

Semiotics After Geontopower Some Preliminary Thoughts

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Abstract This essay is part of a book project, tentatively titled, *Do We Need a Semiotics After Geontopower?* The essay begins with an overview of the atmospheric conditions of an old debate about how to liberate theories of mind, communication and language from their humanist enclosure. It does so by highlighting a few scientific and public debates about what constitutes evidence of prehuman, and nonhuman animal and plant forms of mind and communication. The purpose of this brief foray into complicated debates is to conjure the sense-intuitions circulating around these arguments about the political and ethical stakes of describing a kind of existence as having this or that quality of language and mind. The essay then puts pressure on how these sense-intuitions about communication and mind are scaled – how a sense of the stakes of mind to the treatment of existence becomes a quest to model a general theory of a post-humanist mind. This takes me to the commonalities between a certain way of producing a posthumanist mind and the strategies of environmental protect within the movement for the rights of nature. Why do these approaches feel to some like they are the best way of verifying that prehuman, nonhuman animal and plant forms, and nonlife have semiotic capacities as one supports First Nation and Indigenous earthkin? The essay ends by summarizing the broader content and stakes of *Do We Need a Semiotics After Geontopower?*

Keywords Semiotics. Mind. Geontopower. Settler Colonialism. Race.

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1 Introduction

This essay is part of a book project, tentatively titled, *Do We Need a Semiotics After Geontopower?* It reflects on what such a semiotics might consist of, and why the fate of such a project might be relevant to people interested in language, mind and the arts of decolonizing human and other-than-human existence. The book is set primarily in the capacious international field of pragmatism – including the works of Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, Alain Locke, W.E.B. Du Bois, Gilles Deleuze, Teresa de Lauretis, Cornell West, Felix Guattari, Sergio Franzese, and others. It examines the potentiality of this field to produce a semiotics after geontopower from the perspective of ongoing decolonial and antiracist struggles. The book attends to the sense-intuition among some scholars that such a semiotic model is urgently needed, to the relationship between this sense-intuition and a current liberal public fascination with the language and mental capacities of the other-than-human world, and to the minute and technical details of various semiotic models. But it is primarily interested in tracking how western ways of knowing the world, which in a pragmatic sense would be no different than ways of treating the world, are inadvertently smuggled into the very semiotic models intended to upset Eurocentric approaches to being and existence. I am particularly interested in two specific approaches, the hierarchies of complexity and scope. The book has, in other words, a zig-zagging structure that starts off in one direction but then turns and doubles back on itself. It sets out by attending to a certain atmospheric pressure surrounding the interests of liberal and academic publics in the ethical, theoretical, political and, legal stakes of other-than-human mind, language, and forms of communication, and to the precipitates of this pressure, including the technical aspects of modelling other-than-human minds and communication. But it also continually doubles back on itself, asking what worlds are, or are not, being supported by this or that semiotic model and by the idea that a semiotic model is needed to support, through theoretical verification, Indigenous claims about their relationships with other-than-human existence?

I have discussed what I mean by geontopower in two previous books, *Geontologies* and *Between Gaia and Ground*. Before a quick summary of what I mean by this concept, it might help to outline the aspirations of these books. First, neither *Geontologies* nor *Between Gaia and Ground* sought to establish a new ontological ground from which social entanglements, political maneuvers, and ethical actions could be measured or adjudicated. Nor were they interested in reestablishing the discipline of history or historical anthropology as the

top-breed in the current academic dog show.¹ Nor finally did they seek to draw a direct line from the ways that geontopower is expressed at any given time or given space to the multiple ways that colonial powers justified and disavowed the violent invasions, extractions, and deformations of non-European peoples and their land-kin. Thus, the concept of geontopower developed in these books was never intended to amplify the secret name of the world in-and-of-itself or the transcendental name of power. As I noted in *Geontologies*, the concept of geontopower emerged from my now forty-year relationship with Belyuen/Karrabing Indigenous families, their relationship with the shifting faces and dynamics of ongoing colonialism, our coming-to-understand the sources of these multiple dispossessing countenances, and our collective film and art practices (cf. Chaisson 2023). I do not presume to know how useful the concept might be to other regions. All concepts emerge from the specific ways that power is sedimented in a region. And all concepts are oriented to transforming or embanking power as it is expressed in a region. It is simply not clear how far a region extends. Nor is it clear how a concept works as it moves across regions, especially since there are always multiple social regions within any region. Chad Infante, Sandra Harvey, Kelly Limes Taylor and Tiffany King have explored, for instance, the ways that anti-Blackness, Indigenous genocide, and settler colonialism shape and inform one another in the Americas (cf. Infante et al. 2020). These authors argue that original and ongoing colonialism differentiated kinds of dominated people in order to ‘fit’ them into its various extractive needs. The legacies of these difference, they argue, necessitate keeping an intimate but open dialogue between Indigenous and Black Studies. Thus, geontopower does not mean to conjure power as a singular form. It is a way of referring to the remarkably malleable content of late liberal governance – or whatever formation of liberalism we are now amidst.

