The nonhuman turn or a re-turn to animism? Valuing life along and beyond capital

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Abstract
In this commentary, I point out that Büscher and other critics of the nonhuman turn ignore insights offered by Feminist, Black and Indigenous scholarship that help rethink the human and alternate worldmaking possibilities. The healthy corrective to the somewhat apolitical celebration of liveliness and entanglements in Western new materialist and posthumanism literature, that Büscher and others seek, already exists in Feminist, Black and Indigenous scholarship and practices, and in activism for environmental and climate justice around the world. In these times of deep ecological crises and precarity, we would do well to turn to the wisdom of Indigenous Peoples and other land-based cultures that embody and live by some of the central propositions of the ‘nonhuman turn’. I argue that the central propositions of nonhuman turn – relationality and interdependence; decentring and rethinking the human; honouring the agency, intelligence and subjecthood of other beings – offer alternate ways of doing politics and of imagining and enacting pluriversal, postcapitalist worlds. If this is not grounds for radical ecopolitics, then what is?

Keywords
Nonhuman turn, Indigenous wisdom, Indigenous ontologies, radical ecopolitics

Introduction
In recent decades, non-dualistic, non-determinist vitalist ontologies have gained traction. Some of this work, critics allege, over-romanticizes connections, emergence and indeterminacy and is potentially ahistorical and apolitical. I appreciate Büscher’s (2022) attempt to nuance these critiques and offer a way of overcoming them but I am troubled by his broad-sweep generalization and misreading of central propositions of vitalist ontologies. Especially troubling is a lack of meaningful engagement with longstanding work of Feminist and Black thinkers, Indigenous scholars, and scholar-practitioner-activists from the global South that help reconceptualize the human, human agency and accountability and offer possibilities for imagining alternate worldmaking with the many others with whom we share this world.

Like many others inspired by vitalist ontologies, I read the ‘nonhuman turn’ differently from Büscher and other critics. In fact, I find the label ‘nonhuman turn’ an inappropriate descriptor for
diverse approaches that take vitality and materiality of the world seriously, encourage attentiveness to deep interdependence and multispecies entanglements as an ontological condition of our ‘becoming with’ many others, thus challenging human exceptionalism and bounded individualism. Not to confuse means with the end, the aim of this scholarship is not to ‘decentre the human’ but to displace Eurocentric, modern, capitalist conceptions of the human to allow other ways of being human to flourish. Vitalist ontologies, in conjunction with Indigenous insights, foreground the animacy of the world and show that other ways of responding to this animacy are not only possible but persist and offer possibilities for a pluriversal, postcapitalist world. Challenging human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism is not about undermining human agency, but about challenging human hubris of treating the rest of the world as inert and disposable. It is about remembering that other-than-capitalist ways of being often persist despite capitalism’s attempts to erase them. Life and conceptions of what it means to be human and to be alive exceed capitalism – and this power of life, or ‘biopower from below’, offers grounds for resistance and reimagining. I align with scholars who think that recent emphasis on ‘multispecies entanglements’ is not just a new, passing fad, but a much-needed return to animism and relationality that is at the core of diverse Indigenous cultures around the world.

Büscher (2022) outlines three central propositions of the ‘nonhuman turn’ as: (1) a strong focus on ontological entanglements and relationality, (2) a concern to (re)distribute agency away from humans, and (3) questioning distinctions and distinction-making mechanisms, which according to critics, ‘lead to ineffective ecological politics in a context of capitalist domination’. To moderate apolitical tendencies in this literature, Büscher suggests two shifts – a dialectics between ‘more-than-human’ and ‘less-than-human’ and a shift from ‘more-than-human’ to ‘more-than-life’. I find this to be a flawed reading of this literature and contemporary discussions of human–nonhuman relations. In fact, instead of hampering effective politics, central tenets of vitalist ontologies offer grounds for radical politics.

