

Non-Human Specters: The Archive, Memory and Survival in the Era of the Anthropocene

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The starting point for my considerations is Jacques Derrida's hauntology: using the concept of the "specter", he created a philosophical space (weak ontology) for thinking about what is revealed only in the form of traces, remnants and residues [Derrida]. For too long, however, spectrality has only been associated with an anthropocentric paradigm and the symbolic order. The humanities have been primarily interested in human death and annihilation, human traces, and the human's survival within culture (hence the reflection on the archive, memory, and

writing typical for the second half of the 20th century). I would like to show how the philosophical currents of the Anthropocene grow out of the late thought of Derrida (who can no longer be read in an anthropocentric manner) and continue his endeavors in various ways. I wish to propose a project of non-human hauntology, that is, to speak up for the previously neglected categories of non-human death, melancholy, mourning, and material traces and residues.

I believe that the category of the specter, which stems directly from deconstruction, aptly describes and explains the destructive changes, the dynamic transformations occurring in contemporary nature-cultures. For too long, the notion of the specter has justified the nostalgic dimension of only human culture and explained its penchant for returns, its inability to part with the past. Derrida's deconstruction, however, is not condemned to an anthropocentric reading; on the contrary, it makes room for non-human others, evokes their presence, and awaits their arrival. Therefore, I would like to reinterpret the Derridean category of the specter and emphasize its importance for the symbiotic order, to show the impossibility of parting with non-humans, with whom we have been coupled from the very beginning of our existence. The category of the specter should be developed in the contexts of reflections on death, toxicity (Alexis Shotwell), the uncanny (Sigmund Freud), symbiosis and heritage (Donna Haraway, Lynn Margulis, Anna Tsing), dark ecology/hyperobjects

(Timothy Morton), and new materialisms (Jane Bennett, Karen Barad).

The non-human archive

The Anthropocene appears to us as a truly haunted era in which everything hitherto familiar, tamed, and natural became uncanny, monstrous, and spectral. In the 20th century, thinkers discarded classical philosophical ideas, and their conceptual remnants took the form of weak ontologies that could no longer bear or keep the impossible promise of deep meaning. Meanwhile, the 21st century has brought along the real, most material death imaginable – environmental contamination and the mass extinction of species. Philosophers have almost unanimously abandoned the safe world of texts and literary fictions, in a word, have awakened from their linguistic slumber to turn to what is material, temporary, mortal and disturbing. The return of the materiality displaced by postmodernism has caused us to awaken in a devastated, toxic reality, in which dying and extinction have become commonplace. We have become accustomed to the daily mass disappearance of non-humans (animals, plants, and other living organisms), yet they have never been properly mourned and bewailed. We live in a world of capitalist and ecological ruins in which nearly 70% of the species that have disappeared from the face of the earth exist only as a spectral, material trace. Therefore, I would like to reflect on what remains and how it resists destruction in an age of mass extinction.

In her analysis of the endangered, vanishing relationship between orchids and bees [68-71], Donna Haraway describes an interesting example of the remnants of a non-human material specter. The flower of the orchid (*ophrys apifera*) has evolved to resemble the bee, hitherto responsible for its pollination, thus establishing an inter-specific collaboration called life/symbiosis. In the Anthropocene, through the destructive actions of man, a large number of bees have been decimated and threatened with extinction, yet their likeness is still found on the flower, which unsuccessfully summons its symbiont, its life partner. Although the orchid tries to cope with the dramatic situation by self-pollination, its flower (the vegetal image of the bee) has taken a completely different function; it is a remnant, a trace, a specter, and finally, a witness to a bygone, non-existent reality.

Haraway rejects the neo-Darwinist interpretation that seeks to explain this interspecies relationship by referring to the metaphor of trickery, sexual seduction; where the naivety of the bees, driven by blind, unreflective sexual desire, was exploited by cunning and ruthless plants. Meanwhile, for the philosopher, symbiosis cannot be reduced to a game, described in terms of profits and losses, in which one can enter or leave, but is simply a way of being. Therefore, existence is not, as it might seem, individual, but always common, shared with others, and this is one of the reasons why we can talk about traces. The orchid flower becomes an example of non-human representation and creativity of the non-human world;

it proves that matter not only has meaning but also produces it (matter matters). The orchid does not claim to be an objective image of the insect, but only wants to be its vegetal interpretation, revealing its own way of perceiving and symbolizing. When in the Anthropocene the flower is deprived of its symbiont in the form of the bee, it simultaneously loses its practical, usable function and turns out to be a character devoid of its reader. It moves from the symbiotic to the symbolic order, and from then on serves as a witness, becoming an image of the past in a non-human archive, reflecting ways of life that no longer exist.