Numerous scholars in critical Indigenous and Black Studies have discussed the governmental function of Eurocentric divisions of existence (cf. Deloria Jr. 1973).² Take for instance, Kim Tallbear’s “Care-taking Relations, Not American Dreaming”, written for an issue of *Kalfou* dedicated to thinking with Aileen Moreton-Robison’s notion of the “white possessive” (2015). Tallbear borrows from Mel Chen’s animacy hierarchy to point not merely to the symbolic nature of dominant settler thinking about the human and other-than-human world, but also to Indigenous relational understandings of and attitudes

¹ I am referring to an understandable misunderstanding about what I mean by axiom four in Povinelli 2021.

² See also Moreton-Robinson 2015.

towards their lands (cf. Tallbear 2019).³ She notes the ways that “the binaries of *life versus not life* and *humans versus nature*, as well as other more graduated Eurocentric hierarchies of life” are crucial to ongoing racial and colonial maneuvers of power (Tallbear 2019, 25). Tallbear contrasts these binaries to “an everyday Dakota understanding of existence that focuses on ‘being in good relation’” with their lands and specific kin (25). Likewise, across numerous essays and interviews, Sylvia Wynter has pointed to Eurocentric attitudes about humans and nature as the underlying cause of the deadly climatic conditions that all living things now face; namely, a western belief that humans were given the divine right of dominion over the earth. Wynter insists that this attitude of earthly lordship fractured the relationship between humans and their other-than-human kin. If we are to mend this fractured relation a new “hybrid being, both bios and logos (or, as I have recently come to redefine it, bios and *mythoi*)” must be developed.⁴

I intend the concept of geontopower to align with these scholars’ attempts to demonstrate and interrupt the domination of existence – the multiplicity of ways of knowing existence and being in relation to it – by Eurocentric divisions and hierarchies between Life and Nonlife another cognate oppositions. The ultimate goal is not to tabulate the consistencies and inconsistencies of elements within the divisions between life and nonlife. Nor is it to show how these divisions are named as they move across philosophical, theological, and secular humanist formations and reformations. Even if not the ultimate goal, tabulating these consistencies and inconsistencies can, nonetheless, help illuminate why scholars are trying to develop a semiotics after geontopower. For instance, we could begin by noting certain western consistencies in the figurations of ‘life’ at the most general level – that life is that which can be said to be materially birthed into existence, that which can be seen to unfold its inner potential over the course of its existence, and that which can be heard bewailing its irreducible, unavoidable limit, namely, death, or reconciling itself to the same. ‘Nonlife’ could be figured as that which stares life in its face – the idea of a form of existence that is dynamic in relation to the push and pull of natural forces but without an inner metabolic or mental dynamic that should unfold itself one way or another. Thus original inertness is not without dynamics. It is without what life seems to have, to have negated in its emergence, and to which it is fated to return. From the foundational difference we could track how the divisions of Life and Nonlife inform the way biological

³ See also Chen 2012.

⁴ Wynter points to Fanon’s argument that “phylogeny, ontogeny, and sociogeny” must be thought of together. See Wynter, Mckittrick 2015, 16.

life has geological processes as its grounds, its negation and its ultimate destiny. Or we can listen to how Peirce described natural laws within the framework of birth and death and how this framework has been absorbed in certain regions of astrophysics (cf. Peirce 1892).⁵ Or we could begin with how Carl Schmitt grounded the transformations of *Respublica Christiana* to *Jus Publicum Europaeum* in the conditions of European colonization and imperialism. We would then track how this legal transformation did or did not affect the uses of theories of life, mind, and cognition to govern colonized worlds, such as in the infamous Valladolid Debates between Bartolomé de las Casas and Juan Giné de Sepúlveda. We would then compare these debates to current discussions about the rights of nature in the wake of the Anthropocene. In each case, whether we are looking at role the division plays in the foundation of the natural sciences, in the philosophy of sciences, in critical theory or anthropology, we must continually listen to the consistencies and inconsistencies in any given region, say the between secular humanist approaches to the afterbirth of death and Christian denominations that look forward to the resurrection of an uncorrupted and incorruptible body in the Last Judgment.