### Decentring or Rethinking the Human

If we agree that Western bourgeois humanism’s notion of what counts as human is restrictive (Braidotti, 2013; Wynter, 2003), then surely posthumanism does not simply aim to ‘decentre the human’ but to extend it beyond the Eurocentric conception of Man as a bounded individual, rational-economic actor, driven by the fantasy of mastery and endless progress. Decentring this Man – ‘white man of European modernity entitled to appropriate a feminized and racialized material world in the quest for capitalist progress’ (Tola, 2017: 237) – is about making space for other ways of being human that persist despite modernity’s attempt to obliterate them (de la Cadena, 2019). Concerns for both ‘more-than-human’ and ‘less-than-human’ have long engaged ecofeminist thinkers (Maria Mies, Vandana Shiva, Silvia Federici and others), postcolonial, post-development thinkers (Arturo Escobar, Ashish Kothari, Esteve Corbera, etc.) and strategic practices of environmental justice activists globally. Büscher’s proposed conceptual shift to a dialectics between ‘more-than-human’ and ‘less-than-human’ neglects this longstanding work. In view of diverse ways of being human and from a relational ontological perspective that gives primacy to relationships, pivoting between de- and re-centring the human appears nonsensical. Honouring alternate ways of being present in this world, with our human bodies, and horizontalizing relationship with others, brings relationships to the centre, instead of hierarchical orderings of the world (as ‘more-than’ or ‘less-than’ human) using Western man as the normative device.

Moreover, making space for other ways of being human does not diminish human agency or obliterate human accountability. Rather, as Indigenous leaders and vitalist ontologists suggest, carrying awareness of deep interdependence opens grounds for greater accountability. Posthuman subjectivity
is embedded and embodied, immanent through relationships constituted in and by multiplicity, whose ‘partial form of accountability’ is based on a ‘strong sense of collectivity, relationality and hence community building’ (Braidotti, 2013: 49).

Instead of leading to a ‘do nothing’ approach, acknowledging humanity, intelligence and creativity of other earth beings leads to a deeper appreciation of interdependence and shared responsibility with other beings. Indigenous peoples model and strive to hold onto alternate ways of being present in the world and thinking about human agency. For them, appreciation of relationality and humanity of all beings is not new or a recent response to the intensification of alienation (as Büscher considers to be the case for vitalist ontologies) but an ongoing, affective response to the world that inspires and commands awe, curiosity and respect (Escobar, 2016; Ingold, 2006). Interdependence, as Indigenous scholar Kyle Whyte (2018) points out, is ‘a source of identity for how humans understand whom and what they are in the world’ (128), expressed for example in an Anishinaabe leader’s assertion that his ‘people were the lake, and the lake was them’, composed literally cell by cell… of the lake and the lake’s islands (Erdrich, 2006: 34; cited in Whyte, 2018: 128). The concept of interdependence shapes not only a sense of identity, but also a sense of responsibility to care for other beings, grounded in ‘the philosophy that nonhumans have their own agency, spirituality, knowledge, and intelligence’ (Whyte, 2018: 127). It also informs a conception of justice that recognizes that all beings have responsibilities and constraining other beings’ ability to fulfil their responsibilities is a form of environmental injustice and ‘an injustice to Creation’ (McGregor, 2009: 40).

Challenging human exceptionalism in this way, does not limit radical politics, as Büscher suggests, rather it leads to ecopolitics that motivates humans to exercise their caretaking responsibilities to their relatives, humans and nonhumans, as part of a ‘covenant of reciprocity’ that binds human and nonhuman kin in gift relations (Kimmerer, 2013), and nurtures ‘kin-centric ecologies’ (Salmón, 2000). These ways of thinking reciprocal flourishing in affective ecologies teach us that honouring agency of other beings is not about eroding human responsibility to act; rather it is about learning (or remembering) how to be in relationships that honour humanity and subjecthood of other beings (also see Singh, 2018).

**Distinctions and distinction-making mechanisms: Agency is not a zero-sum game**

Büscher and other critics, critique nonhuman theorists for downplaying distinctions and distinction-making mechanisms. This critique comes from misreading reading of this literature and of relational ontology. Challenging human exceptionalism is not an erasure of distinctions. Drawing from Deleuze and Guattari’s work, de Castro (2015) tells us, ‘immanence is not sameness, it is infinite difference’ (239). To interpret horizontalizing relationships between humans and nonhumans as an erasure of distinctions is a hasty conclusion. Feminist scholars have always insisted that differences matter. Far from taking an ahistorical perspective, Feminist and Black scholars have pointed out the terrible histories that have led us to this moment, terming our current era the ‘plantationocene’, rooted in plantation logic, slavery and disciplining of landscapes, plants and humans (Davis et al., 2019; Haraway, 2015).

Writing about Amerindian ontologies, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2015) points out that the idea that humans and animals share personhood is a complicated one that should not be interpreted as implying that humans and animals are essentially the same. It means that ‘humans and animals are, each on their own account….internally divided or entangled’ and their common personhood or humanity is what permits ‘their difference to be an inclusive, internal relation’ (de Castro, 2015: 238–239). Acknowledging personhood of other beings is thus not an erasure of difference. It rather implies that ‘similarities and differences among humans and animals are both equally concrete and abstract, practical and theoretical, emotional and intellectual, etc.’ (de Castro, 2015: 238). By extension of this logic, animism is not a projection of substantive human qualities onto animals (or things)
(Ingold, 2006), but rather ‘expresses the logical equivalences of the reflexive relations that humans and animals each have to themselves’ and that ‘the common condition of humans and animals is humanity not animality’ (de Castro, 2015: 245).

