

5.1

Bare Land

Alienation as Deracination in Anna Tsing and John Steinbeck

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Certainly, man thrives best (or has at least) in a state of semianarchy. Then he has been strong, inventive, reliant, moving. But cage him with rules, feed him and make him healthy and I think he will die as surely as a caged wolf dies. I should not be surprised to see a cared for, thought for, planned nation disintegrate, while a ragged, hungry, lustful nation survived.
—John Steinbeck (1975, 221)

Towards an Ecological Class Politics

In the Anthropocene, life on Earth is increasingly precarious. With every new heatwave, cataclysmic storm or viral pandemic, we slowly realise that we are living on a damaged planet. According to Bruno Latour, this predicament redraws the foundations of class conflict (2018, 61). Marx focused on the conflict between capital and labour over who owned the means of production, but today's ecological conflict pits those who control *the means of reproduction* against those who have to fend for themselves in increasingly hostile environments. The rich can reproduce their socio-cultural conditions of existence by hiding away in gated communities, while the poor are stuck on degraded soil. Some own the means to recreate the environmental background conditions for their way of life, while others do not. Marx would abhor such a loose utilisation of the vocabulary of class, but Latour convincingly argues that politics in the Anthropocene revolves around the *reproduction* of life rather than merely the relations of *production*. Marx distinguished modes of production from their conditions of reproduction, but this becomes untenable once the economy directly affects its own background conditions (Fraser 2022).¹ When economic expansion is actively cutting the branch it is sitting on, class analysis must pay attention to the environmental

conditions of possibility of life on Earth. At that stage, “it is a matter of broadening the definitions of class by pursuing an exhaustive search for everything that makes subsistence possible” (Latour 2018, 96).

In the context of unsustainable modernisation, the ecological class is the collective whose livelihood is at risk. They suffer the collateral damage of infinite economic expansion and the reproduction of their ways of being alive is rendered disposable in the name of continued economic growth (ibid., 53). But unsustainable capitalist expansion also harms non-human life. As Baptiste Morizot argues, “the human way of being alive only makes sense if it is entangled in thousands of other ways of being alive conducted by the animals, plants, bacteria, and ecosystems around us” (2020, 35–36, own translation). The ecological class hence consists of *all* living beings deprived of the means of reproduction. With a nod to Giorgio Agamben, I propose to call this human and non-human subject of ecological class politics ‘bare land.’ Agamben claims that specifically human life reproduces itself not only biologically as ‘natural life’ (*zōē*), but also culturally as ‘socio-political life’ (*bios*) (Agamben 1998, 9). However, human beings deprived of the means for reproducing a life worthy of being lived do not simply return to natural life. They become ‘bare life’ (*nuda vita*), a kind of zero degree of socio-political life. They are human and still appear as human *bios*, yet their subjectivity is bereft of all qualities that make them human. They are torn from community relations and their life-world until nothing remains but empty shells of human life. Agamben’s examples are inmates of concentration camps treated so violently they turn mute or refugees forcefully impeded from creating a new life in their country of residence. Bare life is a life unable to form long-term relations with any type of human community. It is a mere isolated individual detached from a nurturing collective.

Climate refugees, deprived of the means of subsistence amidst environmental collapse, constitute bare life in Agamben’s classical sense of the term. But the unravelling of the biosphere extends beyond the destitution of human life; it affects the non-human web of life as well.² Hence why I suggest using the term ‘bare land’ to describe the denudement of relations among both human and non-human beings. Unsustainable capitalist expansion undermines the livelihoods of entire ecosystems until nothing but barren wasteland is left. Afterwards, there is no other option but to abandon these dead lands (Sassen 2014, 149). Just like Agamben’s bare life refers to human subjects stripped of the means to reproduce meaningful lives, bare land is a collective subject consisting of human and non-human living beings who have lost the relational capacity to form meaningful ecosystems. Bare land denotes an ecosystem reduced to its zero degree. Nothing remains but lifeless dust. It is ‘collateral damage’ (Agamben 2011, 119–120), the waste economic expansion generates to reproduce the *bios* of the more fortunate classes (Nixon 2013; Lessenich 2019).

In *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing explains how bare land is formed. Capitalism produces ‘ruins’ by stripping living beings of the capacity to form their own ecological relations, a necessary condition for the reproduction of life. Contemporary capitalism *alienates* living beings from ecological relations, i.e. capitalism generates “the ability to stand alone, as if the entanglements of living did not matter. Through alienation, people and things become mobile assets; they can be removed from their lifeworlds in distance-defying transport to be exchanged with other assets from other life worlds, elsewhere” (Tsing 2021, 5). Cutting the threads of the web of life through capitalist alienation, however, produces bare land as a side effect, infertile waste deprived of the means to reproduce itself without capitalist support. Alienation is the deracination of living beings from their lifeworld, transforming them into passive cogs for capitalist accumulation. However, Tsing upholds matsutake mushrooms, rare fungi popular among Japanese foodies, as exemplars of the resilience of ecological relations. Even amidst ruins, matsutakes successfully form beneficial relations with other living beings, like pine trees, other fungi and human beings. The insistent capacity to regenerate ecological relations is the ineluctable means of reproduction for the matsutake mushroom. Even at the end of the world, the matsutake persists by perpetually co-producing new lifeworlds for itself and fellow living beings (see also Haraway 2016).

