LIVING LEXICON
FOR THE ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES

Rot

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I first got acquainted with rot and its possibilities in a graveyard in South London. This Gothic Victorian churchyard was especially rotten, with its old trees, broken tombs, and neglected bodies.[1] Foraying into the worlds of ecologists and conservationists, I learned that, yes, rot is about death, but it also speaks of life. Spending time with enthusiasts, I developed affections for rot. I learned of cycles, of the regenerative power of rot to compost and provision.[2]

Our special interest was deadwood insects—busy, vital decomposers that break down fallen trees. The stag beetle was our talisman minibeast (fig. 1). Britain's largest insect: a charismatic flagship for a neglected ark of rotten creepy-crawlies. Undermanaged graveyards had emerged as stag beetle hotspots, and we were there to count the beetles, to put decay on the map, and to help foment popular support for rot. We wanted to rewild urban parks and gardens, offering aesthetic stag beetle nesting boxes, square wooden chambers for burial filled with choice logs.

Eating apples in the graveyard in the company of a wizened botanist, I was also given a more profound lesson in finitude. Waving a windfall apple, she traced the fruit's possible molecular history—from subterranean human corpse, broken by bacteria, carried in the body of a worm to the reaching roots. Lifted high to branch, to bud, and finally to fruit. A bite, a chew, a swallow, and, after some acidic digestion, into me. From human to humus to human again through a humorous, rotten epiphany.[3]

1. For a discussion of London's graveyard ecologies, see Gandy, "Queer Ecology."

2. I discuss this case and the fieldwork that informs this anecdote in more detail in Lorimer, "Living Roofs and Brownfield Wildlife."

3. For further development of the etymology and potential of humans-as-humus, see Donna Haraway, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene."

Environmental Humanities 8:2 (November 2016)
DOI 10.1215/22011919-3664333

Figure 1. Stag beetle (*Lucanus cervus*). Image courtesy of Maria Fremlin

Later, waiting alone under the apple tree in the gloom, I experienced a sepulchral eeriness. I looked for beetles amid a pungent, buzzing, and crawling invertebrate host, gorged on wood fed from Victorian bodies. It struck me that both stag beetle and I were zombies: well-fed forms of the dead made living. We were both raised on rotten flesh; transient forms in a "microcosmos"[4] of perpetual incorporation.

But decay and putrefaction are rarely aspirational terms or aesthetic phenomena. Zombies and rot seemed out of place in the modern visions of precrisis, early twenty-first-century London. Stag beetles and deadwood were at risk, I learned, from a mania for "greenwashing"[5] tidiness that had swept municipal park management and the fashions of private gardeners in the UK. Rotten wood on brownfield land undermined the utopian dreams of New Labour's planned "urban renaissance":[6] it threatened stagnation, slowness, and disease. It reeked of mortality, vulnerability, and the inevitability of death.

Good "moderns"[7] have worked hard to banish rot. We burn and bury our waste. We renovate our houses, treating wood, painting, and papering over the mold and cracks. We douse the world with a chemical armory: bleach, weed killer, pesticides—familiar domestic products through which we seek to escape rot's degenerative force. Often with good reasons, we hold rot at bay, sanitizing and pasteurizing to secure human health.

4. Margulis and Sagan, *Microcosmos*.
5. Chipchase and Frith, *Brownfield?*, 1.
6. Rogers, *Towards an Urban Renaissance*.
7. I use the term *modern* in the sense implied by Bruno Latour in *We Have Never Been Modern*.

Rot even seems amiss in some of our designated wilds, at least in Western Europe. In parks and nature reserves that conservationists trim and tidy. To the chagrin of stag beetle enthusiasts and rewilders, old trees are grubbed up and dead wood chipped and burned. Shit is bagged. Carcasses are collected and rendered. In the modern European pastoral, nature is green, not brown, and life is disconnected from aesthetics of death and decay. Unruly wilds are entrained to linear geometries or the wholesome, sanitized curves of heritage tourism.