Life after the death of “Nature”

In our considerations so far, the non-human specter has taken the nostalgic form of a survivalist, a remnant relating us to the past, but this is not its only function and meaning. The specter effectively disrupts and blurs the boundaries between life and death, thus becoming a figure of impurity or even toxicity that concerns not only the conceptual sphere but also the material reality of the Anthropocene. The concept of “Nature” has been extinguished as one of the last stable categories of traditional philosophy, and we can now observe its life after death, the astonishing forms it takes [Latour]. Specters are a key category for the Anthropocene’s ontology as it contaminates the hitherto clear boundaries between culture/nature, human/non-human, subject/object, organic/inorganic, and animate/inanimate. Nowadays, we are unable to determine whether a given atmospheric phenomenon

(e.g., a hurricane) is natural or rather was caused by human industrial activity.

We live in an age where objects have become far more active, causal, industrious, and caring than humans. Previously reserved only for humans, the notion of care (*Sorge*) – which in Martin Heidegger’s philosophy is the necessary condition of being-in-the-world – in the reality of the Anthropocene is given over to paws, tentacles, pincers, feelers and all the grasping tools that non-humans use in their everyday lives. They are the ones who are able not only to move, but also to engage and gather other humans and non-humans around them. Until now we could only talk about various kinds of fetishism (including commodity fetishism) or fatal strategies of things, which were said to have a disastrous effect on the lives of individuals immersed in the delusion of their own independence and self-sufficiency. According to the theory of “vitalist materialism” [Bennett] matter creates and acts by itself – it needs no external source of life in the form of spirit, mind, or soul. Is this not the perfect fulfillment of the ghost story, in which tables, forks, and objects move by themselves without human assistance?

The everyday experience of the ecological uncanny becomes the primary marker of the Anthropocene, and it is not just about discovering that humans are non-self and non-human – the complex bacterial flora of their gut (microbiome) determines what mood they are in at any given moment. The feeling of being non-self is based primarily on

the fact that the reality, which until now seemed completely familiar to us, has suddenly become alien and strange. In this context we should paraphrase the well-known sentence of Hamlet: “The climate is out of joint: O cursed spite/ That ever I was born to set it right!”. It suffices to look at atmospheric phenomena and (a)typical weather, which in a short period of time has become ominous, ceased to be predictable and calculable, and, above all, is bringing fear and anxiety. The Anthropocene means that we are no longer in our home, which has become alien and haunted, and that the anticipated future brings only the promise of monstrosity. The fulfillment of the Freudian uncanny includes jellyfish blooms, a disturbing yet fascinating sight in the oceans caused by global warming, winds and atmospheric phenomena of unprecedented intensity, and industrially farmed animals whose size, shapes, and living conditions send shivers down our spine [Bubandt].

The uncanny, impure, spectral and monstrous...

Toxicity, which usually arouses terror in us, becomes extremely interesting in the context of spectrality, as it turns out to be a necessary component of life on earth. Until recently, the modern desire for purity and the traditionally understood ecology wanted to eliminate it, overcome it (*Aufhebung/Überwindung*), banish it from the community, the way a disturbing specter is exorcised. Meanwhile, Alexis Shotwell’s reflections on toxic encounters illustrate perfectly that relations between living organisms can only be toxic, impure, and therefore spectral [Shotwell]. All relationships between humans

and non-humans should be shown in the context of mutual contamination, of creating a trace – for example, the consumption of food, which is the engagement and mutual penetration of two substances different from each other, and the change of perception under the influence of entering into a toxic relationship (e.g., eating garlic, consuming alcohol). It is also worth adding that one of the conditions of socialization in the human world is the obligatory entry into contact with a toxic substance (alcohol, nicotine, drugs or simply junk food). Consent to toxicity turns out to be a prerequisite of life and thinking itself, referring to this state as inspiration or brainwave, even if it is not necessarily associated with a dematerializing idealistic tradition, but simply involves intoxication. Each of us, without exception, carries with us the history of our toxicity and the traces of the catastrophes that preceded our arrival into the world.