I claim that Tsing’s approach to capitalist alienation is descriptively convincing but lacks the affective force for ecological class consciousness. Tsing surveys the web of life from the perspective of living beings quite distant from humankind, articulating a theoretical diagnosis rather than a political exhortation. On an affective level, it is challenging to generate ecological class consciousness among the (presumably) human readers of my chapter if they are presented with only the biographies of mushrooms growing far beyond my home. As Chantal Mouffe (2018, 72) argues, the construction of an emphatically political identity requires an appeal to the affects, like hope, indignation or compassion. Latour and Schultz also stress that ecological politics currently suffers from an affective misalignment, with people failing to identify with the fate of their increasingly inhospitable environments (2022, 47). Why would European humans care about these unknown fungi? The reproduction of our CO₂-intensive livelihoods largely depends on the emission of bare land elsewhere, so in the short run, we stand to benefit more from putting our heads in the sand. I employ Chakrabarty’s (2021) suggestion of grounding post-humanist politics first in strategic anthropocentrism to subsequently push for a post-humanist expansion of our human understanding. One must first feel personally interpellated by the crisis of the global means of reproduction before one can grasp the need for an ecological

class politics beyond human confines. I turn to John Steinbeck's 1939 novel *The Grapes of Wrath* as a kindred spirit with more mobilising potential. Steinbeck tells the story of a family of impoverished farmers from Oklahoma, the Joads, travelling to California in pursuit of a better life, yet only encountering more poverty, exploitation and anti-immigrant racism. Steinbeck describes in detail the environmental and social devastation, but he focuses on the commodified labour power of migrant farmers rather than commodified mushrooms. Steinbeck's main characters are also uprooted from their entangled histories in the land and community of rural Oklahoma, but they present a more familiar face of the ecological class deprived of the means of reproduction. Steinbeck's outcry against alienation-as-deracination is clear, but the shift in perspective facilitates the empathetic outrage required for building ecological class consciousness. Steinbeck's strategic anthropocentrism helps human readers understand why alienation-as-deracination is a concern.

Alienation-as-Deracination

Tsing's alienation diagnosis should be firmly distinguished from more traditional theories of alienation. The latter usually presuppose some metaphysically anchored essential nature that living beings are supposed to enact. Capitalism then 'alienates' beings by perverting these attempts to actualise their nature. The young Marx, for instance, posits a human species-being (*Gattungswesen*), from which workers are subsequently alienated under industrial capitalism (Marx 2005). Factory conditions are unnatural, according to Marx, because they hinder people from actualising their human nature. But as a post-humanist, Tsing rejects essentialist narratives about human nature. Post-humanism suspects the discourse of human nature to be an oppressive apparatus that normalises human beings that fail to conform to pre-established 'humanity' (Braidotti 2013, 26–27). 'Natures' in the plural, on the other hand, have no pre-established metaphysical essences but are the products of collaborative interweavings between multiple living beings. According to Donna Haraway, "critters—human and not—become-with each other, compose and decompose each other, in every scale and register of time and stuff in sympoietic tangling, in ecological evolutionary developmental earthly worlding and unwordling" (2016, 97). In other words, living beings' natures are not metaphysical givens awaiting actualisation, but the contingent outcome of interactions with other living beings. Existence is an open-ended and non-teleological process of constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing one's nature in collaboration with others. That is why most post-humanists either reject the terminology of alienation or even embrace it as

a positive ideal for constructing cyborg futures without an inherent teleology (Braidotti 2013, 88; see also Haraway 1998; Laboria Cuboniks 2018).

Tsing's choice of 'alienation' to formulate her critical theory of capitalism is hence curious. Rather than basing her critique on natural essentialism, she takes a relational perspective on alienation (Haraway 2016, 37).

I find myself surrounded by patchiness, that is, a mosaic of open-ended assemblages of entangled ways of life, with each further opening into a mosaic of temporal rhythms and spatial arcs. I argue that only an appreciation of current precarity as an earthwide condition allows us to notice this—the situation of our world. (Tsing 2021, 4)

Living beings are constitutively vulnerable and open to the impact of others. If they possess the capacity to relationally affect other organisms, they also have the correlative capacity to be affected by those relations. Instead of identifying independent, autarkic entities with their own essential natures, Tsing proposes a relational ontology that embeds individual organisms in ever-changing living networks. Living beings are always already entangled in heterogenous assemblages lacking a pre-determined teleology. For Tsing, "precarity is the condition of being vulnerable to others. Unpredictable encounters transform us; we are not in control, even of ourselves. Unable to rely on a stable structure of community, we are thrown into shifting assemblages, which remake us as well as our others" (ibid., 20). The matsutake is an excellent example of this ontology; not only is it deeply intertwined with shifting forest ecosystems, but even its own individuality as a specimen is relative. What laymen observe with the naked eye as a single matsutake, biologists have proven to consist of different DNA strains from multiple matsutake individuals (ibid., 237–238). Even a single matsutake is, in fact, an assemblage of several individuals working together to increase their chances of collective survival.