Tracing such maneuvers and transfigurations are important, I believe, but only insofar as they allow us to make visible how they allowed, and allow, patterns of dispossession and accumulation that began as European boats crisscrossed oceans in search of loot. What is inconsistent at the level of discursive content reappears as consistent at the level of power, namely, a general Eurocentric aim of appropriating and dominating colonized peoples and their lands, and disrupting their relations to each other and their more than human kin (Schmitt 2006). In short, I am not interested in Life and Nonlife in and of themselves. I am interested in the ways the division, and hierarchies within each side of the division - human over nonhuman, mammals over plants, fossils over rocks -⁶ are mobilized to support the domination of some humans over existence and to justify this domination ethical and political domination. Rather than some secret consistency of governmental content, the concept of geontopower focuses on the variety of registers become weaponized against various colonized and enslaved peoples and against the relations that they have with each other and their more than human kin. Even as the concept of geontopower seeks to illuminate the multiplicity of forms of domination, it also means to foreground the material sedimentations and distributions of this power, including in the shape and interests of this or that academic disciplinarity. Kathryn Yusoff's unpacks, for instance, the

⁵ See also Smolin 2013.

⁶ For Foucault's discussion of fossils and monsters, see Huffer 2015 and Foucault 1970.

ways colonial and imperial thought generated the division between the biological and geological sciences (cf. Yusoff 2024; 2018). Thus, before I set out, I think it wise to distinguish between a *post-geontological semiotics* and a *semiotics against geontopower*. The first project focuses on developing a semiotic model of Mind that is agnostic to the division of Life and Nonlife. The latter is focused on interrupting the sedimentations of colonial and racist hierarchies within these divisions and thus liberal subjects and their institutional sense.

While *Do We Need a Semiotics After Geontopower?* has these perhaps overly ambitious aims, the goals of this essay are more modest. The essay begins with an overview of the atmospheric conditions of an old debate about how to liberate theories of mind, communication and language from their Eurocentric enclosure. The broad question it sets up is whether a postgeontological semiotics is equivalent to, is a necessary step to, or in tension with a semiotics *against* geontopower. It tries to begin to answer this question by highlighting a few scientific and public debates about what constitutes evidence of prehuman and nonhuman animal and plant forms of mind and communication. The purpose of this brief foray into a set of technical debates is to conjure the sense-intuitions circulating around these arguments, namely the political, ethical, and economic stakes of describing a kind of existence as having this or that quality of language, semiotic capacity, and mind. The essay then puts pressure on how these sense-intuitions about communication and mind are scaled. I then segue to some commonalities between a certain way of producing a posthumanist mind and the movement to establish the rights of nature, before ending with a brief summary the imagined content of the book project (de la Cadena 2015). Throughout I travel how an western intuition about the treatment of things without humanist minds is transfigured into the search for a posthumanist mind whose scope and complexity aligns are for all and everywhere.

2 Animals Are Talking

A recent *New York Times Magazine* article, “The Animals Are Talking, What Does it Mean?”, observed that many researchers no long consider the capacity of language to belong solely to humans (Shah 2023). This news might appear as old to many theorists of mind. In his 1972 text, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Gregory Bateson insisted that, if life in general was to have any chance of surviving the effects of Eurocentric humanist approaches to language, mind, and communication, then a theory of mind would have to be developed that situated the human mind on the same level as and within the web of life in general (Bateson 2000). I think we would need to put pressure on several aspects of a Bateson’s project before we could decide what

is old and what new about contemporary interests in other-than-human mind. In *Between Gaia and Ground*, I discussed how, even as Bateson was critiquing humanist approaches to mind, he conserved the distinction between *creatura* (the living) and *pleroma* (the non-living) on the one hand; and, on the other hand, he turbocharged colonial imaginaries of the primitive and civilized as differentiated by ascending orders of complexity. His own life narrative creates an ascending order of mental complexity that begins with local Papuan and Balinese cultural forms of ritual and spirals out and upwards through the cybernetic sciences and the new ecologies. This scalar approach to complexity – from local cultural patterns to a biospheric forms – never pauses to consider how the patterns based on colonial spheres might provide an aesthetic pattern to *Sacred Unity* (Bateson 1991). In aspiring to create a theory of mind whose scope and scale would absorb everyone and everywhere, Bateson exemplified what Vine Deloria Jr. saw as the difference between Western and Indigenous approaches to revelation, the one that mistakes the apprehension of “a difference that makes a difference” as something true for all times and places and one that show the “continuous process of adjustment” necessary to maintain good relations with earthkin in specific but always open territories and territorial relations.⁷

