

Fostering a More-than-human World View

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More-than-Human Worlds: A NatureCulture Blog Series

Growing up a farm boy near Canada's Rocky Mountains, I was surrounded by, enmeshed in, what I thought of as a world of non-human friends and foes (dogs, cats, and cows; coyotes, bees and bears; rifles, tractors and thistles). I escaped the mundanity of farm life through becoming an obsessive fan of the original *Star Trek* television series with its tales of alien embodiments, ways and worlds (*Figure 1*). Its dated and gendered inflections left aside, a "...five-year mission to seek out new life and new civilizations..." still sounds to me like a recruitment call to do doctoral research in some intergalactic anthropology department.



Figure 1: The Vulcan Spock, the Human Captain Kirk, and the USS Enterprise space ship from the Original Series, my virtual introduction to numerous more-than-human worlds.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Leonard_Nimoy_William_Shatner_Star_Trek_1968.jpg

In retrospect, I am sure that these early formative experiences, real and virtual, were what spawned a lifelong interest in more-than-human beings and becomings. Being and becoming are frequently viewed as though they are in opposition in contemporary social theory; with being often understood as singular and static—a Heideggerian influenced (and often human only) constant of self-making (autopoesies)—and becoming viewed in opposition, as ever-plural processes of decentered commingling and emergence (sympoises) (cf. Haraway 2016). From my perspective however, these are not points of opposition but counterpoints, two sides of the same existential coin. There is historic being comprised of idiosyncratic embodiments, affects, capabilities, and memories leading to the present. All of which are clearly plural or shared with other humans (Jackson 2013; Stoller 1997, 2009), other living non-human subjects (Dransart 2013; Kirksey ed. 2014; Massumi 2014; Smart and Smart 2017), along with energies and environments (Bogost 2012; Esposito 2015; Grusin ed. 2015; Kohn 2013; Povinelli 2016; Wharton 2015). In sum, existence is always enveloped in social processes both human and non-human, what STS scholar Andrew Pickering calls a “mangle,” a ceaseless “dance of agency” comprised of “resistances and accommodations” (1995: 22). Yet just as surely as being-becomings are shared, they also exist in particular and singular inimitable constellations that stretch into emergences: the being-becoming of unique life line or trajectory of thingness (Connolly 2011; Ingold 2011). Too often it is this idiosyncratic aspect of our shared living existence that is forgotten or sanitized in our ‘accounting’ of what exists. But the fact remains, though we can typify, classify and categorize all we like, life as process—as concomitantly living and lived—is a messy affair.

Before I had any ability to theoretically frame these interests and inclinations, even to the debatable and flawed way I do today, I was pulled towards a BA and MA focused on Asian religion with an emphasis first on Hinduism and then popular Buddhism. The world I imagined started to include a cosmopolitical myriad of hybrid animal-human-spirit beings and enveloping Mahayāna conceptualizations of Buddha nature (*tathāgatagarbha*; thus gone—non-individuated—womb of being) or (*praṭītyasamutpāda*; the condition of dependent co-arising; cf. Nagao 1991). Indeed, to anyone with a background in Buddhist thought, it is clear that there are numerous unexplored resonances with contemporary social theory that are in need of being probed, points that I have informally discussed with polymath scholar Istvan Csicsery-Ronay in terms of posthuman thought and anthropologist Numazaki Ichiro in terms of cosmopolitan conceptualizations. In sum, there is a need to acknowledge that, though perhaps not teleologically linked, concepts like assemblage or actor-network share resonances with earlier non-European epistemologies, and though

cosmopolite is a word of Greek origin its interpretation and the experience of pluralism, chosen and forced, has been global. From our bipedal trek out of Africa we have always been posthuman ([Smart and Smart 2017](#)) and cosmopolitan (Hansen forthcoming a).