Yet rot persists on the margins. It is there in the "edgelands,"[8] the "blasted landscapes"[9] or "unofficial countrysides"[10] built, abandoned, and ruined in the serendipitous crises of our modern economy. There is rot in rust-belt Detroit, amid the dilapidated houses left by white flight and the demise of industry.[11] It is there in homesteads abandoned in the rural margins.[12] On closer inspection, we can find rot all over, in the scruffy bits of land around railways, motorways, and airports. Rot happens amid landfills, substations, sewage works, and the other eyesores of modern infrastructure that some of us are not supposed to see.[13]

Writing now, a decade later and in much less optimistic times for urban planners, it would appear that my stag beetle enthusiasts were in the vanguard of a shift that is taking place in nature conservation. The stag beetle nesting boxes, which at the time seemed like such token acts of care, now speak of a wider affection for rot and decay. An awareness of the nonlinear nature of the "emergent ecologies"[14] of the Anthropocene is driving a reappraisal of the ecological and functional roles of disturbance. Conservation stands accused of being too conservative: of trying to fix nature upon anachronistic equilibrium models of the past and of forestalling and preempting change.[15] Floods, fire, storms, disease, and pests are increasingly understood as both disastrous and generative: necessary components of dynamic, nonanalogue systems.[16] There is a growing appreciation of the functional significance of deadwood and its decomposing denizens and of the disturbance regimes that bring them into being.

In gardens, parks, and wider woodlands, scientists, managers, and citizen volunteers are working to nurture desired forms of rot. Fallen trees may now be left to decay in situ. River managers flag the positive roles of riparian and stream-channel deadwood for flood prevention. Experiments are underway to return large herbivores as "ecological engineers" whose browsing and grazing will restore decomposition. Beavers, cows, and

8. Roberts and Farley, *Edgelands*.

9. Kirksey, Shapiro, and Brodine, "Hope in Blasted Landscapes"; Tsing, *Mushroom at the End of the World*.

10. Mabey, *Unofficial Countryside*.

11. For critical discussion, see Millington, "Post-Industrial Imaginaries"; and Safransky, "Greening the Urban Frontier."

12. DeSilvey, "Observed Decay."

13. Gandy, "Marginalia."

14. Kirksey, *Emergent Ecologies*.

15. Lorimer, *Wildlife in the Anthropocene*.

16. Tsing, *Mushroom at the End of the World*.

horses are charged with felling or damaging trees, making space for rot. And it is hoped that these animals might be left to die in the wild, with their carcasses returning dead meat vital for carrion-eating insects and other scavengers.[17]

These are deliberate interventions. They are not happening in a "world without us"[18] or as the immediate result of some disaster (or zombie apocalypse). Instead, they constitute efforts to domesticate rot and decay, to tame them of their pathological dimensions and to manage ecological processes toward desired ends. We might understand such interventions as forms of "controlled decontrolling";[19] macrobiome versions of what Heather Paxson has described as a "post-Pasteurian" mode of "microbiopolitics," which she finds in current North American enthusiasms for raw milk cheese and other probiotic products.[20] In Paxson's terms, post-Pasteurians "work hard to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' microorganisms and to harness the former as allies in vanquishing the latter. Post-Pasteurianism takes after Pasteurianism in taking hygiene seriously. It differs in being more discriminating."[21] If we apply the spirit of this shift to parks and gardens, then a post-Pasteurian sensibility gives careful scope to natural processes, creating spaces for what I have elsewhere termed "wild experiments" in human-nonhuman companionship.[22]

Spending time with stag beetles and their people in graveyards taught me that learning to live well with rot, both within and without our bodies, might offer ways of becoming "response-able"[23] zombies. Nurturing, tolerating, and controlling rot are suggestive of probiotic arts for eating, living, and shitting well in the Anthropocene. These would respect our fungal, bacterial, and other microbial kin without dissolving the human into a flux of ecological processes. Thinking with rot and zombies helps reanimate, or even reenchant,[24] the supposedly dead bodies of modernity.

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17. For a review, see Lorimer et al., "Rewilding."
18. Weisman, *World without Us*.
19. Keulartz, "Emergence of Enlightened Anthropocentrism," 58.
20. Paxson, "Post-Pasteurian Cultures." See also Ingram, "Fermentation."
21. Paxson, "Microbiopolitics," 118.
22. Lorimer and Driessen, "Wild Experiments at the Oostvaardersplassen."
23. After Haraway, *When Species Meet*.
24. Bennett, *Enchantment of Modern Life*.

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