Is the research that the *New York Times* heralds suggesting more is afoot in contemporary posthuman sciences than what gave Deloria Jr. pause about the nature of western forms of revelation? It does seem like we are witnessing a substantial wave of scientific and public interest in how mind and language might be liberated from its humanist bias and, in being liberated, provide more robust grounds for understanding how to create a sustainable relationship between humans and other-than-human worlds. While it might seem absurd to imagine anything new could be written about the semiotic nature of mind in general, or any species of mind in particular, let alone to image creatively contributing to contemporary theories of intention and interpretation, we are surrounded by calls to try and attempts to do so. Take for instance, a recent essay in this journal, “Cognition and Intelligences after the Post-Human Turn”. In it, Roberta Raffaetà reflects on a discursive movement within the science of microbes, from one focused on “how microbes influence human brain, cognitive and emotional functions” to one focused on “exploring whether and how microbes themselves ‘think’” (Raffaetà 2023, 182).

Indeed, worried references to nonhuman mind, or qualities that constitute indications that a nonhuman mind might be present, are so ubiquitous in the sciences that on any given day I can move my

⁷ By a “difference that makes a difference” I am referring to the phrasing Bateson deploys in *Mind and Nature* (Bateson 1979, 228).

open palm through the discursive air and be sure to catch a few instances. For example, in May 2023, while driving from Darwin to Belu, a small Indigenous community located just across the Darwin Harbour, I tuned into an ABC radio interview about the perils and promises of AI. One interviewee said that he was relieved his robots did not have a mind because, if they did, he would have to consider their intentions, desires, and beliefs before turning them on and off, taking them apart, and experimenting on them willy-nilly. If robotic AI achieves mindfulness and is inserted into his robots, then his robots would not only feel more lifelike, they would become a new form of life among us because they could be said to have the most important element of humanity, mind, self-awareness, and critical reflexivity. As I drove, I wondered how this way of thinking about robotic AI articulated to certain Christian desires for the resurrection of the sanctified body. Be this as it may, in the context of an increasingly wrecked climate, I was not surprised to hear a radio show on AI veer into discussions of the ethical and political implications of attributing different qualities of mind to not merely non-human animals and more-than-human existence but inanimate existence.

Solicitations to reconsider the nature of nonhuman minds are emerging not merely from the microbial and AI sciences, but from within a multitude of academic and public spaces. Take, for instance, what may appear as a provincial archaeological debate about mind, intention, and interpretation among extinct hominian species. The University of Wisconsin reported that some of its archaeologists had “uncovered evidence of intentional burial” practices among *Homo naledi* and geometrical, perhaps symbolic cross-hatchings, they created on nearby walls. The significance of the find was described in this way:

Until now, scholars believed that the mental capacity behind complex cultural behaviours like burial and mark-making required a larger brain, like those of Neanderthals and *Homo sapiens*. And yet, *Homo naledi*'s brain was only about one-third the size of humans. (Mahon 2023)

If the findings held up, they would upset existing theories about the evolution of the brain and meaning-making (Mahon 2023). Not surprisingly, multiple experts skeptically weighed in. Was this a burial, rather than merely a collection of bones? Did these symbols relate to the bones? Were they symbols, or mere scratches? How do we know *Homo naledi* made the cross-hatchings rather than a group of *Homo sapiens* who came later? And most importantly, what kind of forensic evidence would prove or disprove a claim of semiotic intentionality? (Crossland 2018).

Debates about the meaning of the skeletal collection and the cross-hatchings point to fundamental philosophical and semiotic

disagreements about the relationship between mind, symbol-making and intentionality. If it was a burial site, did this burial signify some second order meaning – the sanctity of *Homo naledi* bodies and by implication the idea of corporal desecration and a belief in deities. Or were these bodies buried so that their purification would not attract dangerous scavenger animals? Did the *Homo Naledi* intend their actions to mean these or other things? Did they intend them to be understood by other *Homo naledi* or perhaps some non-*Homo naledi* kin? For many theorists of mind additional qualities of communicative intention critically separate mental action from behavioural actions. For instance, plant scientists have known for some time that plants produce chemicals to ward off specific predators. But a new study demonstrates that *Arabidopsis* mustard plants can differentiate between hazardous and nonhazardous encounters. “What is surprising and cool is that these plants only create defence responses to feeding vibrations and not to wind or other vibrations in the same frequency as the chewing caterpillar”, according to Heidi Appel (Meissen 2014). We could say that the *Arabidopsis* mustard plant *interprets* the difference between the abrasions of wind and the munching of pests. Interpretation here is used in sense of an ability to discriminate between types of vibrations and the relation of vibration to the activation of the chemical variability of their leaves. Many philosophies of mind, however, see a chasm between the ability to discriminate and respond to elements in the environment and an intention to discriminate. Something might interpret a difference within its environment and, on the basis of this interpretation, alter itself.

