



Afterword

Look Here

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When *The Enchantment of Modern Life* came out in 2001, right after the 9/11 attacks in the United States, I wondered who would want to think about enchantment during such awful times. More violences were on the way, even if “anthropocene” was not yet a common name for that brew of hot earth, runaway capitalism, contagions involving viruses, stupidity, gale force winds, vaccines, anger, neo-fascism, and white nationalism (among other elements). On a much, much more local scale, if you told me in 2001 that in twenty years my book would be part of a discussion with an international group of highly accomplished, creative anthropologists, I would have stared blankly. I am grateful for this last swerve of events.

In this special section on “Enchanted Ecologies and Ethics of Care,” the sweetness of enchantment is balanced with a dash of bitters. Does enchantment have what it takes to achieve the ethical-political work needed today? Isn’t it a “treacherous emotion, and certainly not all that you need” (Lien)? Just how does (and doesn’t) enchantment translate into “ecological responsibilities and modes of care” (Krøijer and Rubow)? And isn’t “care” itself an ambivalent good, given, for example, that the vitality of a forest may rest not on conscientious interaction but on the ability to distance ourselves from it (Di Giminiani)? Treating enchantment as both something that strikes from outside and as an intimate compartment susceptible to cultivation, the essays illuminate, by enacting in specific locales, the arts of noticing. In so doing, they call readers to “Look Here!”—at *this* place, at *these* things, in *this* context.

Under their influence, I notice several things. I notice the variousness of the ways that “enchantment” presents itself. It could be that enchantment is one of those shapes that is essentially “anexact, vague, vagabond or nomadic.”¹ Enchantment presents differently even among those of us who inhabit privileged social positions, who seek to

1. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 367.

harness enchantment to radical, ecological sensibilities, and who view shifts in affective comportment not as a romantic luxury but as necessary if we are to exit the paths of planetary exploitation and destruction.

I notice that *romantic* is used as a modifier that marks something wholly undesirable. And I recall how this applies to many discussions in the environmental humanities in general. I wonder about that, and admit to finding in the American romantics a comportment toward life that remains worthy of appreciation, even if in need of a somewhat different inflection today. In “Song of Myself,” for example, Whitman highlights how human and nonhuman vitalities mingle and jostle:

The blab of the pave, tires of carts, sluff of boot-soles, talk of the
promenaders,
The heavy omnibus, the driver with his interrogating thumb, the
clank of the shod horses on the granite floor, . . .
The impassive stones that receive and return so many echoes, . . .
What living and buried speech is always vibrating here²

Thoreau, for another example, never ceased to find vitality wherever he looked carefully, and he was always looking carefully, as here in the “Spring” chapter of *Walden*:

There is nothing inorganic. These foliaceous heaps lie along the bank like the slag of a furnace, showing that Nature is “in full blast” within. The earth is not a mere fragment of dead history, . . . but living poetry . . .
O the evening robin, at the end of a New England summer day! If I could ever find the twig he sits upon! I mean he; I mean the twig!³

I too say no to the romantic figure of nature as pure site unpolluted by humanity, but yes to the intuition that flourishing requires attention to the natural tendencies of physical processes. No to nature as providential, but yes to celebration of the (“sublime”) power of impersonal natural forces and everyday objects. No to human exceptionalism, but yes to the presentiment that persons are no more *and* no less than constellations of cosmic matter. As Rubow says, “Yes, the wind and light are ‘out there,’ but are also . . . inside the body”—we are “blown through.”

The romantics were onto something, I think, when they looked to “nature” as an inspiration for human ethics, even if they (like us) trade in and are unwoke to many bad, false, and objectionable ideas. One finds, I think, among the romantics a sense that ethics is “a doing, it is trouble, and never a human-only matter” (Krøijer and Rubow), that “our human-centered ethical frameworks . . . have failed us” (Kohn), and that it is “our hubris . . . to think that we can have culture without nature” (Kohn).

2. Whitman, “Song of Myself.”

3. Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau*, 312.

I notice that it is hard to identify the actual locus of enchantment. It is a mood inside, and capable of moving, a (relatively stable) self. But it is surprisingly difficult to pin down that mood in words—happy-surprised? wondrous-upset? beautiful-sublime? Is part of that mood an eerie feeling of dissolving-merging into something trans-individual and more-than-human? (“I felt myself beginning to resemble, not to resemble anything, but just to resemble. Millions of infinitesimal particles whirled about and swirled together and I was connected to all of them as if on axes that turn above circular voids. I felt the pressure of the strings” and “I become a piece of material, a kind of sponge. . . . I am all perforated and icy liquids penetrate me through and through,” writes the quasi-surrealist Roger Callois.)⁴ But enchantment is more than a human mood: it involves a force in excess of sentiments, emotions, or feelings. It is a prompt from outside, from a farmed salmon or boreal plant or a painted border wall, which strikes and impresses. It seems that in a world of vibrant matter, the efforts composing the event of enchantment are multiple and multi-specied, and thus it is quite impossible to identify any first cause or single locus.

