In light of the extraordinary social and political situation under which we all now labor, I have chosen to take a rather different approach than usual in this year’s essay. To this end, I deploy Bruno Latour’s *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* as both a framing mechanism and a heuristic device in order to focus attention on the compelling question of posthumanist political ecology. While originally published as *Où atterrir? Comment s’orienter en politique* in 2017, Latour’s short text has only continued to gain relevance consequent on the heavy black pall cast over society first by the Covid-19 pandemic, and then quickly followed by the political hucksterism of the Trump administration in lieu of any reasoned response—as clearly evidenced by the opportunist’s refusal by the US to pay dues amounting to millions of dollars to the World Health Organization by way of an inflammatory campaign of lies and blame aimed at denying any and all responsibility for the current woes of the Earth writ large. Whereas to some this might seem to concern animal studies only obliquely, the questions brought to bear by political ecology upon the agitated thickness of geological history are among the most important facing animal studies today.

1. Introduction: Epistemological Delirium Has Taken Hold of the Public Stage

It is not by chance that ecological militants are, as Latour notes, the most ‘readily vulnerable’ of all political activists today. It has long been clear to everyone, writes Latour, that the Earth is not a limitless resource and that we shall ultimately pay dearly for the ongoing outrages of capitalist plunder. However, the power-wielding elites of today have elected *not* to make public...
the increasingly indisputable evidence regarding the threat this poses to the future of everyone and everything today. On the contrary, writes Latour, we must suppose that they drew two consequences from the warning, which resulted in the election of the Tweeter-in-Chief to the White House. ‘First, yes, we shall have to pay dearly for this upheaval, but the others are going to pay for what is broken, certainly not we ourselves; and, secondly, as for this less and less debatable truth about the New Climatic Regime, we are going to deny its very existence!’ (p. 18)

These two decisions, writes Latour, make it possible to connect three seemingly disparate phenomena spanning the past forty years: namely, deregulation, climate-change denial, and the ‘dizzying extension of inequalities’ (p. 18). Moreover, upon being brought into relation in this way, these phenomena are ultimately disclosed as differing parts of a single phenomenon aligned with the political invention of a new and profoundly postmodernist attractor.

First, then, the inescapable awareness of the Earth’s equally inescapable limits expressly gives the lie to the utopian project of global emancipation that underwrites modernist discourse. Hence, with a future life available to everyone now firmly out of the question, the elites ‘decided to get rid of all the burdens of solidarity as fast as possible—hence deregulation’ (p. 18). As a corollary of this, they decided too that ‘a sort of gilded fortress would have to be built for those (a small percentage) who would be able to make it through—hence the explosion of inequalities’ (pp. 18–19). And finally, in order to successfully ‘conceal the crass selfishness of such a flight out of the shared world’, these same elites had then ‘to reject absolutely the threat at the origin of this headlong flight—hence the denial of climate change’ (p. 19). In short, writes Latour, the elites ‘understood that, if they wanted to survive in comfort, they had to stop pretending, even in their dreams, to share the earth with the rest of the world’ (p. 19). Henceforth, the public life of a nation is orientated toward a fourth pole of attraction—one that bisects the ongoing tug-of-war between the Local and Global attractors at a 900 angle. Latour names this new vector the ‘Out-of-This-World’ attractor, which he describes as ‘the horizon of people who no longer belong to the realities of an earth that would react to their actions. For the first time, climate change denial defines the orientation of the public life of a nation’ (pp. 34–35).

At this point, Latour makes explicit the target of his impassioned critique: ‘Trumpism’, he writes, is the political invention of this fourth attractor, and as such constitutes ‘a political innovation of a rare sort that needs to be taken seriously’ (p. 34). Indeed, even with ‘the absence of
flagrant evidence, the effects themselves are quite visible. At the moment, the most edifying of these effects is the epistemological delirium that has taken hold of the public stage since the election of Donald Trump’ (p. 22). The innovation of Trumpism rests with its oblique relation to the line of attraction that stretches from the modernist lure of the Global at one pole to the nationalist perversion of the Local at the other. Trumpism, in other words, manages to link *in a single gesture* ‘the headlong rush toward maximum profit while abandoning the rest of the world to its fate’ and ‘the headlong rush backward of an entire people toward the return of national and ethnic categories’ (p. 37). Furthermore, insofar as it identifies with a fourth, ‘Out-of-This-World’ attractor, Trump’s election ultimately ‘confirms, for the rest of the world, the end of a politics oriented toward an identifiable goal. Trumpian politics is not “post-truth,” it is post-politics—that is, literally, a politics with no object, since it rejects the world that it claims to inhabit’ (p. 39).

What matters here, however, is not the elitist escape pod currently manned by the Trump administration, but rather what happens when the rest of us turn our backs on its profoundly selfish brutality.

### 2. And If We Should Turn Our Backs . . .

Thus far we have identified three distinct attractors: the Global and Local attractors as the opposing poles of one vector, and then the new ‘Out-of-This-World’ attractor situated at one pole of a second vector running perpendicular to the first. So what then, of the missing *third* attractor? We already have our answer: in turning away from Trumpism we must turn instead toward a resolutely Earthbound line of flight, one that refuses both a global rush for maximum profit at any cost and the febrile backward nationalism of any promised return of the local. Latour describes this third attractor as ‘that consummate political actor, the Terrestrial’ (p. 56). Moreover, he argues, if we are ever to ‘restore a positive meaning to the words “realistic,” “objective,” “efficient,” or “rational,”’ we have to turn them away from the Global, where they have so clearly failed, and toward the Terrestrial’ (p. 66).