But the claim that *a plant* can discriminate between motions that threaten its life and motions that do not is quite different from the statement that *it intends* to discriminate and it *intends* the chemical change to be interpreted as ‘yuck’ by the predator bug. In sum, three elements are in play: an interpretive capacity, the capacity to shape signs to be interpreted by others, and an intention to do so (Zimmer 2023). Philosophies of mind have long debated this relationship between intentionality, consciousness and mind⁸ as well as language-based approaches to linguistic subjectivity.⁹ In the latter, intentional sign-production – signs produced to be interpreted by another – is tightly correlated to the emergence the form of self-consciousness associated with the human acquisition of subjectivity, that is, linguistic subjectivity. Here language provides the necessary grounds for the ‘I’ who intends to convey meaning to ‘you’. And it links this dialogical personhood to linguistically established organizations of tense and space. When referring to nonlinguistic ‘subjects’, studies deploy

⁸ For example, see Ascombe 1957; Seale 1983; Dennett 1972; Strawson 2008; Short 1981.

⁹ Perhaps most influential was the work of Emile Benveniste (cf. Benveniste 1971).

nominal forms that conjure the agency that understands *itself* to be doing the communication and interpreting communication of others. Whether this agency is individualized (a plant) or mass collective (a forest), some nominalized object is projected as the *locus mens* where intentional action is seated. Are these nonlinguistic subjects, self-aware subjects, i.e., the forest is interpreting even if it does not understand itself to be doing so? Does this matter, to whom, and in order to produce what?

Daniel Povinelli's work with numerous collaborators on the evolution of self-recognition has raised another issue for those attempting to extend theories of mind from human to nonhuman animals. He and Jennifer Vonk have argued that, in the study of nonhuman primates, qualities that prove *the presence of mind* and those that prove the presence of *a theory of mind* must be differentiated. Do nonhuman apes have a theory of mind, of their own minds or the minds of others? Povinelli and Vonk's point is that nonhuman primates can see, feel, interpret, and communicate without *having to have* a 'theory' about seeing, feeling, and communicating which they project onto others and which mediates the way they engage in sign-making. In my understanding, Povinelli and his various collaborators are not arguing that nonhuman primates do not have a theory of mind but merely that no test has proven that they do. Moreover, they continually emphasize that their absence of a theory of mind does not demote the value and worth of nonhuman primates. But critics have argued that denying nonhuman primates *a theory of mind* does indeed, in very practical ways, shift nonhuman primates from mental creatures to behavioural creatures and from more to less mentally complex forms of existence (cf. Povinelli, Vonk 2003; 2004; Tomasello, Call, Hare 2003). To be sure, we can ask whether it is possible to neutralize hierarchies of value while retaining hierarchies of semiotic complexity and whether the evolution of mind from sense discrimination to self-awareness necessitates a hierarchy of complexity.¹⁰

3 Affects of Mental Attribution

Interesting questions, no doubt. But I point to these academic debates and their circulation in nonacademic publics to get at something other than where nonhuman phenomena sit in the ascending, or merely different, orders of intentionality, reflexivity, and interpretive ability. I want to ask why some *feel* the need to prove this or that nonhuman animal or this or that plant does or does not have mind and the various qualities of mind associated with the western human mind?

¹⁰ Cf. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4427860/>.

Why do some *feel* we must add these western-derived qualities of mind to nonhuman animals, plants and inanimate matter if they are to have an equal place in the governing order of ethical, public, and economic life? Why do some *feel* like, in arguing that we don't know whether chimpanzees have a theory of mind, we are lessening their worth? Why do some feel as if we have reduced the ethical nature of the plant if we *deny* that the plant intends to produce chemicals to ward off predators? Why are we always creating individuals and collectives to provide the seat of mind and its multifarious qualities? A plant intends to do this? A forest thinks?