I now notice a creeping dissatisfaction with the very picture of “a self with feelings.” Perhaps it is better to speak of humans as (necessarily porous) *dividuals*? In another context, McKim Marriott had drawn a distinction between individuality and *dividuality*: *dividuals*, he says, are actors that are “not . . . indivisible, bounded units” but shapes that must “absorb heterogeneous material influences. They must also give out from themselves particles of their own coded substances—essences, residues, or other active influences—that may then reproduce in others something of the nature of the persons in whom they have originated.”⁵ *Dividuals*, you could say, are the porous and leaky shapes within a much larger (historical, biological, social, geological, cosmic) process. It seems that a condition of existence is a strange contemporaneousness of *transient dividuals* (within an ongoing, destructive flow) and *perpetual re-dividuation* (within a generative, metamorphic flow). The process of enchantment “sing[s] up” *dividuals* (Baker). And then it drowns them in a chorus.

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When I first started thinking in the 1990s about Max Weber’s claims that “modernity” was “disenchanted,” I was teaching at Goucher College in Baltimore. Goucher’s liberal interpretation of liberal arts education gave me the space to experiment with off-center ways of inhabiting “political science,” which was the department in which I had landed that job and which, as a political theorist, I would never be wholly comfortable. This discomfort was a good thing, and it pushed me to keep groping toward (with the help of many and various others in literature, poetry, nature writing, Greek tragedy, human geography, and anthropology) a mode of inquiry and a writing voice that felt more right.

4. Callois, *Necessity of Mind*, 106.

5. Marriott, *Hindu Transactions*, 111.

The mode of inquiry would direct attention to the affective that rattled and modified the economic, strategic, or ideological dimensions of collective life. By affective I mean to include not only emotions and sentiments but also “the numinous” (Rubow), that is to say, those impressions from outside that act as prompts received below the register of clearly felt emotions or clearly delineated ideas.⁶ The mode of inquiry I started to inhabit would qualify pure critique and pursue the presence of un-actualized, virtual potentials hovering even within hegemonic systems of domination. It would direct attention to (morally indeterminate) lines of flight amidst us. To do so may mean that the mode of inquiry does a poor job of asking “whose enchantment gets retold” or of marking the “domination” factor in the “entanglement of domination, exploitation, and care” (Lien).

The voice I sought was more speculative and fabulistic than empirical, historical, or genealogical. My treatments of enchantment in relation to the conjuring of ecological ethics are deliberately “framed in a demonstrative, hopeful way” (Rubow). This has the advantage, I think, of counter-balancing the relentless, but always less efficacious than hoped, exposé of inter-human relations of domination. The effort of this minor chord is to add energy to demoralized bodies of privileged but radical eco-activists.

Energy levels are always in flux; barometric pressure varies; some days I am dull and out of sorts and other days awake and on top of things; yesterday the winds blew fiercely, then there was just a breeze, and now sailboats stall in the Chesapeake; sometimes it’s too hot to think and other times currents of ideas and swirls of words sweep us up; the atmospherics of Baltimore are now hopelessly repetitive and violent, and now wildly artistic.

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I agree that “the chords of affective enchantment” are entangled in their “messy worldliness” and “hence they do not travel well” (Lien). But travel they nevertheless do, as when the enchantment with Canadian muskeg becomes part of an effort of reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and settlers (Baker), or when forest-thinking (Kohn) resonates strongly with city folk, including this Baltimorean.

There are loud voices in many polities today avowing hate, racism, xenophobia, greed, patriarchy, and other forms of authoritarian rule. These voices deny not only their entanglements with other people but also their profound susceptibility to nonhuman forces (preferring to believe, for example, that climate change and a viral pandemic are hoaxes propagated by the weak). Such claims have faced direct, forceful, and high-intensity counter-responses by militant ecologists and radical democrats, objecting to entrenched structures of privilege and domination. The use of militant outrage is necessary. But in *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, and again years later in *Vibrant Matter* and

6. Whitehead in *Process and Reality* and William Connolly in *Why I Am Not a Secularist* speak of the “visceral” register in which “affective tones” are struck but not consciously felt.

Influx and Efflux, I tried to become attuned to more indirect but not necessarily weak powers, including wonder at the vitality of matter and a protean attraction to, or at least fascination with, the fabulously diverse bodies and atmospheres of ordinary encounters. I seek to harness the efficacy of wonder and of our own vague, ahuman affections on behalf of a more decent, egalitarian, and ecological public culture.

It's not that positive moods and indirect influences should replace critique; they are offered instead as a political supplement. Such an approach has its virtues, flaws, and blind spots. It isn't fool-proof. And maybe a "both-and" approach—both chilling exposé and enchanting exposure—ought to be pursued together, moving toward one for a while and then becoming refreshed again by the other. The essays in this special issue do just that, dancing between the lovely and the unjust. They include many, many examples of the kind of poetic prose needed for the performance. I will end with just one:

The border fence is built as a series of vertical lines of steel. But because these bars are triangular in form, they allow for visual tricks. Walk east along the border—again, on the Mexican side—and you'll see a flag that combines the American stars and stripes with the Mexican motif of green, white, and red. But then circle back and walk west along the same fencing, and what you'll see instead is an image painted in strips onto a different face of these triangular bars, one that reveals a giant monarch butterfly perched upon bright red petals. It's almost as though this flitting creature is a rejoinder to these weighty posts planted into the earth, a living reminder that things will move no matter how much we fix them in place. (Pandian)

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