Despite being orientated perpendicular to the Local–Global axis of attraction, the Terrestrial and the Global poles are nonetheless *almost* the same, albeit for one crucial difference:

the Globe grasps all things from *far away*, as if they were *external* to the social world and completely *indifferent* to human concerns. The
Terrestrial grasps the same structures from *up close*, *as internal* to the collectivities and *sensitive* to human actions, to which they *react* swiftly. Two very different versions of the way for [...] scientists to have their feet on the ground, as it were. This is a new *libido scienti*, a new distribution of the metaphors and sensitivities that are essential to the recovery and reorientation of political affects. The Global has to be viewed as a *declension* of the Globe that has ended up distorting access to it. (pp. 66–67)

It is as part of this new *libido scienti* further to the invention or disclosure of the Terrestrial attractor, argues Latour, that two fundamental concepts are made newly available to scholars of animal studies and beyond: those of *political ecology* and *movedness*. In more precisely defining the Terrestrial, the concept of political ecology is at last mobilized on a scale adequate to the stakes, insofar as there is no longer any distinction to be made between socio-economic conflicts and ecological conflicts. As Latour puts it, we can no longer have recourse to this distinction ‘for the excellent reason that there are not naked humans on one side and nonhuman objects on the other’ (p. 58). Prior to this ‘more precise’ definition of the Terrestrial attractor—which only becomes available through its opposition to the Out-of-This-World attractor—Latour rightly locates a general misconception of *nature* at the root of the failure of political ecology hitherto. Common to both ‘the old veterans of the class struggle and the new recruits to the geo-social conflicts’, he writes, is a certain conception of Nature that ‘has allowed the Moderns to occupy the Earth in such a way that it forbids others to occupy their own territories differently’ (p. 64). Original and compelling, Latour argues that, insofar as the molding of a politics is deemed as the bringing together of agents with shared interests and capacities for action, an ecological politics is thus already doomed to failure insofar as an instrumental conception of Nature by definition prohibits any such political alliances from taking place between political actors and objects deemed ‘external to society and deprived of the power to act’ (p. 64). It is this particular political-scientific history, he continues, which must be challenged ‘in order to restore more leeway to politics’ (p. 65).

Here, however, it is crucial that we do not to make the mistake of confusing this concept of political ecology made available by the Terrestrial attractor with the mundane assumption found everywhere today that simply takes for granted the prior deconstruction of the nature–culture binary. By contrast, writes Latour, we must instead know how to ‘grasp’ this concept of nature that was ‘invented precisely to limit human action thanks
to an appeal to the laws of objective nature that cannot be questioned’ (p. 65). The concept of determined nature, in other words, serves to hold us prisoner in a deathly political quietism:

Freedom on one side, strict necessity on the other: this makes it possible to have it both ways. Every time we want to count on the power to act of other actors, we’re going to encounter the same objection: ‘Don’t even think about it, these are mere objects, they cannot react’, the way Descartes said of animals that they cannot suffer. (p. 65)

This last reference—to the Cartesian animal-machine and, more obliquely, to the capacity to suffer as proposed by Jeremy Bentham—carries with it a peculiar poignancy. The opposing concepts of ‘the animal’ put forward by Descartes and Bentham are unavoidable touchstones in the founding and subsequent evolution of animal studies as a theoretical field. Here, however, Latour is turning that same critical trajectory back upon itself, suggesting that the same unfeeling complacency that characterizes Descartes’s position also characterizes the contemporary kneejerk dismissal of the capacity of inorganic and nonbiological others to act. While this might—and indeed should—make for somewhat uncomfortable reading for many scholars of animal studies and beyond, it is nonetheless imperative that we submit this depoliticizing concept of nature to a rigorous and ongoing critique. As Latour puts it, for political ecology to become adequate to the Terrestrial attractor it needs first of all ‘to be able to count on the full power of the sciences, but without the ideology of “nature” that has been attached to that power. We have to be materialist and rational, but we have to shift these qualities onto the right grounds’ (p. 65).

For Latour, as we know, this critique of the instrumentalist concept of nature—and of the so-called ‘natural sciences’ to which this conception gives rise—makes explicit newly restored spaces for the play of political alliance. As such, this leads us directly to the second of his two fundamental concepts made available through the Terrestrial attractor, namely that of movedness.

Latour, we recall, identifies what might best be described as a ‘dictatorship of distance’ as the modus operandi of the Global attractor in general, and of best scientific practice in particular. In accordance with such thinking, all things must be grasped objectively as if from a great distance away and thus from a position of supreme externality and indifference, while simultaneously imposing strict constraints upon movements of all kinds in such a way as to detach us from any sense of nature as process. Hence, argues Latour,
within the erroneously named ‘natural sciences’ and beyond, it thus
becomes increasingly difficult to gain any knowledge with respect to the
many other forms of transformative movement, from epigenesis, engender-
ing, and decay to plasticity, negentropy, and metamorphosis. Latour sum-
marizes this operative mode of the Global attractor as follows:

the word ‘natural’ is increasingly reserved for what makes it possible
to follow a single type of movement viewed from the outside. [. . .]
Every movement had to conform to the model of falling bodies. This
is called the ‘mechanistic’ view of the world, thanks to a strange
metaphor borrowed from an inaccurate idea about the working of
real mechanisms. (p. 69)

This inaccuracy or, more literally, this misconception regarding the
working processes of actual mechanisms is thus caused by—or, better, is
a product of—the constitutive reduction or occlusion by the ‘natural’ sciences
of manifold processual movements to the supposedly ‘objective’ movement
of falling bodies in space.