Surely part of the answer to this unwieldy block of questions is that the sense-intuitions that I am tracking are correctly registering the greater stakes in play. By sense-intuitions I mean interpretations felt affectively, derived from the social constitution of corporeal sense. It is a bit of 'snake swallows its own tail'. Nevertheless, sense-intuition of the sort I am tracking here is derived from how bodily dispositions are constituted from within a social world and thus always interpreting themselves in relation to it. As the assumptions and values of one aspect of the social world changes, the sense-intuitions of how to act in the world are disturbed. These sense-intuitions are part of what Alaine Locke called the "struggle over the means and instrumentalization of value" lodged not only in "institutionally vested interests" but the "feeling-attitudes" and "dispositional imperatives" that emerge to constitute persons as such (Locke 1989, 49). What surprise that as western subjects are bombarded with dire messages about climate collapse and environmental degradation, their sense-intuitions about the relationship between their taken for granted hierarchy of life and the use of things is being disturbed?¹¹ The ancestral catastrophe of liberal settler capitalism has been radically destabilizing environments for centuries on centuries. But it is only now that a large majority of western subjects are being affected by this derangement, which they feel as a coming or arriving catastrophe. Whether anyone knows anything about the slur of behaviourism, the sense-intuition that assigning plants and nonhuman animals to this form of action reduces their ethical claim on us, casting them out of political logos and dooming them to cruel and thoughtless usury. They correctly diagnose that granting plants and nonhuman animals the attributes associated with Eurocentric mind raises them in a value hierarchy built into the ordinary transactional logics of liberal capitalism. They correctly feel that, if something does not share western

11 See, for instance, the incommensurability between the settler liberal critical public and moral (deontological) reason that I discussed in *The Cunning of Recognition* (2002), or say the contradictions within the ideological state apparatuses that Louis Althusser discussed in *Lenin and Philosophy* (1971). For Canadian context of transfigural settler colonial recognition, see Coulthard 2014.

values, in this case, the form and qualities of mind that Europeans have created to understand themselves, then they can fall into the rapacious jaws of capitalism. In short, the sense-intuitions surrounding the above debates link academic and public interest in other-than-human languages and minds to the ordinary ways in which liberal or authoritarian capitalism habituates people to treat parts of existence that fall outside certain theories and territories of the human mind. Thus, the sense-intuitions I am discussing are correct if they are seen as diagnosing not qualities of mind, but the deployment of Eurocentric ideas about mind in the ongoing rampages of colonialism and capitalism.

What we may be seeing in recent interests in nonhuman language and mind is a violent shuttling within the sense apparatus of liberal capitalist subjects as the ancestral catastrophe of settler colonialism begins to affect them in the form of climate collapse. But if these sense-intuitions are correct, they still face the question of diagnosis. How do they interpret the cause of the problem their intuitions are intuiting? We could say that these subjects are intuiting that geotopower has created a careless attitude to other-than-human existence and this attitude is related to the environmental and climate crisis they face. What then? What forms of solution do they create or gravitate to?

4 Aspirations of Biosemiotics

For many scholars and activists, the developments in *biosemiotics* would aide in the derangement of Eurocentric approaches to mind by altering the way we think about sign-based communication (Guernsey 2017). For instance, scholars like Jespers Hoffmeyer have made great strides in provincializing the human mind by recasting it as merely “a particular instantiation of a nature that is in a deep sense itself minded” (Hoffmeyer 2008, 28). He and other scholars in biosemiotics often point to the dynamic, emergent, and relational nature of mind in which humans participate but in no way transcend. In their hands, mind is a system of *communicative relationality* composed of co-interpretative relays that can ramify in an alteration of bodily composition and disposition. The emphasis is typically on the ways that communication instantiates relations, the ways relations are irreducibly mediated by forms of communication, and how both are irreducibly material and materializing. Relational communication is thus at once creatively playful and carefully conserving, at once and the same time, inside, outside, and between specific organisms. Relational communicative systems can thus spiral up into an ever-increasing order of complexity and coproduction. They can be remarkably robust once anchored down. But they are also fragile

and unstable at their tipping points (Kohn 2013; Thompson 2010). The complex interpenetrating systems of interpretation are also subject to collapse if the relational networks of communication are severed – say a road is cut across an amazon forest. This is what we are seeing in climate collapse.

This play of communication as relationally-producing materiality attempts to free the other-than-human world from the denigrating prison of mechanistic behaviourism – the idea that certain kinds of existence do things because of some hardwired code, reducing them to little more than organic windup toys. But for all of its attentiveness to the immanent webs of life’s communicative relationality, most of biosemiotics remains, well, unrelentingly biontological. Thus it is hard to see biosemiotics as providing the basis for semiotics after geontopower. Still signs proliferate suggesting an intuition of a *postgeontological* existence whether or not we currently have a theoretical modelling of such – say, intuitions about robotic AI. And many scholars are attempting to neutralize the geontological division within semiotic theories of mind. Jonathan Beever and Vernon Cisney suggest a way of exiting a strict *biosemiotics* through a form of panpsychism, “the ancient and seemingly mystical position that minds are in and through everything that exists... *from* human beings and nonhuman animals *down to* things like rocks and thermostats” (2013, 352; italics added). Beever and Cisney focus on Deleuze’s post Spinozian approach to ‘contraction’. They write,