The Anthropocene is an epoch that demands not only an entirely new conceptualization of life, but above all, a rethinking of the phenomena of death, dying, perishing, and loss. One of the main spectral figures of the present is lichens (the result of the entanglement of fungi and algae), whose mode of being is symbiosis. If we think about death from a non-human perspective, we find that lichens are admittedly vulnerable to destruction, but they are not bound by human time; they do not die as humans do from old age, and therefore they can probably live forever (Pringle). Existence in the Anthropocene requires reflection on the numerous, very different ways of living

and dying, other than just human. It would be necessary, then, to represent the variety of ways of lasting and to think through a range of survival strategies in the face of ecological catastrophe, as well as forms of non-human memory.

If we recognize the specific, spectral ontological status of lichens (entanglement), then we can easily conclude that “we are all lichens” [Gilbert et al.] From this perspective, human beings always appear to us as non-self, non-human, because they are made up of more non-human cells than their own. For Derrida, to be meant, above all, to inherit, while spectrality was associated with an absolute vision of hospitality; I would like to broaden this research perspective and find its non-human dimension, its non-anthropocentric character. Derrida argued that we never eat alone, we always eat with our bacteria, parasites, or microbes. Similarly, Haraway, using the metaphor of the “cat’s cradle” game, suggests that we are never alone; in her concept, to exist is to always be with someone. The problem is that most often we do not choose our life-giving companions at all, or we are connected to someone/something unwanted by us (smog, plastic, mercury, viruses, bacteria, etc.), which makes us afraid or disgusted. Spectrality in this context would mean that we are never alone, we can always expect that something/someone accompanies us in our existence or even more, simply enables it. This theme appears very strongly not only in the reflections of Donna Haraway (making kin), Anna Tsing (mushrooms as companion species), and Lynn Margulis

(symbiogenesis), but also in Timothy Morton's work. His proposal of a dark ecology suggests that we are always connected to some impure, unwanted, repulsive companion [*Dark*]. Furthermore, one of the main features of his hyperobjects is the so-called viscosity, which asserts the ontological impossibility of existence without a spectral companion. According to the spectral ontology of the symbiotic order that I propose, we can say that we have never been individual.

Ecological annihilation?

So far, the ecological crisis in the humanities has been variously conceptualized by scholars who wanted to transcend the dualism associated with the nature/culture opposition: Bruno Latour (nature-culture, political ecology), Rosi Braidotti (becoming earth), Paul Crutzen (the Anthropocene), Jason W. Moore (the Capitalocene), Donna Haraway (the Chthulucene, Plantationocene), and Jussi Parikka (the Anthroscene). But none of them has emphasized the spectral nature of the Anthropocene, which I think is crucial to understanding the era of mass extinction, in which death, toxicity, the uncanny, and the monstrous have become the most common and ordinary phenomena.

I think it is important to conceptualize the various human and non-human ways of dying, remembering, surviving, and coping with loss. I would like to think about death in the Anthropocene in a different way than by exploiting the overused and ineffective metaphor of annihilation, which

I believe is an anthropocentric construct. Moving away from the over-exploited notion of annihilation and producing different discourses about living and dying than have hitherto been in place is in keeping with Haraway's postulate of telling stories for earthly survival (*it matters what ideas we invoke when creating new ideas*). Thinking about the Anthropocene in the context of mass destruction usually refers us to Holocaust studies or engages traditional notions of human responsibility and keeps us stuck in considerations of human exceptional guilt or merit: humans are capable of destroying life on earth or repairing and saving it.