3. Political Matters

We are now better placed to understand some of the ways in which Latour’s
analysis can be usefully deployed as both a framing mechanism and a pointed
heuristic device in order to critically engage the question of posthumanist
political ecologies. If the Trump administration and the Covid-19 pandemic
have taught us anything, it is that we can no longer afford to separate the
ecological from the social. No longer can we hide our unmovedness and
quietism behind the delusions of distance and indifference even as space itself
is transformed around us. No longer the orderly, gridded planes of global
cartography, space instead becomes ‘an agitated history in which we are
participants among others, reacting to other reactions. It seems that we are
landing in the thick of geohistory’ (p. 42).

So just what does this all mean, which is to say, how does it matter?
Whereas Latour rightly views the vulnerability of ecological militants as a
‘sign that does not deceive’ (p. 45), he is also right to see in this ready
vulnerability a clear sign of the failure of political ecology to date:

Ecology has thus succeeded in running politics through its mill by
introducing objects that had not previously belonged to the usual pre-
occupations of public life. It has successfully rescued politics from an
overly restrictive definition of the social world. In this sense, political
ecology has fully succeeded in changing what is at stake in the public sphere. [...] Everyone agrees about this. And yet, ecology has failed. Everyone agrees about this too. (p. 46)

Interminably it seems, we continue to wager the Earth along a single narrow track. Herded lockstep through a cattle chute along a single available movement space, the promise of ecology has thus already been broken.

Latour’s question is our question: how are we to orientate ourselves differently and in so doing avoid the killing floor of global termination? How, in other words, are we to find the necessary leeway for authentic political action? The concept of orientation here is crucial. Insofar as we make our stand along the modernist tug of war between Global and Local attractors, we at best offer little or no resistance, and at worst provide enthusiastic support for the continuance of political oppression as something ‘natural’ akin to the force of gravity itself. However, and in stark contrast to the simultaneously delusional and cynical utopias of the Local, the Global, and the Out-of-This-World, political action makes its stand insofar as it takes its place within a specific territory of ‘material participations’.

Politics has always been oriented toward objects, stakes, situations, material entities, bodies, landscapes, places. What are called the values to be defended are always responses to the challenges of a territory that it must be possible to describe. This is in effect the decisive discovery of political ecology: it is an object-oriented politics. Change the territories and you will also change the attitudes. (p. 52)

It is important here not to confuse Latour’s ‘decisive discovery’ of ecology as an ‘object-oriented politics’ with that of Object Oriented Ontology (OOO) as proposed by Graham Harman. Despite some claims to the contrary, there is in fact very little common ground between the two positions. The logical schema of object-oriented politics, writes Latour, is inevitably fragile insofar as ‘it is a question of diverting toward the Terrestrial the energies that were going toward the Local attractor’ (p. 53).

Unfortunately, the fragility of object-oriented politics is all too obvious, resting as it does upon the possibility of entering into fraught negotiation with supporters of the Local. Such negotiation, writes Latour, has to bear on the importance, the legitimacy, even the necessity of belonging to a land, but—and here lies the whole difficulty—without immediately confusing it with what the Local has added to
it: ethnic homogeneity, a focus on patrimony, historicism, nostalgia, inauthentic authenticity. (p. 53)

And here lies the whole difficulty. For Latour, it is ‘the uprooting that is illegitimate, not the belonging’ (p. 53). Belonging to a land, those everywhere infinite movements and becomings of attachment, is reactionary ‘only by contrast with the headlong flight forward imposed by modernization’ (p. 53)—a flight ironically imposed along a single track so confined as to allow no space of movement whatsoever, while at the same time leaving the ruling elites free to plot new escape vectors aimed at leaving behind the whole catastrophic mess of worldly concerns. Again, Latour’s question is our question: ‘If we stop fleeing, what does the desire for attachment look like?’ (p. 53).

We shall return to the potential material participations of Latour’s Terrestrial politics, but before that I aim to show in the forthcoming sections just some of the ways in which the key concepts introduced here by Latour enable further critical engagement with contemporary articulations of ecological posthumanism. To this end, I first consider a recent article by Suzanne McCullagh primarily through the lens of political ecology, before moving on to a paper by Thomas Nail read through the concept of movedness.

4. On the Nature of Political Ecology

In ‘Heterogeneous Collectivity and the Capacity to Act: Conceptualizing Nonhumans in Political Space’, Suzanne McCullagh argues that the neoliberal concept of the political arena as exclusively occupied by rational and individualist subjects of a will ultimately occludes any recourse to ‘accounts of a molecular or micro-political register composed of heterogeneous collectivities in processes of composition’ (p. 141). By contrast, she continues, to conceive of political action ‘in terms of heterogeneity brings into view the processes by which capacities for political action are constituted by nonhuman forces, entities and elements’ (p. 141). More specifically for us here, McCullagh further states that to think political space through heterogeneity serves to ‘facilitate an ecological conception of political action’ in that it moves the nonhuman world ‘from the position of passive resource for human ends to active participation in political action’ (p. 143). The so-called ‘nonhuman turn’ has of course become something close to mandatory across the humanities in recent years and, as such, it is imperative that we do not simply accept as valid any and all such ‘posthumanist’ claims but instead put each one repeatedly to the test of sufficient reason. In other
words, is it in fact the case that thinking of the space of politics as a composite of human and nonhuman capacities and materialities is itself sufficient on its own to actualize what, following Latour, can be called political ecology?