Tsing distinguishes these ecological relations characteristic of the web of life from commodified relations of capitalist networks of exchange. Ecological relations derive from living beings' own capacity to co-produce lifeworlds (ibid., 28). By slowly affecting and being affected by each other, they learn to perceive each other's sensibilities and cooperatively co-engineer ecosystems in which they can collectively thrive. This is a subtle back-and-forth calibration of multiple organisms that, over time, constitutes a smoothly operating web of living beings continually affecting and re-affecting each other.³ This is an almost imperceptibly slow process taking place in supra-human deep time (Chakrabarty 2021, 190). A rainforest, for example, does not emerge overnight, but slowly materialises, across centuries, by fauna and flora immanently coordinating their conduct with

each other. Ultimately, a wilderness of living beings forms a relatively stable ecosystem without the need for top-down design or coordination. They have collectively established a network of horizontal relations that together produce a vibrant and flexible ecosystem.

Opposed to such ecological relations are commodified relations of capitalist exchange. Among the different world-forming activities in the web of life, one creature, 'Modern Man,' supports a peculiar form of ecosystem engineering that disavows the species' own dependency on the web of life (Tsing 2021, 21). It represents 'Nature' as a monolithic, passive and external background to its own socio-economic expansion. 'Nature' appears as an available instrumental resource for a supposedly independent human civilisation. Capitalism is one such growth regime that exploits the fecundity of the web of life to further economic expansion (ibid., 5). To this purpose, capital has to subject living beings to grand-scale efficient methods of production and exchange. Capitalism replaces the slow horizontal entanglements of the web of life with the faster rhythm of top-down coordinated capital accumulation. Singular ecological relations developed through mutual affectation across centuries are subjected to the uniform laws of economic equivalence to speed up the circulation of beings (Moore 2015, 235). This means dissolving the direct ecological relations living beings form among each other in favour of top-down managed relations of production and exchange, mediated by capital. The latter takes control over relations between living beings to synchronise all elements of its supply chain and simplify the process of capital accumulation (Tsing 2021, 132; see also Morizot 2020, 31).

Tsing stays close to standard Marxist political economy, even if she uses post-humanist terminology. In *Capital: Volume I*, Marx describes how living labour is the force to affect and be affected by the world through labour, but capitalism forces workers to sell their living labour as interchangeable commodified units of 'labour power,' which capital puts to work in a factory system in order to accumulate surplus value. According to Marx, capital asserts its power over the labour process by concentrating the power to coordinate the labour process in the hands of managers and machinery.⁴ Artisanal craftsmen in pre-industrialised workshops were collectively and autonomously in control of their own labour. They coordinated the labour process directly with each other, without the mediation of a boss. Machine-operated factories and assembly-lines, on the other hand, dispossess workers of the power to form horizontal relations of cooperation. Workers still have to collaborate to produce valuable commodities, but this process is subsumed under managerial control. Capital sets the terms for workers' interactions. If assembly-line workers even wanted to take autonomous control of the labour process, they would no longer know how, as the moment of conception of the labour process has been thoroughly separated from

its concrete execution. The knowledge required to run the factory system is entirely concentrated in the managerial echelon, on which workers have become dependent. Factory labour expresses not the immanent vibrancy of living labour and social cooperation, but the commands of capital in pursuit of economic expansion. Individual workers are, in this process, only mere ‘living accessories,’ interchangeable cogs of a centrally planned machine (Marx 2005b, 693).

Tsing agrees with this analysis, but argues that the colonial plantation showcased the dispossession of living cooperation long before the industrial revolution (Tsing 2021, 38–39; see also Tsing 2011). The plantation destroys the back-and-forth rhythm of the web of life typical of, for example, rainforests with a single meticulously managed monoculture that scales up and accelerates the productivity of the land. The living labour of beings forming ecological relations is thereby instrumentalised in a system of top-down commands in service of capital accumulation. The coordination of crops development is concentrated in the hands of capital. Through its mediation, plants are made to grow as fast and cost-efficiently as possible in order to maximise capital expansion. Living beings are reduced to an abstract resource to be maximally exploited. Jason Moore sums it up succinctly:

In capitalism, the crucial divide is not between Humanity and Nature—it is between capitalisation and the web of life. Capitalism’s arrogance is to assign value to life-activity within the commodity-system (and an alienating value at that) while de-valuing, and simultaneously drawing its life-blood from, uncommodified life-activity within reach of capitalist power. (2015, 100)

Tsing locates alienation in the transition from the web of life to capitalist relations of production and exchange.⁵ “In capitalist logics of commodification, things are torn from their lifeworlds to become objects of exchange. This is the process I am calling ‘alienation’” (Tsing 2021, 121). Alienation occurs when living beings are subsumed under capitalist growth regimes as stand-alone abstract resources. The moving force of life is then no longer the immanent interaction between living beings, but the instrumental logic of capital aiming to accumulate itself. Living beings are, as it were, mere vehicles for capital accumulation moved by an alien power (Marx 2005b, 693). Capitalist subsumption uproots living beings from their ecological relations and refurbishes them as uniform commodities mobile enough to be coordinated independently of the web of life that formed them. The web of life is unwoven and turned into a collection of stand-alone commodities that obey the laws of capital accumulation. For the matsutake, this is a literal process of deracination: they are cut off by the roots and integrated into global supply chains. For the companies investing in the matsutake trade,

the mushrooms are simply a shape their capital takes on its trajectory toward self-accumulation. By separating beings from their roots in the web of life, they appear as something alien to themselves. Value is determined extraneously in terms of beings' instrumentality to capital accumulation; whatever is deemed useless is discarded as waste.

