as if' Black people are something other than (fully) human (see Wynter, 1994). As Hortense Spillers (1987) observes, the antiblackness that enables this mode of being is so resilient that it responded to the formal abolition of slavery with little more than cosmetic variation: 'Even though the captive flesh/body has been 'liberated'... the ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is *as if* neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, shows movement' (p. 68, italics added). For Wynter and Spillers, the conjunction 'as if' not only reinforces Man's place of privilege within our 'ruling episteme,' but also enables the reification of its symbolic and racializing orders. It is through this 'as if' that the libidinal economy of (anti)blackness comes to matter and becomes matter. Conjunctive being links the nonhuman world (as represented by racial blackness) to the world of the human (as represented by Man) through symbolic and material violence.

In this sense, conjunctive being is an apt representation of how (anti)blackness might challenge or disrupt new materialisms and radical democratic thinking. Even as Black beings/objects/experiences open new avenues for collaboration, or hint at opportunities for shared emancipation, these efforts are often frustrated by the libidinal economy of antiblackness. At the same time, conjunctive being makes



clear that Man offers neither the fullest nor the richest range of human relations. Rather than enriching or extending one's social relations, appeals to human or Mankind largely restrict kinship to those beings already belonging to the category of Man. And as Orlie astutely reminds us in this *Critical Exchange*, this antiblack and antisocial violence is deeply connected to the violence at the heart of the commodity form and therefore to the violences enacted against members of the land community. Here, we can take inspiration from Gagnon's concept of 'becoming through loss' to reposition the exclusion from Man as an opening unto other kinds of becoming. If Man is created by enclosing a small part of the field of possible relations, then a wider range of relations is available to those located outside of Man.

But as per Sexton's (2012) previous suggestion regarding the affirmation of blackness, this availability often depends on refusing the privileges of whiteness, or the very privileges that 'bring one closer to health, life, or sociality.'

Here, I examine how conjunctive being bears on the possibilities of radical democracy in the work of Jared Sexton and Frank Wilderson to advocate an analytical approach to the nonhuman condition that attends closely to how (anti)blackness informs the categories of the human and nonhuman. As I have written elsewhere (Leong, 2016a), racial slavery generated a 'rupture in the quality of being' (Brand, 2001, p. 29) that was not limited to Black lives. The racialization of blackness precipitated the 'hierarchical ordering of the *Homo sapiens* species into humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans' (Weheliye, 2014, p. 8). By initiating a set of divisions internal to the category of the human, racial slavery ensured that species membership alone could no longer determine one's privilege or position relative to the nonhuman. Under the auspices of antiblack racialization, the nonhuman has become 'one but not the only form blackness is thought to encompass' (Jackson, 2020, p. 3).

The questions how and why conjunctive being operates how it does, place Black Studies and radical democratic thinking on similar if not always shared grounds. While radical democracy and Black Studies scholars agree that antagonism plays a key role in shaping political and social dynamics (see Honig, 1993; Mouffe, 2013), they differ in their views of the character and location of this antagonism and how it organizes relations between subjects and structural positions. For Mouffe (2000), any antagonism contains the possibility to 'domesticate' the relationship within an agonistic political arrangement that turns enemies into adversaries, or 'persons who are friends because they share a common symbolic space but also enemies because they want to organize this common symbolic space in a different way' (p. 13). However, any 'common symbolic space' that does not deal directly with the libidinal economy of antiblackness can never be truly 'common' (see Smith on 'commoning' in this *Critical Exchange*).

In a 2016 interview, Frank Wilderson described Black Studies as a site for confronting the formative assumptions of the humanities and social sciences,



namely ‘that all sentient beings are subjects; that empathy can be extended to all sentient beings; that all sentient beings are precarious in the same way, structurally’ (Wilderson et al., 2016, pp. 4–5). While Wilderson’s comments are *prima facie* about a disciplinary framework, they also form the basis of Afropessimism’s political ontology. As a radical framework for describing how and why antiblack violence structures the modern world, Afropessimism takes seriously that relations of slavery have persisted beyond the formal abolition of the institution itself. It excavates and interrogates those psychic, social, political, and discursive structures on and through which (now mutated) relations of slavery continue to operate. Consequently, no distinction exists between blackness and Slaveness because ‘the Slave is not a laborer but an anti-Human, a position against which Humanity establishes, maintains, and renews its coherence, its corporeal integrity’ (Wilderson, 2010, p. 11). This is to say that the word ‘slave’ denotes an extant structural position that is identical to the one inhabited by Black people. For this reason, Afropessimism rejects any understanding of power and identity that draws equivalences between Black and non-black structural positions. A fundamental antagonism therefore exists between human subjects and Black persons that, barring the elimination of antiblackness, is without possibility of domestication or redress.