At first glance, McCullagh’s argument appears to suggest that we can actualize an ecological conception of political action with the potential to subvert the macro-politics of contemporary neoliberalism simply by incorporating other-than-human bodies and forces within the terrain of politics. Can it really be that simple, or is that simply naive? Indeed, variations on just this claim are commonplace in the ‘speculative’ theories collated under the umbrella of new materialism. So, what exactly is happening here? First of all, in following McCullagh’s reasoning it is necessary for us to have already conceived political action ‘in terms of heterogeneity’ in order for us to thereafter ‘bring into view’ the processes by which capacities for political action are constituted, and in particular those processes by which capacities for action are in fact constituted by nonhuman forces. Hence, in order to first disclose those processes that are the prior condition of nonhuman political acts, we must already have known that nonhuman forces constitute such processes that are the prior condition of nonhuman political acts. This first step, in other words, literally consists in finding something that was never lost in the first place, and as such the circularity of McCullagh’s reasoning becomes readily apparent. Moving now to the second step of her argument, it is on this basis of having disclosed the occluded processes that constitute capacities for political action that McCullagh argues that it thereafter becomes possible for us to think political space through heterogeneity, and in so doing facilitate the emergence of an ‘ecological conception’ of political action. As we have seen, however, such thinking of the concept of political space in terms of heterogeneity is not an effect as suggested here, but is rather its prior condition. Given this, McCullagh’s aim of somehow facilitating the emergence of an ecological politics, while laudable indeed, nonetheless ends up turning in circles around an absence of foundation.

However, McCullagh’s paper nonetheless raises important questions regarding the possibility or otherwise of a genuinely object-oriented political ecology. Is it perhaps that what McCullagh’s paper discloses is in fact the necessary failure of ecological reason itself? Or is this rather a failure orchestrated by a misplaced conflation of the ontological and ethical domains? Of particular note here is McCullagh’s recourse to Rosi Braidotti’s The Posthuman (2013) in substantiating her claim that posthuman politics overcomes the political exclusion of both humans and animals by the simple expedient of ‘reconceiving political action as “fully immersed in and immanent to a network of nonhuman (animal, vegetable, viral) relations”’
(Braidotti quoted by McCullagh, p. 148). In contrast to the individualist politics of neoliberalism, continues McCullagh, political ecology concerns processes of differentiation constitutive of collectivities with varying capacities for action. This last point is crucial: the logic of posthumanism centers on a shifting of focus and scale away from bodies as encapsulated socio-political individuals and toward bodies as at once differentiated and differentiating collectivities, each producing or reproducing differing capacities for political action. For McCullagh, this shift is rooted in the collaborative works of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari and in particular their theorization of nature as ‘interconnected machines; not machines rationally designed to serve a purpose, but productive processes that encompass both producer and product’ (p. 148). This of course returns us to what for Latour is the central role occupied by the concept of nature in establishing the space of politics, and the parts played therein by collectivities and capacities.

‘In beginning something new’, writes McCullagh, ‘the actor enables the actions of others, and in this sense also, action is engaged with collectivity; in acting, one is both capacitated by others and capacitating the actions of others’ (p. 145). Secondly, she argues, the enaction of a given capacity should in fact serve as a prompt insofar as it calls our attention to the prior constitutive ‘elements’ of that particular capacitation. Lastly, in yielding to that prompt we are given to understand that ‘capacities for political action are enabled by complex compositions [and] it is by combining with others that affects are produced in ways that will either increase or decrease a given body’s capacity to act’ (pp. 150–51). Leaving aside for the moment the problematic circularity noted previously, it is clear that McCullagh’s account of political ecology, like Latour’s, is a function of specific relations of collectivities and capacities, albeit with differently stressed concepts of nature, with McCullagh following Deleuze and Guattari’s more overtly Spinozan approach.

Given the profound importance attributed by Latour to the concept of nature in the production of novel political spaces, however, can we still consider McCullagh’s argument as posing a genuine political ecology despite her particular conception of nature? As we know, Latour maintains that any ‘molding’ of a politics based on the bringing together of agents with shared interests and capacities for action has necessarily already failed insofar as all such accounts take as their condition an instrumental conception of nature that prohibits the taking place of novel political assemblages by definitively excluding all such objects deemed external to society. Moreover, Latour in fact locates the restorative potential for increased political leeway as taking place right here, on this particular ground, insofar as it is this ‘quite
particular’ political-scientific history that must be challenged in the mobilizing of a genuine political ecology. At first glance, McCullagh’s conception of nature as a practically infinite composition of interconnected machines as (re)productive processes encompassing producers and products alike appears to be in clear accord with Latour’s condition of political possibility. Indeed, argues McCullagh, ‘liberal political thought, though it may oppose social and ecological injustices resulting from neoliberalism and globalization, reinforces the depoliticization of heterogeneous assemblages wherein injustices are actualized, suffered and resisted’ (p. 154). This point is absolutely critical—and for Latour as much as for McCullagh. Things, however, are not quite that simple.