In the long run, alienation-as-deracination produces a barren, unlivable web of life. By dismantling ecological relations, it undercuts living beings' means of reproduction. Once living beings are dispossessed of the force to guarantee their own thriving via ecological relations, they become dependent on capital reproducing them for profit. The crops grown in a monoculture field cannot survive independently without the interference of capitalist management. If these living beings stop being useful to capital, the latter emits them as bare land. By cutting living beings loose from the webs that shape their nature, the long-term effect is a loss of overall vitality. The colonial plantation, for example, must destroy lush rainforests in order to concentrate the management of plant growth in the hands of agricultural experts. The continued reproduction of life is henceforth conditional on its utility to capital expansion. The resulting monoculture can maximise the productivity of profitable crops, but it undermines the land's long-term resilience. Single-crop fields are dependent on the continued investments of capital for their survival (Moore 2015, 112). They are more vulnerable to environmental deprivation or infectious disease because they fail to ensure their reproduction through ecological relations. By concentrating the coordination of relations among living beings under capitalist management, the crops become unable to flexibly react to outside influences. They have become too dependent on the coordinating, alien power of capital (Morizot 2020, 185). Just like Marx's deskilled factory workers become dependent on the coordinating power of capital, living beings that have lost their potential to form ecological relations helplessly depend on the whims of capital to survive. Monoculture farming is subsequently faced with a dilemma: either it must attempt to immunise plantations from external contaminations from the web of life—by spraying pesticides, importing super-fertilisers, genetically modifying the crops—or it must abandon unproductive lands (Moore 2015, 270–286). Once the investment of keeping the impoverished soil no longer yields sufficient profits, capital expels these territories as bare land.

John Steinbeck and Ecological Class Politics

Post-humanist environmentalism provides illuminating insights on the ecological limits of capitalism, but a frequent complaint is that the elimination of clear distinctions between humans and non-humans is politically ineffective.⁶ The

addressees of any *publication* calling for an ecological class politics are strictly human, yet they are expected to enact ecological class consciousness through stories of the uprooting of rare mushrooms or faraway rainforests. Post-humanist environmentalism seems to require human individuals to transcend their anthropocentric identity in favour of an abstract extended self encompassing the entire biosphere. It is thereby confronted with an affective challenge: how does one generate a deeply felt and resonant connection between the human addressees of one's writings and a world too ancient, large and complex for the human brain to fathom? According to Chakrabarty, "we cannot place [the planet] in a communicative relationship with humans. It does not as such address itself to humans [...] To encounter the planet in thought is to encounter something that is the condition of human existence and yet remains profoundly indifferent to that existence" (2021, 70). The environment at stake in ecological class politics exceeds the bounds of human intelligibility, constituting a hyperobject that resists easy representation (Horn 2020, 166). Tsing attempts to focus the challenge on a more manageable scale by zooming in on one entity, the matsutake mushroom, but even this simple being turns out to constitute a node in a bewilderingly complex network of relations.

More advisable is to assume anthropocentric strategic essentialism in conducting ecological class politics. Rather than trying to invoke compassion for faraway beings of a radically different nature from ours, Chakrabarty advises starting from a more familiar, human appeal. "Our creaturely life, collectively considered, is our competitive animal life as a species, a life that, *pace* Kant, humans cannot ever altogether escape" (2021, 90). Hence,

any theory of politics adequate to the planetary crisis humans face today *would have to begin from the same old premise of securing human life* but now ground itself in a new philosophical anthropology, that is, in a new understanding of the changing place of humans in the web of life. (Chakrabarty 2021, 91, emphasis added)

Any effective response to the planetary crisis of today must start from an appeal to human beings' need to reproduce their way of life. Once this strategically anthropocentric appeal clarifies the stakes of the crisis on a cognitive level understandable for human beings, it can clarify why the political struggle for human reproduction necessitates an ontological shift of perspective in favour of a post-humanist ontology of the web of life. The affront of alienation-as-deracination and the subsequent ejection of bare land also affect human life. Alienation is hence not only a problem for Japanese mushrooms, but also for the human addressees of this book chapter. Focusing on this human fall-out first gives a more solid affective foundation to subsequently extend the analysis to other liv-

ing beings. Once we viscerally accept the diagnosis of alienation-as-deracination for humans, it is easier to argue for its extension to the entire biosphere. John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* shows potential in this endeavour. It was written in order to provoke outrage in Depression-era America for the uprooting of farmers and their lands under *laissez-faire* capitalism and it can still have this effect today (Seelye 2002, 30).