All of being is reconceived by Deleuze as a multiplicity of more and less complex constitutions, relations, and interpretations of *signs*, themselves conceived as contractions of time constituting the relative *life* of each *thing* that *is*, for as long as it *is*. (356)

Like Peirce, so Deleuze “mind is this ongoing and universal semiotic process of contraction, interpretation, and reaction that occurs at all levels of the natural world” (363). Not only is the differentiation between *the* wasp and *the* orchid a semiotic contraction, but so also is the difference between the *wasp orchid* and air pressure. All of these approaches can be said to model a semiotic theory neutral to the divisions of Life and Nonlife, the animate and inanimate, the biological and geological, the ecological and atmospheric. But are these models of a semiotics against geontopower, or are they a postgeontological semiotics? Does modelling an irreducible and original semiotic multiplicity agnostic to all categorical reason, let alone the division between Life and Nonlife, confront the colonial order to geontopower? Or, by proclaiming the Good News of semiotic panpsychism, true for all and everywhere, do we smuggle a Eurocentric universalism in the back door.

This risks of not taking seriously the aspirational scope of biosemiotics and post-geontological semiotics can be concretized in recent

attempts to establish the *rights of nature*.¹² Two questions become obvious when shifting the focus from a semiotic model to a political project. First, is whose system of human and other-than-human relationality grounds the project to establish the rights of nature? And, second, what is the scope of the framework imagined? What the rights of nature make explicit that debates about plants, nonhuman hominian species, nonhuman apes, and semiotic panpsychism can skirt, is that, at the centre of any discussion of the rights of nature, is, as Jeremie Gilbert and his colleagues put it, the question of “guardianship, stewardship, trusteeship and/or custodianship of nature”; namely, who should be empowered to speak on behalf of this or that realm of “nature”, more, to define the *nature* of “nature” (Gilbert et al. 2023, 373). If “natural entities cannot defend their own rights and require representation” how are they to be represented and by whom are the proper representatives? (Gilbert et al. 2023). “We” can model nonhuman mind any way we wish, but some human, or group of humans, is doing the modelling and interpreting. As Christine J. Winter and David Schlosberg have argued, debates about relational communication always are about “what matter matters as a matter of justice?” (Winter, Schlosberg 2023).¹³ I would add the question, what must matter become in order to circulate within and across what social relational territories?

Being of a certain age and educational profile, I cannot help but think of Gayatri Spivak’s distinction between *vertretung* and *darstellung* in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (Spivak 1988). A multitude of questions unfurl from the seemingly simply question of *vertretung*. Who will be *locos parentis* of this or that region of human and other-than-human relationality and kinship? Who will decide what is there? Where is there? And whether scaling from the local to Gaia is a perversion of earthkin relations or not? In short, we are not only faced with the ability of the other-than-human world to signal to others, or to parts of itself, its communicative intention, but with the filtering of these qualities through specific social worlds, themselves always within specific if multiple relations to the “struggle over the means and instrumentalization of value”. This struggle has been at the forefront of the work of activists such as Vandana Shiva and her Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology. And because of this struggle, many legal scholars and activists working with the framework of in the rights of nature foreground their alliance with specific Indigenous cosmologies such as Pachamama.

Whatever intentions specific persons have in each of these complex legal struggles, the question is remains of how the multiplicity

¹² See, for example, Gilbert et al. 2023.

¹³ See also Winter 2020.

of Indigenous relational cosmologies transformed to fit specific, what Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar and I called an ethnography of transfiguration, in the case of the rights of nature, the necessity for Indigenous relations with their other-than-human kin to conform to western legal concept of corporate personhood. We asked:

What limits are imposed on cultural forms as the condition of their circulation across various kinds of social space? What materialities of form emerge from, and brace, these movements, and that make ‘things’ recognizable inside the contexts in which they are inserted? (Parameshwar, Gaonkar, Povinelli 2003, 387)

To be sure, Greek and European law has a long history of animals and inanimate objects in its systems of justice.¹⁴ But leaving aside the question of standing – who can stand as the representative of a region of more-than-human existence – we still must consider the forces of *darstellung*, of what forms something must take as the condition of entering liberal forms of addressivity and adjudication. Sure, one way of asking the question is, if corporations can be legal persons, why can't other abstract collectives be considered persons within the framework of liberal law? (Gordon 2018). If we ask the question this way, the question is how developments in postgeontological semiotics can support this idea of the personhood of nature by anchoring it in an other-than-human mind *in general*. Put another way, a postgeontological semiotics fits neatly into the new juridical imaginary of the *rights of nature* (cf. Gilbert et al. 2023). It seems to solve an ethical-political problem with an ethical imperative that conserves Eurocentric imperative, “Give unto others what you find most valuable in yourself”, which in a decolonizing perspective can be translated into “Give unto others a modified version of what you refuse to give away, your own sense of yourself as the model of all existence” (Winter 2003). Afterall, we do not hear a call for stripping away the values that compose subjectivity as a sedimentation of ongoing capitalist processes. “Give back to others the materials composing your good life and the value-forms that make the continued dispossession of others reappear as natural goods”. For those whose lives are lived from the sedimented compositions of this hierarchy of mental values disrupting it can *feel* like a derangement of their body and its senses, because it is. This is why laws are passed to keep the capitalist mind and economy of usury in place (cf. Eddy 2005). Or, the use a capitalist form, corporate personhood, to solve a capitalist problem, the destruction of existence as it currently exists.