From this perspective, the animacy of the world is not ‘the infusion of spirit onto substance, or of agency into materiality, but rather ontologically prior to their differentiation’ (Ingold, 2006: 10). Agency or animating principle, thus, does not reside in the interior of physical objects but is immanent in relationship, and animacy is ‘the dynamic, transformative potential of the entire field of relations within which beings of all kinds, more or less person-like or thing-like, continually and reciprocally bring one another into existence’ (Ingold, 2006: 10). How does this notion of animacy animate a different understanding of politics? Examples of this already abound in ongoing environmental justice struggles around the world that are not simply struggles for distributive justice but are ontological struggles that challenge existing value regimes and assert a different way of being. They derive strength and motivation from an ongoing relationship with the animate world and not simply from an intellectual understanding about the workings of capital.

On ‘Ecopolitics’ inspired by liveliness of the world

Appreciating the animacy of the world leads to environmentalism that is not (just) about saving the (external) environment from a distance but about learning to respond (in specific local places) to affective ecologies that humans are a part of. As Jane Bennett (2010) puts it, ‘if environmentalists are selves who live on earth, vital materialists are selves that live as earth’ … who call for more sustainable, less noxious modes of production and consumption ‘in the name of vigorous materiality’ where materiality is a ‘rubric that tends to horizontalize the relations between humans, biota, and abiotia’ (111).

The wide variety of approaches that seek to understand and respond to ‘multi-species entanglements’ and inspire ecopolitics rooted in humility, respect and reciprocity for the world do not see their work as part of the ‘nonhuman turn’. Donna Haraway draws attention to how we are constantly becoming with other species, whether as compost (as a final destination) or as ‘companions’ (and not just dogs and cats). Indigenous theorists term this as a ‘kincentric’ ecological approach (Salmón, 2000), where humans are obliged to not simply ‘care for country’ but ‘care as country’ (Suchet-Pearson et al., 2013), seeing the land as ‘self-same’ (Simpson, 2014).

Contrary to Büscher and other critics’ interpretation, none of these approaches suggest that sharing agency with other beings diminishes human imperative to act. Rather they insist that (differentiated) humanity has (uneven) responsibility to clean up the mess that they have created. Acknowledging shared materiality or a different understanding of agency, as being immanent or emergent in assemblages instead of being bounded in individuals, need not open the door for a ‘do nothing’ mentality. We do appreciate the limits to (human) individual action within human social community and still show up to work collaboratively with other human colleagues, so why should admitting nonhumans as co-workers, kin and actors paralyze us with despair?

Even though Büscher does not name the nonhuman turn theorists who render struggles against capital ineffective, since Haraway and Tsing feature centrally in Hornborg’s (2017) critique that Büscher draws from, so I guess they are implicated. Both Haraway and Tsing insist that challenging human exceptionalism is not about the erasure of difference or a way to justify doing nothing. Haraway (2016), following Isabelle Stengers, insists that if thinking is our special human quality, then ‘think we must’ (36). As story-telling creatures, we, humans, have special responsibility, as Haraway reminds us repeatedly, it matters what stories tell stories, what concepts think concepts (2016: 118).

Modelling sympoietic thinking in our work

Corrosive skepticism cannot be midwife to new stories – Donna Haraway (1991: 78; cited in de la Bellacasa, 2012)
Lastly, humbly, I want to draw attention to the style of critique and theorizing that we embrace as academics. Following Ursula Le Guin’s (1986) ‘the carrier bag theory of fiction’, Haraway (2016) and Tsing (2015) urge us to write stories as a forager gathering diverse ideas rather than a hunter waiting for the big kill (Tsing: 287) and celebrate the ongoingsness of life, everyday actions, and living theory in everyday struggles. Modelling sympoietic thinking, I hope we can turn the spotlight on the road, the fellow travellers and the everyday struggles of people and other beings resisting capitalism. Instead of theorizing anew, I hope we can turn to onto-epistemologies of the South (Santos, 2014) and the wisdom of Indigenous peoples, the subaltern, and other marginalized peoples and beings – for they do know a thing or two about alienation, intensification of alienation, loss of life-worlds and how to resist this in solidarity with the many others with whom we make worlds.

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