However, the politics of Steinbeck's book do not explicitly align with the programme of ecological class politics. Steinbeck was primarily a New Deal reformist (Dickstein 2004, 124). He believed that a stronger welfare state should integrate impoverished farmer-migrants into a broad and dignified working class (Yazell 2017, 507). This programme had no explicit environmental angle and held a strained relationship to Marxist class politics. Marxist critics generally like Steinbeck's social diagnosis, but they object to its reformist solutions (Beck and Erickson 1988, 44–57; Wang 2012, 1–31; Nez 2022, 97–84). Steinbeck's presentation of how the Joads are forced out of Oklahoma aligns well with Marx's theory of primitive accumulation and the expulsion of surplus populations (see Marx 1996, 503–545). According to Marx, British capitalism commenced when large landholders forcefully privatised common farming lands and drove off the local farmers. The latter migrated to the cities and became the urban working class. The Joads are the American equivalent of these proto-proletarian farmers. Droughts and debts make tenancy subsistence farming financially unsustainable. "A man can hold land if he can just eat and pay taxes; he can do that. Yes, he can do that until his crops fail one day and he has to borrow money from the bank" (Steinbeck 1993, 39). When the pressure of debt rises, a few large-scale landowners buy up all the land and forcefully expel their tenants. The latter move to California in pursuit of a better life, where they become a proletarianised industrial reserve army pushing wages down for other workers (McParland 2016, 84). The solution, however, is for Steinbeck not revolution but state reform. He does not wish to upend capitalism itself, but only to embed it within better government regulation. Marxist critics consequently accuse Steinbeck of containing rather than reinforcing working-class fervour.

Another element deviating from Tsing's ecological class politics is Steinbeck's Christian humanism (Dougherty 1962, 224–226). Steinbeck introduces one of the central characters, ex-preacher Jim Casy, as a man who, even amidst a deep crisis of faith, upholds Christianity via an appeal to love for the human neighbour: "Why do we got to hang it on God or Jesus? [...] Maybe it's all men and all women we love; maybe that's the Holy sperit—the human sperit—the whole shebang" (Steinbeck 1993, 29). Steinbeck's explicit love for humankind, created in the image of the Lord, animates the entire novel. His characters believe not in a post-human web of life but in an Emersonian humanistic Oversoul, a common

immortal soul shared by all humanity, of which individual egos are only limited participants (Beck and Erickson 2016, 199). The novel is steeped in Christian metaphors and Biblical references. The title, for instance, refers not only to the abolitionist protest song *Battle Hymn of the Republic* (“Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord / He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored”), but also to Revelations 14:19 (“And the angel thrust in his sickle into the earth, and gathered the vine of the earth, and cast it into the great winepress of the wrath of God.”) (Gudmarsdottir 2010, 210). At the end of the novel, during Tom Joad’s farewell speech to his mother, the elements of political protest and Christian humanism merge into a single faith in the humanist struggle for dignity. Tom argues that, by devoting his life to the downtrodden, his individual self will merge with the human Oversoul.

A fella ain’t got a soul of his own, but on’y a piece of a big one [...] then I’ll be around in the dark. I’ll be ever’where—wherever you look. Wherever they’s a fight so hungry people can eat, I’ll be there. Wherever they’s a cop beatin’ up a guy, I’ll be there. If Casy knowed, why, I’ll be in the way kids laugh when they’re hungry an’ they know supper’s ready. An’ when our folks eat the stuff they raise an’ live in the houses they build—why, I’ll be there. (Steinbeck 1993, 534)

Tom’s devotion to the struggle against human suffering expresses a Christian faith in the dignity of humankind. By emptying his egoistic self and committing to the cause of humankind, he becomes part of the Oversoul that animates the love human beings show each other.

Given this explicit humanism and New Deal reformism, there is no point in arguing Steinbeck consciously was a post-humanist *avant la lettre* or a proto-ideologue of ecological class politics. Nonetheless, his anthropocentrism can be strategically useful if it remains compatible with post-humanist ecological class politics. Steinbeck’s naturalism offsets some of the lofty humanism of Christianity and the New Deal, bringing him closer to post-humanist environmentalism. Steinbeckian characters tend to act very animalistically. Despite their Christian morals, they are not upstanding exemplars of the Protestant ethic but sensuous creatures craving fulfilment of their bodily needs. As early critic Alfred Kazin wrote disparagingly, “Steinbeck’s people are always on the verge of becoming human, but never do” (quoted in Dickstein 2004, 118). Steinbeck held a profound interest in animal life and regarded human beings as just another species of animal (Kelley 2002, 255–265). Jim Casy, for instance, rejects the priesthood because he denies the sinfulness of bodily desire and fails to repress his sexual impulses. Casy preaches the faith of a carnal Oversoul revelling in bodily pleasure and sexual lust:

Here's my preachin' grace. An' here's them people getting' grace so hard they're jumpin' an' shoutin'. Now they say layin' up with a girl comes from the devil. But the more grace a girl got in her, the quicker she wants to go out in the grass. An' I got thinkin' how in hell, s'cuse me, how can the devil get in when a girl is so full of the Holy Sperit that it's spoutin' out of her nose an' ears. (Steinbeck 1993, 26)

The implicit undermining of Christian humanism continues throughout the novel. While the text abounds in Biblical references and presents itself as an American Exodus, the story of the Joads deviates sharply from that of the Mosaic Israelites by decentering human salvation (Seelye 2002, 20). Steinbeck emphasises the analogies to Exodus in the first chapters to present the migrants' lot as a transition from enslavement to the promised land. The evicted farmers think: "maybe we can start again, in the new rich land—in California, where the fruit grows. We'll start over" (Steinbeck 1993, 111). California, however, is not the land of milk and honey that the Joads deserve (*ibid.*, 321). They just move from one enslavement to industry to another without liberation. In the final chapters, Rose of Sharon gives birth to the baby she has been carrying since the start of the novel. But again, salvific expectations are subverted, as the baby is stillborn and her uncle John sends it floating down the river during a flood like a macabre baby Moses, saying, "Go down in the street an' rot an' tell 'em that way" (*ibid.*, 569). In Steinbeck's universe, there is no providential God looking out for the vulnerable and the weak. "An Almighty God never raised no wages" (*ibid.*, 320). Only a combination of sturdy perseverance and dumb luck allows the Joads to survive the hardships of the road and the discriminatory violence of California (Seelye 2002, 22). In contrast to the promise of Revelations, where the heavy vineyards announce the wrath of God, there is no transcendent God to avenge the Oklahoma migrants. No one will save the downtrodden but the people themselves (Gudmarsdottir 2010, 214). If God is an Oversoul present in humankind, then only humankind can save itself from enslavement.