This should give those of us wondering what a semiotics against

14 See, for instance, Hyde 1916; 1917; Dinzelbacher 2002.

geontopower might consist of if upsetting a humanist approach to personhood, mind, and rights can conserve the apparatus of liberal humanist law. What happens when we absorb rivers and others forms of existence into the concept of personhood emerging out of the catastrophes of Second World War and the Nuremberg trials? Put differently, what are we begin doing in a pragmatic sense, when we interpret regions of other-than-human as persons – what are we insisting they become in order for them to have standing before a court of law? How is the legal inclusion of nature through a category meant to protest capitalists from financial responsibility for the harms they do to the human and more-than-human worlds an exit from the same overdetermination of a specific form of the Man – one that at once and the same time aspires to include all in its dominion and exempt it from the harms of applying its ruler? How would Deleuzian notions of semiotic contraction allow us to understand the transfigurations of existence necessary for natural things to be heard?

5 Semiotics Against Geontopower

The book from which this essay is derived will examine in more depth how a post-geontological semiotics certainly could push biosemiotics beyond a strict correlation between biology and mind. But it will compare such an approach to a semiotics against geontopower. As opposed to a post-geontological semiotics, a semiotics against geontopower does not aspire to model a *new nature* or the *true nature* applicable to the All and Everywhere. It does rest on the bizarre notion that if theory does not begin with what things share in common then vicious war and usury are inevitable outcomes. A semiotics after geontopower would need to begin within a set of relations and the forces and powers that produce differential sedimentations of thought and matter, including thought as habituated matter with its tendencies of interest and its aspirations of scope. It must carefully track the difference between deranging a humanist approach to mind and a decolonial approach to semiotics. It must examine how unhinging a humanist mind need not touch the derangement of the colonial order. When thinking about thought in this way, I often return to Edouard Glissant's opening words in *Poetics of Relation*.

Thinking thought usually amounts to withdrawing into a dimensionless place in which the idea of thought alone persists. But thought in reality spaces itself out into the world. It informs the imaginary of peoples, their varied poetics, which it then transforms, meaning, in them its risk becomes realized. (1997, xxi)

Do We Need a Semiotics After Geontopower tries to create a space between a post-geontological semiotics and a semiotics against geontopower. The first seeks to break the deforming borders and boundaries of life and nonlife as it creates an all-encompassing approach to mind. The other examines the presuppositions within semiotics in order to unhinge the deployments of mind in the ongoing relational sedimentations of settler colonialism. The format of this still speculative book cites Roman Jakobson's *Six Lectures on Sound and Meaning*. The first lecture will consist of a revised version of this essay. The next three lectures take an elementary kernel of pragmatic approaches to semiotics and mind and pivot it against seemingly cognate concepts developed in critical Indigenous and Black studies. The second lecture will focus on theories of relatives. I begin with Peirce's self-understanding that his semiotics rested on a new logic of relatives. I pivot what this means technically against various critical Indigenous discussions about the ethics and obligations of peoples to other-than-human kin, such as Kim Tallbear's call cited above. The third lecture pressures pragmatics understandings, and conflatons, of the interpretant (or the agency of interpretation) and mind. Again, it asks not merely how critical race and Indigenous studies have shown the function of discourses of mind in the colonial and racial systems of governance, but whether mind is a necessary feature of any part of existence to be treated with ethical care. The fourth lecture examines pragmatic approaches to truth in which the highest order of thought must be understood as the habituated way that mind treats objects through the mediation of signs. The fifth lecture continues this discussion, asking how pragmatic approaches to radical empiricism relates to the way Deloria Jr. and others have discussed revelation as a form of adjustment and power rather than fact or post-fact assertion. The final lecture returns to the sense-intuition that a post-geontological semiotics is needed, asking whether a semiotics against geontopower could work alongside decolonizing and antiracist projects without becoming yet another colonizing ontology, another evangelical form of mind announcing the arrival of a redeemed theoretical world.

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