As noted above, it remains—and furthermore will always remain—inufficient to assume that the deconstruction of the nature–culture binary (along with its corollaries) has been done and thus done away with. Instead, following Latour, we must always know as far as possible just how to ‘grasp’ the concept of nature, or else risk unknowingly confining ourselves to the empty rhetoric of political quietism. Political ecology, we recall, will only become adequate to the stakes once it deploys the full power of the ‘natural’ sciences, but such mobilizations can only ever take place without the ideology of ‘Nature’ attached to that power. With this in mind, the key to McCullagh’s ecological politics centers upon a body’s capacity for potential capacitation. More precisely, it concerns the possibility of mobilizing material compositions in such a way as to either increase or decrease a given body’s capacity to act. For example, she writes,

Indignation may give rise to powerful collective actions capable of overthrowing a given political order. But, militancy and ressentiment, as sad or reactive passions, may lead to a general decrease in capacities for action. Further, the fluctuation in the capacities of bodies for action (human and nonhuman) [is] dependent upon combinations formed with heterogeneous others. (p. 151)

But how, exactly, are we to mobilize material compositions in order to ensure an increase in a given body’s capacity for political action? Both indignation and ressentiment, it should be noted, describe specifically human capacities for engagement with a material reality that is perceived as both external and prior to itself, so is it actually the case that McCullagh’s argument moves us beyond an understanding of politics as a purely human affair? Calling again upon Deleuze and Guattari in response to this question, McCullagh argues that ‘the relation between a maker and their material consists in the maker “surrendering” and “following” the material’
This, however, would seem to offer little resolution insofar as ‘to surrender to’ and ‘to follow after’ material composites thus construed as prior to any such relation ultimately ends up simply reiterating two further—specifically human—capacities for engaging an external material reality that always already precedes political capacitation. For McCullagh, however,

The material takes on an active dimension; it has the capacity to inform and guide the actions of the maker. As a result, we get a view of action as a kind of co-action comprising humans and materials. This account of productive activity makes room for the conceptualization of human activities with nonhumans to be rendered in political terms; it creates an opening for the conceptualization of collective political space as heterogeneous rather than exclusively human. (p. 151)

Here, the active capacities ‘to inform’ and ‘to guide’ taken on by material composites directly correspond with the privileged human capacities for engaging with that material reality—namely ‘to surrender’ and ‘to follow’—in accordance with a prior constitutive distinction between ‘a maker and their material’. McCullagh, in other words, does not award an active political capacity to material composites but only an ontological priority awaiting proper political activation by a human maker on the basis of the latter employing an ethically correct form of engagement. Material reality, while ontologically prior, thus gives of itself to inform and guide a political ecology only once its information and guidance have been activated by a human maker. As such, posthumanist ecology has yet to become political ecology: political capacitation remains an exclusively human property insofar as it fails to escape the depoliticizing ideology of ‘nature’ identified by Latour as maintaining a deathly quietism.

The combined timeliness and urgency of Latour’s critique of the prevailing notion that politics ultimately comes down to having the ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ attitude is perhaps most clearly disclosed by the contemporary ascendancy of ‘new materialism’. In ‘A Critique of New Materialism: Ethics and Ontology’ (2016), Paul Rekret addresses this issue directly. What specifically characterizes new materialist discourse, he argues, is precisely the tendency to frame the political in terms of our ethical relations to an external material world. New-materialist theories, in other words, draw upon a certain understanding of ethics in order to politically mobilize the ontological primacy of matter. In McCullagh’s paper, it is the ontological primacy of matter that informs and guides our correct attunement and
registration of material reality—that is, to surrender and follow—in what is ultimately an exclusively human act of political mobilization. In collapsing ontology and ethics in this way, argues Rekret, ‘new materialist theories thus seem to acknowledge no material constraints to access to non-human nature’ (pp. 2–3). Consequently, this risks obscuring the complex materialist logics at work by granting its proponents leave to ‘sidestep any epistemic questions over the conditions of thought’ (p. 3). Thus, continues Rekret,

Given that the expansion and intensification of processes of enclosure and privatization continues apace across geographical and microbial scales, the invocation of ‘entanglement’ risks appearing as an idealizing gesture empty of content. At stake in the question of the relation of the mental and the material is thus our ability to understand the political terrain upon which we act in the midst of massive and rapid technological, ecological, and social change. (p. 3)

Here again, the prevailing ecological posthumanism ultimately ends up turning in circles around a fundamental emptiness.

In this way, McCullagh’s posthumanist ecology unwittingly reiterates the same tendency in political philosophy that she initially sets out to contest—namely, the tendency ‘to overemphasize the human ability to shape and order materials’ and in so doing ‘de-emphasize the capacities of the materials to certain kinds of shaping and arrangement’ (p. 152). As McCullagh rightly maintains, without the development of conceptual resources that explicitly involve the nonhuman and the non-organic within the space of emergent politics, we ultimately end up ‘silently condoning’ such political theories that ‘register the exploitation of the nonhuman world as apolitical’ (p. 152). However, what McCullagh’s argument also demonstrates is the need to continually put these conceptual resources to the test of rigorous critique.

