LIVING LEXICON
FOR THE ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES

Attachment

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Perhaps it is the security that modern urban societies have developed for their intellectuals that has given rise to their habits of detachment: critically distanced analysis, ironic commentary, skepticism that can veer quickly to cynicism. Our houses are more storm-proof than birds' nests; we don't have to choose between eating and keeping up with the herd; and if a visiting anthropologist were to ask what we really care about, what we are most attached to, we would have to pause and think. It turns out we *are* deeply attached to all sorts of things, we just like to cultivate detachment from them. "The common root" for such positions, says Graham Harman, "lies in the modern supposition that subject and object are two alien things, and that the best course of action lies in disentangling one from the other as cleanly as possible."[1] The environmental humanities harbors a foundational critique of such dualism, for instance with Val Plumwood in the early nineties.[2]

Environmental humanities turns to relations and networks as major concepts in its new conceptual architecture, extending even to "meshwork" for Tim Ingold.[3] Now it seems axiomatic that no entity is on its own, yet the actual modes of relating one thing to another, in and among more or less heterogeneous networks, can sometimes slip through undescribed. The concept of *attachment* would demonstrate its utility in the field of the environmental humanities to the extent that it can help specify (without being able to carry it out in a short space such as this) the differences among, for instance, a hermit crab's *occupancy* of its shell (fig. 1), photosynthesis's *dependency* on sunlight, my own *love* for my family members, or a *passion* for music.[4]

1. Harman, "De-modernizing the Humanities," 266.
2. Plumwood, *Feminism*.
3. Ingold, *Being Alive,* part 2.
4. Hennion, *Passion for Music*.

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Figure 1. Still from *Sunset Ethnography*, dir. Aaron Burton, 2014, courtesy of Kurrajong Films

The hermit crab's retreat into its shell (which it regularly changes and to which it is not physically attached) is in response to danger, an ethologist might tell us. Its urgent scuttle expresses an avidity, as most attachments do in their different ways. It was Gabriel Tarde whom Bruno Latour followed in the initiation of a philosophy of affective relations. It replaces the "being" of philosophies of existence with the "having" of attachments: "It is as though . . . a philosophy of identity and essence—of being-as-being—had played a trick on us by concealing the avidity, the pleasure, the passion, the concupiscence, the hook, of *having* and *had*. This philosophy would have forced us never to confess our attachment to the things capable of giving us *properties* that we didn't know we had."[5] Instead of asking, "What is it?" we could try, "What has it got going for it?"—a question that expresses persistence through variable attachments. This kind of question is consonant with the environmental humanities' ways of describing an alternate expression of being within expressions of relation, as in "relational becomings" or "grappling with other animate beings,"[6] where a species is not foregrounded *as it is* but brought "into existence at the intersection of entangled practices of knowing and being" as well as in interspecies entanglements.[7] Asking *what something is* implies just the kind of objective detachment that removes the mutual interests (Latin *inter-essere*) implied by the entanglement of attachments.

Factoring attachments into descriptions will certainly transform the style of descriptive writing but will not necessarily diminish the truth value of its "objectivity." It should multiply and extend the perspectives, such that the point of view is not always

5. Latour, *Enquiry into Modes of Existence*, 425.
6. Kirksey, "Species," 777.
7. Ibid., 776.

projected from the central, masterful position of the privileged human. And at the most basic level, it seems once the writer starts a description, he or she moves quickly from the verb "to be" to the verb "to have": "What *is* it? Well, it *has* ten legs, it *has* an exoskeleton." And with all these attributes thus described, extending to the environment that supports the little crab (it needs to *have* an ocean temperature within a certain range), our practice becomes less classificatory and more one that follows the struggles of an animal avid for its survival, grasping one thing, scuttling away from another.

An example Latour gives is of humans' passionate involvement in the consumer society from which they love to express their sophisticated detachment: "You were walking by that store without thinking about it; how does it happen that you can no longer get along without this perfume when ten minutes earlier you didn't know it existed? You bought that plastic-wrapped chicken without attaching any importance to it; what unexpected discovery has left you really disgusted with it now?"[8] The point is not just the hypocrisy and the default position of pretending one is without passionate interests but the unwillingness (at least for us researchers) to describe the series of transformations—something Latour himself has left in syntactic aporia—between being ignorant of the perfume to its being a must-have; between the casual acquisition of a chicken to its rejection. For the purchaser of the perfume, the attachment may be temporary. It might be a woman's gift to the man she wants to become more attached to, so it has an agency through which they both pass on their way to other destinies.

Comparison to other cultures can highlight the parochial nature of philosophies of being and of identity. For example, Australian Aboriginal cultures are not existentialist in this way. In an obvious manner, most Australian languages, like many other languages of the world, are marked by the absence of the copula (the verb "to be"). Being is *not* the question, making Hamlet's speech very difficult to translate. Belonging is far more important, and this is often marked by a comitative suffix, like *-tjara*, meaning "having" or "with." Whether this translates into "cosmic" relatedness for such cultures will be open to further study of the kind already undertaken by Deborah Bird Rose: how individuals are inalienably assigned so-called animal or plant totems; how initiation is expressed as boys who have "got man."[9] And in general, indigenous Australians, through multiple attachments, are bound to their country with no desire for escape. There are, therefore, both moral and methodological reasons for promoting the concept of attachment. In method, we have seen how the easy equivalence of the copula can short-circuit the description of transformations and the gaining and shedding of attachments that seem essential to describing ecological networks. And from a moral point of view, "objective detachment" is merely one of the critical techniques that has forged the notion of the mobile, atomistic (and superior) modern individual who, thus liberated from one set of constraints, can get busy acquiring others.

8. Latour, *Enquiry into Modes of Existence*, 429.

9. Rose, *Nourishing Terrains*.

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