This anti-salvific message is where Steinbeck connects to the ecological class politics of Tsing and Latour. For the latter, the ecological class is the collective of living beings robbed of the means of reproduction. Capitalism ruins itself by undercutting the means of reproduction of life on Earth. The response to the dissolution of the web of life is a return to ecological relations. Even amidst the ruins of capitalism, living beings like the matsutake possess the potential to form new, mutually strengthening ecological relations with other organisms. For Steinbeck as well, the only adequate response left to the Joads is stubborn endurance, despite their livelihoods falling apart, and a continued commitment to mutual aid. By the end of the novel, the region is struck by a flood, the government refuses to send medical help, and the Joads have lost their car, on which their employment

and income depend. They are stripped from all means of reproduction. Yet the book does not end in apocalyptic hopelessness. The final scene—so scandalous the 1940 film adaptation chose to skip it—portrays Rose of Sharon feeding breast milk meant for her stillborn baby to an old, starving stranger. Steinbeck's editors urged him to delete the chapter or at least give the stranger a backstory, but Steinbeck refused, claiming that "the giving of the breast has no more sentiment than the giving of a piece of bread [...] If there is a symbol, it is a survival symbol, not a love symbol, it must be an accident, it must be a stranger, and it must be quick" (qtd. in Seelye 2002, 18). As a symbol of survival, this uncomfortable nativity scene emphasises that, in a Godless world, the relations of care living beings nurture among each other is the only means of reproduction left.

The most explicit description of ecological relations as an answer to hardship under Depression-era capitalism comes from Steinbeck's portrayal of the Joad family. When living in their truck, for instance, Steinbeck writes about the Joads,

As the cars moved westward, each member of the family grew into his proper place, grew into his duties; so that each member, old and young, had his place in the car [...] And this was done without command. The families, which had been units of which the boundaries were a house at night, a farm by day, changed their boundaries. In the long hot light, they were silent in the cars moving slowly westward; but at night they integrated with any group they found. (Steinbeck 1993, 250)

The family is a porous assemblage of living beings who develop cooperative relations through a back-and-forth rhythm that slowly generates a close-knit community of mutual aid. The boundaries of this family unit are not fixed in advance, but change according to shifting circumstances. Along Route 66, for instance, on their way to California, the Joads successfully cooperate with strangers to form temporary camping sites. People spontaneously cooperate and thereby form inclusive communities that support their members' well-being better than anyone could have done on their own. Steinbeck revels at migrant cooperative "techniques of building worlds" with their own rules and government (Steinbeck 1993, 248):

Every night a world created, complete with furniture—friends made and enemies established; a world complete with braggarts and with cowards, with quiet men, with humble men, with kindly men. Every night relationships that make a world, established; and every morning the world torn down like a circus. At first the families were timid in the building and tumbling worlds, but gradually the technique of building worlds became their technique. Then leaders emerged, then laws were

made, then codes came into being. And as the worlds moved westward they were more complete and better furnished, for their builders were more experienced in building them. (ibid.)

The slow calibration of immanent cooperative relations that Tsing observes in the matsutake's web of life finds here its equivalent in the spontaneous collaboration of migrants along Route 66. They establish new lifeworlds that sustain a viable enclave in hostile territory. Through the slow process of mutual affectation, these lifeworlds become richer and more supportive so that they allow their members to survive amidst the ruins of Depression-era capitalism. Though Steinbeck often prefers to use the language of Christian neighbourly love, which pushes him towards humanistic language, it takes no dogmatic post-humanist to call this 'making-kin.'

Steinbeck, a Post-Humanist Interpreter of the Land?

Showing that Steinbeck animalises his human characters or champions ecological relations among humans, however, does not make him a post-humanist. That requires an extension of ecological relations to non-human beings, which Steinbeck never explicitly does. However, there are more implicit clues for a post-humanist reading of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Some of Steinbeck's readers have, for instance, focused on the humanisation of cars in *The Grapes of Wrath* (Griffin and Freedman 1962, 569–580; DeLucia 2014, 138–154). The Joad family is not only composed of human members and pets, but also the family Hudson Super-Sex Sedan gets its own characterisation and biography. More pertinent is, however, Steinbeck's description of the entanglement between farmers and their land. As McParland observes, "we are introduced to the changing colours of the sky, the shadows of dust upon the land, and the life of animals and human beings who face the tumultuous transitions of the natural world. [...] Humanity is close to the earth, interdependent with an ecosystem that has been damaged" (McParland 2016, 75). Steinbeck describes subsistence farming as a close-knit cooperation of human and non-human life under adverse circumstances. For Steinbeck, 'ownership of the land' is not a legal title but a state of deep intertwinement with the soil through sustained labour and hardship (Steinbeck 1993, 41). By working (with) the land, one slowly develops a back-and-forth dynamic of bonding with the soil and its offspring. Though the words were obviously unavailable to a 1939 novel, today's post-humanists would call this 'making-kin' or 'ecological relationality.' Once these deep mutual roots of subsistence farmers and land are established, Steinbeck even argues that it is impossible to extract the farmers from