5. Of Political Movements

For Latour, as we know, it is only by putting the concept of nature to the test of rigorous critique that newly restored spaces are made available for the play of political alliance. By contrast, the supremely indifferent dictatorship of distance orchestrated by the Global attractor serves instead to detach us from all such material participations arising from the sense of nature as process. Latour then goes on to identify one particular component as contributing significantly to the latter’s wildly successful ideology: the restriction and exclusion of movement. This restriction of movement goes hand in hand with the instrumentalist concept of nature insofar as it grounds the
synonymous description of determinist causality as mechanistic, that is, as concerning forces and movements over time (mechanics) and as concerning fully determinable instruments or machines (mechanisms). The positive sciences, in short, are founded upon a bizarrely selective perception—the sight of bodies falling in space somehow serving to blind that same eye to manifold processual movements.

A political ecology that remains blind to the strict restrictions imposed upon movement inevitably reneges on its promise insofar as it has already obscured the possibility space of the political. As such, we can now better understand Latour’s locating of the spaces of future politics within ‘those everywhere infinite movements and becomings of attachment’ (p. 53). To become materialists, he writes, ‘is no longer to reduce the world to objects, but to extend the list of movements that must be taken into account’ (p. 87). In ‘Kinopolitics: Borders in Motion’, Thomas Nail engages this problematic by focusing on the relations between potential spaces of politics and the forms of movement that order and disorder the processes of bordering.

To move on from the falling bodies of the natural sciences, writes Nail, we need ‘a new theoretical foundation that takes seriously the collective agency of humans and nonhuman systems’ as dimensions of what he calls ‘kinetic systems’ (p. 184). While the recasting of all kinds of matters from the geological to the technological in active and constitutive roles is a commonplace within animal studies and posthumanism today, for Nail it is the largely overlooked fact that movement is ‘something that all matters do’ that ushers in nothing less than ‘a new Copernican revolution’ (pp. 184–85). Hence, in a novel Aristotelian echo, Nail argues that we must begin not with language, logic, or life, but with motion in order to provide ourselves ‘with a shared and materialist basis for posthuman systems analysis’ (p. 185). Indeed, he continues, only through movement in the first instance is it possible to understand the orientation and function of borders within such systems.

Nail begins his account of kinetic systems with Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the assemblage. In contrast to unified organic systems, he writes, assemblages are ‘more like machines, defined solely by their external relations of composition, mixture and aggregation’ (p. 186). Moreover, insofar as we take a ‘movement-oriented approach’ to assemblages we ultimately disclose ‘something extremely counter-intuitive about political borders: that they are in motion and circulation’ (p. 188). This movement-oriented approach, he continues, concerns kinetic systems understood as ‘empirically and historically emergent patterns of motion’ situated in the present and ‘defined by their flux, mobility and circulation’ (pp. 188–89). If we define
political systems by their patterns of motion, he argues, then ‘political theory can provide a much closer analysis of the material and kinetic systems within which humans and nonhumans share collective agency and responsibility’ (p. 190).

Kinetic systems, writes Nail, are defined ‘by their continuities and folds. They hold together not by divergence but by knotting and knotworks. Their collections are not defined by singularities but by confluences, conjunctions and circulations’ (p. 190). Moreover, he continues, a political theory based not on essence, substance or space but rather on movement or movedness requires the further definition of conceptual terms appropriate for this analysis. For this, Nail returns to the concept of assemblage, which he argues ‘makes three major contributions to any future posthuman system theories’ (p. 185). While this is clearly an overstated claim, Nail nonetheless demonstrates just as clearly the importance of these three contributions: flow, fold, and field. Before turning to each of these concepts in turn, however, it is important to bear in mind throughout our own framing of this problematic, which can be summarized as follows: What, if anything, does Nail’s concept of ‘kinopolitics’ have to offer to Latour’s political concept of movedness, and of politics as a domain of manifold movements?

The concept of material flow as continuous movement composes the theoretical bedrock of Nail’s argument. A flow does not simply absorb or ‘totalize’ a second flow, he writes, but instead the two ‘remain mixed like different regions in the same fluid. Confluent flows are diverse but also continuous and thus overlap in a kind of open collection of knots or tangles’ (p. 191). Crucially, a flow ‘is not a probability; it is a process’ (p. 191). As such, the ‘control of flows is a question of flexible adaptation and the modulation of limits’ (p. 191), whereas the politics of movement is defined by the analysis of bifurcations and redirections of flows, of vectors, tendencies and changes in speed. By contrast, folds mark secondary sites of relative or perceived stasis within the primacy of unceasing material flow. Hence, a fold ‘is not something other than a flow; it is the redirection of a flow back onto itself in a loop or junction’ (pp. 191–92). The approximate reiteration of these looping patterns or folds thus produces ‘a kind of mobile stability’ in the repeated joining together of a flow with itself (p. 192). More importantly, while the initial site of a given fold is arbitrary, the yoking of a flow to itself through a process of reiterated feedback loops thus augments this flow at every turn. It is here that the question of differing kinds of movement arises for the first time. Rather than being reducible to simple changes of speed, writes Nail, this auto-augmentation of flows marks the seceding of control over the flow to something else: a driver. This driver, he
writes, ‘is not necessarily a person but the given point at which the flow intersects with itself’ (p. 192). While obviously fundamental to Nail’s kinopolitical project, this concept of the driver nonetheless remains somewhat vague and thus consequently difficult to grasp.