This is not to say that antiblackness governs absolutely the practices, discourses, and institutions of politics or that the human/Black antagonism comprises the totality of the political. The intent of this understanding instead is to draw out the libidinal economy of antiblackness, or conjunctive being, that undergirds a supposedly political economy of family resemblances. To be sure, like non-black subjects, Black people can and do experience the world as relational, contingent, and discursively produced—that is, as humans and as subjects. For democratic theorists like Laclau (1990), the subject’s experiences of contingency or lack are realized because the structures in which subjects are positioned are themselves radically undecidable. What he calls dislocation, or the failure of a structure to determine identity, has clearly contributed to generations of Black radical politics (see Bennett, 2020; Moten, 2003). And yet, as Sexton (2010) clarifies, Afropessimism’s political ontology ‘is not a metaphysical notion, because it is the explicit outcome of a politics and thereby available to historic challenge through collective struggle. But it is not simply a description of a political status either, even an oppressed political status, because it functions *as if* it were a metaphysical property across the *longue durée* of the premodern, modern, and now postmodern eras. That is to say, the application of the law of racial slavery is pervasive, regardless of variance or permutation in its operation across the better part of a millennium’ (pp. 36–37; italics added). What Sexton describes are two analytical approaches pitched at different levels: radical democracy at variance, permutation, and operation and Afropessimism at the libidinal economy of the ‘as if.’ As such, Afropessimism is a critical attempt to explain the persistence and prevalence of conjunctive being.



To illustrate, Wilderson (2003) attends to the inability of Gramscian and Marxist logic to account for the practical and conceptual realities of antiblackness. For Marx and Gramsci, capitalist exploitation transpires through symbolic power (e.g., variable capital), is enacted on unraced bodies, and is mediated through hegemony. However, as Wilderson reminds us, capitalism was founded on modern racial slavery, the primary drive behind which was to accumulate enslaved people and not simply or only for the purposes of labor. According to historian David Eltis (1993), if Europe had continued to enslave primarily groups within its own populations, the costs of labor transportation would have been far less than those related to the African trade. What prevented this more advantageous situation from taking hold were ‘psychological obstacles,’ or the fear that the largescale enslavement of whites would represent a ‘violence beyond the limit’ (Wilderson, 2020, p. 16). Above and beyond a labor force, what Europe and more precisely whiteness gained from racial slavery was symbolic capital. Abducted Africans were codified as property not only to provide a legal form for their exchange, but also to secure for non-blacks a categorical legibility as human. While more than two hundred years have passed since the end of the trade, the LAPD’s use of the ‘No Humans Involved’ code demonstrates that the effort to secure this legibility is unfinished and ongoing.

Just as the grammatical construction ‘as if’ joins two clauses, conjunctive being describes a lived and living condition in which the libidinal economy of antiblackness is joined with the symbolic orders of Man. It is through this condition that we can understand not only ‘how antiblack fantasies attain objective value in the political and economic life of society and in the psychic life of culture’ (Sexton, 2015, p. 167), but also how they shape theories and representations of the nonhuman. As we incorporate new materialist insights into radical democratic thinking, the question how we account for antiblack violence becomes more pressing when we consider that neither the end of anthropocentrism nor the radical extension of freedom and equality is possible without such an account. Indeed, conjunctive being suggests that in one way or another, Black people and Black Studies have always been engaged with the nonhuman condition. Black people have been and are linked to the nonhuman in such a way that the emancipation of Black people appears as a necessary condition for the emancipation of the nonhuman. Consequently, to realize the possibility of a shared emancipation, we might begin with a willingness to blacken the human and nonhuman worlds.

Diana Leong

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