this assemblage without fundamentally rupturing their individual identities. It is impossible for subsistence farmers to start over elsewhere, on new land, because they always carry with them personal histories that are embedded in a particular place left behind (ibid., 111). Steinbeck thus ultimately defends a place-bound ethics of human and non-human symbiosis. It is also in this area that Steinbeck presents a critique of capitalism as a process of alienation-as-deracination.

Alienation-as-Deracination in *The Grapes of Wrath*

Like Tsing, Steinbeck criticises capitalism as an uprooting force, but the focus shifts from the displacement of commodified mushrooms to that of farmers as commodified labour power. Steinbeck wanted to spark outrage among his middle-class readers through a blunt presentation of the hardships suffered by poor farmers and their land. Here, it is not the colonial plantation but its American successor, large-scale industrialised cotton farming, that is presented as the space of alienation for both workers and their land. Subsistence farmers are 'tractored off the land' and thereby transformed into a reserve army of abstract labour power readily deployed whenever their labour profits Californian industrial farmers. People are uprooted from the soil that raised them and turned into mobile carriers of labour power, leaving them without personal purpose or identity. They are robbed of the ecological relations that constituted their shared identity with their community and land. In the words of Jim Casy, "us, we got a job to do, an' they's a thousan' ways, an' we don' know which one to take. An' if I was to pray, it'd be for the folks that don' know which way to turn" (Steinbeck 1993, 184). Being reduced to for-hire commodities that move to wherever the labour market needs them dissolves people's bonds with the web of life.

The same applies to the bare land deserted by the emigrating farmers. This also suffers a loss of identity and resilience from being violently torn away from their cultivators. Not just human beings, but also the soil loses its means of reproduction, turning into a worn-out territory awaiting rejuvenating encounters with other organisms that never come. Steinbeck documents how a handful of companies monopolise the land and turn it into a passive profit-making vehicle. The choice of cotton production is, for instance, particularly damaging to the soil (ibid., 40). It exhausts the land more quickly than the latter can regenerate itself, reducing Oklahoma to a dust bowl. However, agricultural companies are not bothered with this looming environmental catastrophe. They plan for short-term profits, after which they either sell or abandon the soil as bare land. They are not interested in fostering a mutually beneficial lifeworld with the soil. Their business highlights accelerated profit-making rather than the slow mutual

affectation of ecological relations. According to Steinbeck, industrialised monoculture distinguishes itself from subsistence farming through its affective detachment from the web of life that determines the soil's long-term fecundity.

And it came about that owners no longer worked on their farms. They farmed on paper; and they forgot the land, the smell, the feel of it, and remembered only that they owned it, remembered only what they gained and lost by it. And some of the farms grew so large that one man could not even conceive of them any more, so large that it took batteries of bookkeepers to keep track of interest and gain and loss [...] Then such a farmer really became a storekeeper, and kept a store. (Steinbeck 1993, 298)

In chapter 5 of *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck gives a detailed analysis of how alienation-as-deracination works in Depression-era America from the perspective of an outside observer (ibid., 138–148). The chapter documents how industrial monoculture replaces subsistence farmers with bare land. Surprisingly, no one *wants* to upend the Oklahoma region, yet an entire self-propelling system makes people so dependent on big banks and landowners that they have to do capital's bidding. Steinbeck mentions the case of one of the people driving the Joads off their land (ibid., 45). He admits that he does not want to operate as an agent of the bank's violent interests, yet he must if he is to avoid his own children starving. Even large landowners themselves do not want to evict their tenants, and yet they have to. They are beholden to the big banks, their investors and creditors. If landowners allow unprofitable farming on their territory, they will ultimately pay a heavy price. At the bank as well, the employees hold no desire to cause suffering to the countryside, and yet the dispossession of rural families continues unabated. "The bank—the monster has to have profits all the time. It can't wait. It'll die. No, taxes go on. When the monster stops growing, it dies. It can't stay one size" (ibid., 40). The reproductive capacities of the region are steadily undercut without anyone wilfully responsible for the outcome.

The alienation process Steinbeck describes dissolves the direct bonds people have with each other and the land in favour of a centrally coordinated system geared toward profit-maximisation. Individual beings are thereby transformed into living accessories for a self-propelling system. It seems like none of them are really in control of their own actions. "The monster isn't men, but it can make men do what it wants" (ibid., 42). Capital is acting *through* them to pursue its own interests. These employees or farmers cannot take ownership over their own decisions, because they are subsumed in a system that runs by its own unaccountable laws. They are stand-alone cogs in a chain of commands that is driven by an anonymous power. One either submits to these imperatives or one

is discarded. Bare land is purportedly collateral damage to be accepted to keep feeding the capitalist monster.