Although the flow is continually changing and moving around the loop, the driver appears to remain in the same place. In this sense, the driver absorbs the mobility of the yoked flow while remaining relatively immobile itself: a mobile immobility, a relative immobility that moves by the movements of others. (p. 192)

As a reiterative circular process, however, the augmented fold with its driven feedback is necessarily subject to the play of différence. According to Nail, as we know, flows and folds are necessarily empirically and historically determined patterns of motion, and thus concern becomings in and of spacetime. Despite this, it is time rather than movement that remains as the prime mover behind Nail’s political ecology. As such I would argue that the relation here between the arbitrary driver and the augmentation accrued by its reiteration of flows still requires further development. Nail makes an important point, for example, in contrasting the concept of the fold with the concept of the node as developed explicitly in spatial location theory. Without prior movement, he writes, ‘how did nodes or stable points emerge in the first place? Placing the fixed nodes first means that movement is always already yoked to an origin and destination, so there is no fold’ (p. 193). But is it the case that empirically and historically determined patterns of movement in fact precede the emergence of nodal points, or is it rather that such nodes are markers of spatial and material emergence only against the timeless backdrop that is absolute time? To be clear, this is by no means to suggest that Nail’s kinopolitical project is necessarily condemned to fall foul of a time of transcendence, but only that such issues remain to be fully addressed.

On several occasions, Nail calls upon advances within the fluid sciences to further substantiate his argument. In my opinion, a more focused analysis along these lines is likely to offer particularly fertile ground for further development insofar as it brings to the fore the difference between a system of production and a system of engendering that Latour describes as having ‘to do with the possibility of multiplying the actors without at the same time naturalizing behaviors’ (p. 87). Only by actualizing this possibility, continues Latour, do we become materialists, and only by extending ‘the list of movements that must be taken into account’ can this possibility be actualized (p. 87). Developments in the physical sciences have long since discredited
the absolutes of time and space that served to anchor the universe of classical physics, and accord instead with the irreversibility and eventual undecidability characteristic of both subatomic particles and far-from-equilibrium dissipative structures. Metastable processes, as Eric Schneider and Dorian Sagan argue, ‘underlie the things we mistake for things. Selves are not closed or isolated but arise as metastable open systems in a sea of energy and flows’ (Into the Cool, p. 112). Nail’s kinopolitics thus echoes the claims of contemporary thermodynamics, according to which all forms of being in fact are emergent, energy-driven processual material structures, at once product and producer of material cycles and self-reinforcing networks. Similarly, the patterns of motion that compose the flows and folds of open metastable systems do so only insofar as they are empirically and historically determined. Formed through iterative feedback loops, in other words, the emergence of novel forms or patterns is nonetheless constrained by historicity, that is, by the memory of prior states of being. Indeed, it is exactly this iterative processual development that inscribes the potential for unpredictable and irreversible transformation as a constitutive condition of metastable systems.

Before we return in conclusion to the impact of all of this upon the tendential attractors and manifold movements that for Latour represent the very possibility of politics going forward, it still remains to address the concepts of field and border that, according to Nail, are fundamental to the emergence of radical political enfoldings. Fields of circulation, he argues, constitute kinds of meta-foldings insofar as they bring together a series of folds within a larger curved path that ‘continually folds back onto itself, wrapping up all the folds together’ (p. 193). More specifically, he continues,

Circulation is the regulation of flows into an ordered knotwork of folds, but flows are indivisible, so circulation does not divide them but rather bifurcates and folds them back onto themselves in a series of complex knots. Since flows are continuously variable and the junctions are vortical, circulation is dynamic. It acts less like a single ring than like an origami object that brings together multiple folds, changing the neighborhoods each time it folds. (p. 193)

The field of circulation is thus immanent to the flows and folds of matter, sharing with the former the necessary absence of origin and destination. And, just as with flows, circulation too is incompatible with the concepts of exclusion and inclusion. Instead, writes Nail, the field of circulation composes ‘a multifolded structure creating a complex system of relative insides
and outsides without absolute inclusions and exclusions, but the insides and outsides are all folds of the same continuous process or flow’ (pp. 193–94). In the same moment, however, every time circulation creates a fold it also creates ‘both a new inclusion and new exclusion’ (p. 194). This latter point is crucial insofar as this reworking of the concept of circulation necessarily transforms the concept of the border as a result.

The apparent function of a border, writes Nail, is to let desirables in and at the same time keep undesirables out. This, however, only appears to be true when viewed from an anthropocentric perspective. Similarly, the conventional view of the border as fixed, immobile, and impassible is again a mere apparition, the result of anthropocentric blinkering. In fact, argues Nail, borders are ‘both malleable and continuously fluctuating between the two sides they separate’ (p. 194). Furthermore, rather than stopping movement, the primary function of borders is rather to circulate movement. As such, borders are agents of topological transformations on both sides, thus transforming too the figures defined by them. Borders, in short, are open kinetic systems much like the open metastable systems described above.

On this basis, Nail then turns his attention to the larger question of political agency. Borders, he reiterates, ‘are not well understood only in terms of inclusion and exclusion, but rather by circulation. [...] The exclusion is always mobilized or circulated’ (p. 197). The mobilization or circulation of exclusion, in other words, is at the same time the possibility of its radical remobilization or recirculation. As a mattering, bordering is always already a process.

