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Crafting scholarly alliances for multispecies justice

Krithika Srinivasan

My main response as I read Bram Buscher's reflections on the 'more-than-human' turn was a mixture of relief and gladness. Relief that political ecology, as represented by one of its key scholars, no longer sees our Earthly cohabitants as solely pawns in social conflicts or resources to be divided up equitably between people. Gladness that this shift from resolute anthropocentrism holds the possibility of scholarly alliances that can more carefully address the drivers of socio-ecological and multispecies injustice in today's world.

Bram's¹ paper is not an unequivocal endorsement of more-than-human scholarship. Rather, it develops a strong critique of the field. Its main concerns are the emphases on "ontological entanglements and relationality" (2) and nonhuman agency, and the contestation of human-nonhuman distinctions that have become common themes in more-than-human scholarship. The paper argues that the focus on establishing the ontologically entangled character of the human and nonhuman "does not adequately distinguish between consequential and inconsequential distinctions on epistemological and practical levels" (4). To Bram, merely demonstrating ontological relationality deflects attention from the historical culpability of humankind for socio-ecological crises and fails to tackle "forms of domination that systematically degrade both humans and nonhumans" (19). As a corrective, he suggests "re-centering" humans when required, and upholding the category of the human to challenge dehumanization (of some humans).

Diversity and dissent within more-than-human scholarship

I cannot but agree with the problems Bram flags with the tropes of ontological entanglement and nonhuman agency. However, in calling out these issues, I worry that the paper presents a limited, straw-mannish, characterisation of more-than-human scholarship. More-than-human geographies and human-animal studies contain a far greater degree of diversity and dissent vis-à-vis these tropes. Bram identifies two works, Giraud (2019), and Collard and Dempsey (2013), as exceptions to the celebration of ontological idealism. These are great examples, but they are not the exceptions.

As a PhD student new to more-than-human geographies, I remember being energised by Lulka's (2009: 383) thorough critique of hybridity² that flagged how this framework "absolves us of contending with serious environmental questions". My own writing has problematized the predominance of "agency, embodied encounters, and relational ethics" in animal/more-than-human geographies, arguing that analyses built on these concepts are "founded on a conflation of agency and moral standing...[and ignore] systemic decisions about human-animal relationships" (Srinivasan, 2016: 76–77). My concern, like Bram, has been the scholarly overlooking of the structural conditions that mediate human-animal relations, and the resultant perpetuation of the status quo with respect to exploitative more-than-human relations.

I build on this critique in other work (de Silva and Srinivasan, 2019; Srinivasan, 2019), pointing to the need to differentiate between ontological and ethical dualisms. I argue that more-than-human geographies have focused on highlighting ontological nondualism (what Bram calls ontological entanglement), but continue to perpetuate ethical dualisms: "the social (the human) may be recognized as intertwined with the natural (the nonhuman) in ontological terms, but is still seen as separate and superior to the rest of nature for matters of ethics...These ethical dualisms are at the

¹ I refer to Bram by his first name to subvert the Eurocentric privileging of surnames.

² As relationality used to be referred to.

root of the socio-ecological harms that characterise the Anthropocene” (Srinivasan, 2019: 387). What Bram refers to as the epistemological and practical consequences of distinctions are the ethical implications that have been my interest.

The enchantment with relationality can be seen in nature geographies more widely. Becky Mansfield (Mansfield and Doyle, 2017) refers to the “impasse” of rejecting dualism, suggesting that we need to critically examine the varied real-world impacts of dualisms. Likewise, “problematic ahistoricity” (23) can also be found in political ecological literatures which often ignore political-economic and historical changes that make nonhuman life vulnerable, rendering contemporary human-wildlife interactions very different to those from pre-industrial and pre-settled agriculture times (de Silva and Srinivasan, 2019).

I point to these literatures to highlight that Bram’s concerns are shared by scholars *within* more-than-human scholarship. Aside from overt critiques of relationality and linked themes from within more-than-human scholarship, there is also a substantial body of work that simply does not deploy these frameworks, arguably because they are found to be flawed or not useful. Katie Gillespie’s (2018) research on cows comes to mind, where one would struggle to find any mention of ontological entanglement or nonhuman agency, and where the emphasis is on understanding the lived experiences of these animals and the harms they sustain within human political economies. Dinesh Wadiwel’s (2009, 2018) writing is another example of keen attention to the interplay between the structural and the everyday, and where animal lives and resistances are studied without losing sight of the systemic conditions that limit their opportunities and agencies. Jody Emel, Yamini Narayanan, Lauren van Patter, Tony Weis, Richard White, Karen Morin, Stephanie Rutherford, Henry Buller and Sarah Crawley are examples of other scholars who write within more-than-human geographies without reproducing “ontological idealism” (23) or restricting theorisation to how the nonhuman constitutes and affects the human; their analytical foci are firmly on the social (human) conditions that shape and diminish more-than-human lives. There are other works (e.g., Deckha, 2008; Hovorka, 2015; Jackson, 2020; Kim, 2015; Taylor, 2017) that explicitly “connect a concern for the more-than-human with the critical importance for challenging structural, violent, less than human turns” (28).