Ultimately, capital drives people to undercut the reproduction of the area and dissolve the bonds constituting the web of life until nothing but bare land is left.

And all of them were caught in something larger than themselves. Some of them hated the mathematics that drove them, and some were afraid, and some worshiped the mathematics because it provided a refuge from thought and from feeling. If a bank or a finance company owned the land, the owner man said, The Bank—or the Company—needs—wants—insists—must have—as though the Bank or the Company were a monster, with thought and feeling, which had ensnared them. These last would take no responsibility for the banks or the companies because they were men and slaves, while the banks were machines and masters all at the same time. (Steinbeck 1993, 38–39)

In Steinbeck's novel, capital appears as a monster that instrumentalises the living beings that it subsumes. Living beings are reduced to “robots in the seat” (ibid., 43) *through* which capital enacts its own interests. “The monster that sent the tractor out, had somehow gotten into the driver's hands, into his brain and muscle, had goggled and muzzled him” (ibid., 44). Farmers no longer directly relate to their land or vice versa; capital rather acts *through* the farmers' hands, brains and muscles to take from the land what it can turn into profitable commodities. They are passive media for the self-actualisation of capital accumulation. This process dispossesses living beings of their own actions and puts them in a relation of dependency to an alien power. Capitalist accumulation operates as a self-propelling machine that dispossesses its agents of their autonomous agency to relate to their own lifeworld. These agents are turned into passive cogs powerless to change the monster's course—even when it is heading for disaster.

The Wrath at the End of the World

One should not too quickly identify Steinbeck as a post-humanist prophet, but he shares a number of affinities with post-humanist environmentalism that are helpful for the project of ecological class politics. Through a parallel reading of Tsing's *Mushroom at the End of the World* and Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, I have sought to uncover these affinities. Firstly, both start from a relational ontology of ecological relations, though Steinbeck's version remains more wedded to humankind than Tsing's. The primary means of reproduction for living beings is their capacity to form cooperative ecological relations with other organisms

that strengthen their common resilience and chances of survival. Steinbeck's predilection for animalistic human characters struggling in a Godless world and his naturalistic description of the Oklahoma soil as a character in its own right, move the novelist closer to an ecological class politics. Steinbeckian characters engage in ecological relations beyond the human sphere. Secondly, Tsing and Steinbeck both lament alienation-as-deracination. Capital uproots living beings from the web of life to mobilise them as stand-alone commodities in the capitalist valorisation cycle. This not only renders beings dependent on capital and its pursuit of profit, but also condemns them to a fate of bare land once their value for capital is exhausted. The strategic advantage of Steinbeck's anthropocentrism is, on the other hand, that it facilitates affective understanding of the plight of bare land. A politically effective response to the planetary crisis requires some strategic anthropocentrism to first lay out the challenge of reproducing human life on Earth before it clarifies how this struggle necessitates a shift of our human solidarities towards other, non-human beings. Once readers agree with the diagnosis of alienation-as-deracination in the case of uprooted farmers, it is easier to argue the same critique for the deracination of the web of life in general.

Nevertheless, Tsing and Steinbeck do not preach despair. Tsing is well aware of the ruins at the end of the world, but she praises the matsutake because it manifests a remnant capacity for ecological world-building that partly escapes capitalist control. Life persists and renews its ecological bonds even under catastrophic circumstances. Steinbeck also affirms the inexhaustible capacity of living beings to form new relations of mutual aid. Despite all the hardships the Joads encounter, they are "aimed right at goin' on" (Steinbeck 1993, 539). The Joads start out as individualistic farmers who praise autarky and independence above all else, but in the face of capitalist dispossession, this quest for autarky mutates into an appeal to collective solidarity:

Here is the node, you who hate change and fear revolution. Keep these two squatting men apart; make them hate, fear, suspect each other. Here is the anlage of the thing you fear. This is the zygote. For here "I lost my land" is changed; a cell is split and from its splitting grows the thing you hate—"We lost our land." The danger is here, for two men are not as lonely and perplexed as one. And from this first 'we' there grows a still more dangerous thing. (ibid., 193)

Marginalised labour migrants only stand a chance against alienation if they cultivate a 'we' of collaborative relations. They can form a counter-will to the instrumentalising force of capital and thereby resist their deracination and subsumption under capital's monstrous power. Though individually they can only oppose their subjection at great personal cost, their collective organisation can tip the

balance in their favour. The capitalist monster would have to retreat when met by the superior strength of the web of life regenerated.

And [resistant migrants] stand still and watch the potatoes float by, listen to the screaming pigs being killed in a ditch and covered with quicklime, watch the mountains of oranges slop down to a putrefying ooze; and in the eyes of the people there is the failure; and in the eyes of the hungry there is a growing wrath. In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage. (ibid., 445)

Notes

1. Marx himself became increasingly aware of the impossibility of separating the economy from ecology (see Saito 2017).
2. The concept ‘web of life’ comes from Moore (2015).
3. For the notion of ‘affect’ implying a simultaneous capacity to move and be moved by other beings, see Deleuze’s interpretation of ‘affect’ in Spinoza (Deleuze 1981, 66–69).
4. See Marx (1996), especially chapter 15 on ‘Machinery and Modern Industry.’
5. On the moments of friction and resistance to alienation, see Tsing (2011, 4).
6. See, for instance, Malm (2020).

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