The border is the social technique of reproducing the limit points, after which that which returns may return again and under certain conditions (worker, criminal, commuter, etc.). The border [...] practically redistributes. Undocumented migrants, for example, are, for the most part, not blocked out but rather redistributed as functionally ‘criminalized’ persons into underground economies. (p. 198)

While by no means reducible to it, the process of bordering as productive of the undocumented migrant offers perhaps the clearest example of the functioning of contemporary border politics. Human and nonhuman political agencies, writes Nail, are ‘two sides of the same pattern of motion that “funnels” migrants to their death’ (p. 195). From within the constraints of naive anthropocentrism, ‘these migrant-border deaths look like unfortunate accidents of the nature of those borders. In fact, however, the material agency of the sea, mountains and desert [is] part of the agency of the border
itself in a certain pattern of funneled motion’ (p. 195). However, the same process of bordering is at the same moment the possibility of breakdowns and partial functioning, of bugs and hacks and malware, and even perhaps of a kinopolitics of misdirection and mutation.

According to Nail, it is precisely because the border ‘is not a logical, binary or sovereign cut, [that] its processes often break down, function partially, multiply or relocate the division altogether’ (p. 198). Interesting here is Nail’s invocation of sovereign binarism, which inevitably recalls the work of deconstruction as well as the performativity of queer theory to which it gives rise. Indeed, it seems to me that a careful engagement with Derrida throughout would doubtless both strengthen and clarify Nail’s position, most notably around the concepts of the border and the fold—concepts that occupied Derrida’s thought from first to last. In the posthumously published The Beast and the Sovereign (2008), for example, Derrida defines the deconstructive ‘gesture’ as the refusal to ‘consider the existence (whether natural or artificial) of any threshold to be secure, if by “threshold” is meant either an indivisible frontier line or the solidity of a foundational ground’ (p. 310). Or again, in Limited Inc. (1988) Derrida documents at some length how ‘the limit of the frame or the border of the context always entails a clause of nonclosure’ (p. 152).

6. Conclusion: If We Stop Fleeing, What Does the Desire for Attachment Look Like?

It would be difficult indeed to disagree with Nail’s concluding claim that the twenty-first century ‘marks a Copernican turn toward the emergence of new posthuman systems’ (p. 198). At the same time, however, things are, as always, considerably more complex. Whereas movement, as Nail acknowledges, comprises ‘at least one major defining characteristic of these systems with relevance for every kind of material agency’ (p. 198), it is far from being the only one. More than ever before, it has become imperative that political theory shed its constraining anthropocentric bias and thus, more than ever before, it has become imperative that scholars of animal studies address themselves to such questions of political ecology as have been raised here by Latour, McCullagh, and Nail, and made ever more urgent by the ‘epistemological delirium’ of the alt-right’s attempt to escape the world altogether. Political ecology, by contrast, speaks to desires for attachment, not escape. The knotty entanglements of political or posthuman ecologies are indeed, as Nail argues, ‘the agencies of the matters and critters that populate and suffuse all political events’ (p. 198). However, two points are
crucial. First, ecological political agency must go beyond the limits and the limitation of living biological organisms to include the ecological political agency of matter itself or, in Latour’s phrase, that of material participations generally. And second—as I hope has been sufficiently demonstrated here—the simple extension of inclusion within the political domain is itself insufficient on its own to create genuine political change unless it is continuously and carefully put to the test of reiterated self-critique. Lacking this latter, political ecology inevitably risks either remobilization by the prevailing regime or else being left turning circles around an absent foundation. When all is literally said and done, reorientation always cuts all ways.

Turned thus toward the manifold movements and movedness of the Terrestrial, we inevitably face significant further challenges insofar as such a turn will, in the end, always have demanded ‘too much care, too much attention, too much time, too much diplomacy’ (Latour, p. 91). Despite everything, writes Latour,

> Even today it is the Global that shines, that liberates, that arouses enthusiasm, that makes it possible to remain so unaware, that emancipates, that gives the impression of eternal youth. Only it does not exist. It is the Local that reassures, that calms, that offers an identity. But it does not exist either. (pp. 91–92)

To this list of nonexistent utopias, we must of course also add the promised libertarianism of the Out-of-This-World. But what of the Terrestrial? Does it, at least, exist? In one sense, the answer is very simple: no, the Terrestrial does not exist, has never existed, and never will exist. This is because the Terrestrial, like the Global and the Local, names an attractor, that is, a tending-toward still to be enacted by a singular knotwork of material forces, movements, and times that together constitute the a priori impossibility of resolution, closure, and sublation. The power of the Terrestrial, writes Latour, ‘acts everywhere at once, but it is not unifying. It is political, yes; but it is not statist. It is, literally, atmospheric’ (p. 93).

That the political and ethical response to both climate change and the ‘epistemological delirium’ of its contemporary denial should rest with a power that is literally—actually, materially, locally and globally—atmospheric is fitting indeed, calling forth novel territories of ceaselessly iterated formal mechanisms and manifold processual movements. Dragged back and forth along a single movement space linking utopianisms at once illusory and cynical, however, this ‘literally atmospheric’ political power, too, can never take its place. In wagering the Earth, it has long been time to stop fleeing the world for the deathly quiet of one delusion or another.
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