This is by no means an exhaustive list; my intention is only to make visible the breadth of more-than-human scholarship (in addition to the three pieces mentioned by Bram) that does not resort to the contentious tropes (Cochrane and Srinivasan, forthcoming). What is true, nonetheless, is that these are “propositions [that] have become highly influential” (2). Why this might be the case requires reflection: I wonder if a key difference between work that is characterised by ontological idealism and relational propositions, and work that is more cognizant of the force of human histories and structures, is their emancipatory intent, with the latter being more likely to articulate an ethics and politics that contest the status quo. These knowledge politics around the relative (in)visibility of some types of more-than-human scholarship makes critiques by prominent scholars such as Bram important, for they bring to the fore problems and dissent that have remained under the radar.

Clarifying concepts, parsing distinctions

While I am in broad agreement with many of Bram’s arguments, there are some contentions that require specification. The first is to do with ‘decentering the human’. To Bram, the more-than-human turn promotes “a politics that decentres humans in favour of nonhumans” (19). This claim is inaccurate - any decentering of the human does not automatically imply the centering of nonhumans. Rather, what more-than-human scholarship does is to try to correct the long-standing *privileging* of the human. Furthermore, much of this decentering of the human remains ontological

in character. Ontological decentering does not necessarily lead to ethico-political decentering, as prevailing anthropocentrism in scholarship and society shows. For the emancipatory political project that Bram and I seem to share a commitment to, the latter is more vital. Hence, I would reinforce Bram's call for "pivoting between de- and recentering humans" (1), but only with respect to questions of culpability and responsibility for contemporary harms. If recentering humans refers to the continuation of the ethical privileging of humankind over all other life, I would find his call more difficult to align with.

The same goes for human exceptionalism. Bram suggests that "acknowledging certain forms of human exceptionalism is no impediment to convivial more-than-human relations" (4). I assume that in this sentence, human exceptionalism refers to only ontological and historical differences between humans and other life-forms. I fully concur that how humans inhabit and impact the planet and other life-forms is "consequentially different" (17). But if human exceptionalism includes the (widespread) assumption that humankind is of greater ethico-political significance because of these ontological differences, then supporting human exceptionalism would amount to supporting the continued exploitation, sacrifice, and dismissal of nonhuman life – as well as marginalized human life (Srinivasan and Kasturirangan, 2016).

Thus, with both 'de/re-centering' and 'human exceptionalism', there is a need to specify whether they refer to ontological or ethico-political distinctions, or both. Which brings me to Bram's discomfort with the "questioning of distinctions and distinction-making mechanisms" (3). It is true that a lot of more-than-human literatures, including mine, have dissected taken-for-granted distinctions between human and other life (e.g., intentionality, self-awareness/consciousness, cognitive capacities). This is because these ontological distinctions are commonly used to justify the ethico-political devalorisation of nonhuman life (Srinivasan, 2010, 2015).

It is the deep intertwinement of ontological and ethico-political distinctions that gives the category of the 'human' the special value which provides political force to the idea of 'dehumanisation', one of Bram's concerns. Dehumanisation as a material-political process is reprehensible because it enables some humans to cause other humans serious harm with impunity by stripping the latter of the superior ethical status attributed to *only* humankind. That is why narratives about dehumanisation go alongside narratives about being treated like 'animals' (Vaughan-Williams, 2015). These narratives foreground the horrors associated with the political-material processes that compose dehumanisation even while implicitly reinforcing the norm that it is alright to subject other animals to similar harms. I therefore cannot see how the idea of the "less-than-human" can remain free of anthropocentrism, i.e., the ethico-political privileging of humankind over all other life.

My last point is one that echoes Risan's (2005) worries about hybridity discourse glossing over the "consequential" differences between life and non-life, and I would add, between non-living human artefacts and non-living biophysical processes and entities. I must admit that I am unable to grasp the implications of Bram's analyses of digital platform capitalism. These platforms are (so far) non-living human artefacts, and so I would not classify them as "more-than-human relations and processes" (32). Neither would I classify them as "more-than-life" (34). They are outputs of purely human relations and processes, and as such, all the injustices they produce are to be attributed solely to (some) humans.

I, and I suspect other more-than-human scholars who have "emancipatory political aims" (36), would retain the use of concepts such as 'more-than-life' and 'more-than-human' for living and non-living biophysical entities and processes. Deploying them to cover everything from algorithms to

turkeys to rivers undermines their analytical and political utility. Perhaps this is precisely the point that Bram is trying to make, in which case, I wholeheartedly agree.

To conclude, Bram's critiques of more-than-human scholarship are spot on, but subject to the caveats elaborated above. The challenge is how both more-than-human geographies and political ecology can be re-crafted to effectively address the historic and contemporary drivers of multispecies (including human) injustice without succumbing to the deeply entrenched anthropocentrism that infuses our societies and the academy.

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