This is perfectly illustrated in Ewa Bińczyk's book *Epoka człowieka* [The Epoch of Man], which points out that the Anthropocene is first and foremost the epoch of human. The lethargy of the Anthropocene that she emphasizes is meant to arouse remorse; she refers to the unique role of man, who instead of acting for the benefit of the environment is immersed in inaction [Bińczyk]. I believe that we should reject the traditional notion of responsibility and move to thinking about responsibility as response-ability, a different type of commitment, far from the messianic promises and overestimation of the role of man. Finally, we need to pay attention to the egalitarianism of the Anthropocene: all of us without exception (humans and non-humans) breathe the same polluted air, drink the same poisoned water, eat contaminated food. It is the pollution that is the source of community, because it means that there are no longer separate, isolated enti-

ties; there is only a toxic, collectively forming community. In the age of human marasmus, the previously unseen or simply overlooked activity of non-human actors must be addressed with a different kind of attentiveness (the art of noticing) [Tsing]. We should listen to their stories of dying, life on the brink of death, survival and living in a precarious and uncertain reality.

The proposed research perspective on death and survival in a world that is not merely human also goes beyond the anthropocentric perspective adopted in Ewa Domańska's *Nekros*, which I call the Anthroposhadow (only human specter and traces). Domańska adopts a human perspective on death; she is interested not so much in non-humans as themselves, but above all, non-humans who were once human [Domańska]. Every organism, object and subject – not only humans – has its shadow, trace and memory, which is why I am interested in transcending the anthropocentric viewpoint. Humanity has always been non-human, that is, constantly produced and enabled by non-humans: bacteria, fungi and plants. This non-human aspect of humanity, emphasized by such authors as Timothy Morton in his vision of non-human solidarity, is in my view the most interesting [Morton]. If we look at humans from a non-anthropocentric perspective, in the course of our lives, it is we who are fertile necrosis, a space teeming with non-human traces and remains, an archive in which non-human fates and histories are recorded. Enough space in the humanities has been devoted solely to human deaths, remains, and lamentations;

it is time to think about relationships beyond the anthropo-world: about non-human specters, deaths, memories, and even melancholy. We need to develop philosophical tools, a proper ontology of the Anthropocene that will allow us to talk about non-human deaths, loss, survival strategies, spectral and toxic relationships, the monstrous, and the uncanny.

Disturbing proximity and the end of distance

I want to clearly emphasize the innovative lack of distance in creating a non-anthropocentric hauntology. Until now, the humanities (thanks to Cartesian dualism, among other things) have distanced themselves from the object of their research, cared about the purity of theory, and presented a dematerialized or purely textual version of it. The result of critical practices is detachment, or the contemporary lack of engagement of theory with the material practice of everyday life: a widespread lack of faith in the social change that could come from academia. Meanwhile, the Anthropocene should be treated as both a corporeal and discursive phenomenon. As a corporeal subject myself, I am toxic: I generate smog and plastic, and simultaneously, I am being materially changed by them. For me, the Anthropocene is not only a theory, but also an extremely corporeal experience; it concerns and affects me in a material way, thus, I am unable to distance myself from it. I refer here to Karen Barad's proposed material-discursive practices and intra-actions that should inspire an ontology of the Anthropocene [Barad].

Adopting Barad's assumptions, grounded in the currents of new materialism, will help us avoid reproducing traditional distancing critical thought and highlight the material-semiotic and material-discursive character of science. A simultaneous creation of connections and commitments, coupled with an adoption of a strategic lack of distance in researching the Anthropocene will evoke a specific kind of responsibility (response-ability), different from the one understood anthropocentrically, which assumes that the fate of the earth rests in human hands (saving or destroying the planet). For me, a new understanding of responsibility becomes a condition for objectivity; moreover, it presupposes egalitarianism, the effective reduction of the gap between humans and non-humans. Response-ability means that knowledge is produced not only by human actors, but each entity is capable of responding, and knowledge is produced in the course of collective negotiation.

Nowadays, the dominant affects associated with the Anthropocene are fear and anxiety, and their excess results in frustration, reserve, and unwillingness to act, that is, the impasse of the Anthropocene mentioned already in the context of Bińczyk's book. Abandoning its traditionally distanced critique, non-anthropocentric hauntology aims to connect the Anthropocene with other affects, including non-human ones (emphasized, e.g., by Jane Bennett and her concept of vital materialism). The traditional distance-enhancing philosophical critique also intensifies the sense of passivity and lack of engagement of the

humanities. Non-human specters draw our attention to the fact that not only do we live together, but we also die together: human/non-human ways of living and dying are intertwined.

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