Wanting to focus on something more ‘practical’ for doctoral research, thinking back what I could now say was a desire for a more embodied and affect oriented epistemology, I studied anthropology and, utterly unplanned, came full circle with my rural upbringing. I wound up doing research on the rapid industrialization and neoliberal environment of dairy farming in Hokkaido, Japan (Hansen 2014a; 2014b; 2018; forthcoming b). Beyond sentient life—human and non—and the worlds of transcendent beings and beliefs, technologies of co-production and reproduction from fermenting silage, to the use of antibiotics, to artificial insemination began to play a central part in the way I now view being-becoming. I began to foster ideas about more-than-human-worlds influenced in large part through thinking in terms of assemblages. In short, we (a very inclusive we, material and immaterial, sentient and non-sentient) share worlds as “ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts...living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within” (Bennet 2010: 23), complex and decidedly more-than-human worlds are ever-oscillating paradoxically encompassing both individual *being* and processual *becoming* (cf. DeLanda 2016). Yet, even leaving aside more-than-human-epistemologies, we know that humans need not share perceptions of the world they share. The Hokkaido dairy farm that I worked on and researched for a year in 2005-2006, and have visited countless times since, is a case in point.¹

Great Hopes Farm is the pseudonym that I gave to the then 1800 cow operation and Wada-san is the name I conferred on its owner, my former boss and a key informant. He ever-expands the dairy farm’s number of Holstein cows (3000 today), human workers (around 50), and cutting-edge technological innovations (from antibiotics to artificial insemination). We share a base perception of the world, such as the above numbers, as points of fact: his farm is expanding in numerous more-than-human dimensions, yet we often differ on our points of concern, our political opinions about that process. In short, for better or worse, *Great Hopes Farm* is the fastest growing industrial mega farm in the area and from the first day we met Wada-san’s eyes have been set on becoming Hokkaido’s largest. I would never peg my former boss as sentimental or superstitious and it would be easy to typify him as a neoliberal agrobusiness owner in that he is a pragmatic and hard-nosed local, a business-first farmer who often shuns, even scoffs, at traditional ways of doing things considering them inefficient and impractical. But this does not explain his complex view of the world

or how we have come to understand, and at least from my perspective, respect each other. For example, he cares for his cows and human workers better than most of, if not all, the farm owners in the region. He does not do this out of altruism or some notion of traditional paternalism, but because he contends that health is a key factor that equates with profits. As with many other issues, for him the ends justify the means without ethical or moral abstractions. Wada-san and I can agree to disagree about numerous perceptions of human and non-human health or the relationships of technology, profit and agricultural policy, yet there remain areas where our perceptions of the world that we share are utterly incommensurate, and one example is what might be called a spiritual perspective of place.

One day seeing a new construction crew on the farm, I asked what was being built so close to the main gates. Without a pause Wada-san told me that he was having trouble sleeping as he was haunted by the *tamashi* (most commonly translated as soul) of cows in the form of greenish blue dancing lights. He continued—while I earnestly wondered if he was having a laugh at my gullibility—that such entities can bring about great misfortune to a farm and he reasoned that paying for an exceedingly expensive *chikukonhi* plaque (livestock funerary monument) and yearly services from the local Buddhist temple was a way to protect the farm and allow him some peaceful sleep (*Figure 2*).



Figure 2: Photos of the monument
(photo by author)

I nodded attentively listening to his story and then ran off to triangulate this account with other locals and farmers I know. To my dismay (then) and curiosity (still) most replied to my recounting—of what from my perspective was an *extraordinary*, indeed *other-worldly*,

tale from a rational business man—with a semi interested “*ah, naruhodo ne,*” (hum, makes sense). Thus, while Wada-san stands out in the community due to the size of his holdings – he is commonly known about town as simply *shachō* (the president)—he is not alone in having a particular spiritual more-than-human understanding of the world that includes cow souls and their potentially dangerous agency. Numerous dairy farmers have since related similar explanations and participate in their own rituals—albeit the lion’s share of them more half-heartedly (*Figure 3*). But Wada-san and other local dairy farmers are not some rarefied pocket of superstitious, rural, cultural outliers, at least not in these beliefs. As Barbara Ambros notes, there is a wide range of non-human relationships in Japan where funerary practices have long been common to assuage guilt and fear as well as earnestly show gratitude (2012) and my own research on dog-human relationships underscores much the same in an urban context (2013). The paradox inherent in accepting a more-than-human view of agency is inescapable in this ethnographic vignette: There is Wada-san, me, a particular place and the world that we share and can even objectively debate, and concomitant with this there is an experiential world that we don’t share. Moreover, he has never attempted to convince me of the spirit worlds existence, he and others have merely offered their views, and I believe that this world exists despite my not having any direct experience of it.



Figure 3: Local farmers and Buddhist funeral services to appease the souls of cows
(photo by author)

While we bipeds are individual bundles capable of choosing, planning and acting along lines that are both open and entwined, both trailing off independently and tightly bound

(Ingold 2016 [2007]: 1-5, 156-174)—humans can often agree, disagree, and agree to disagree about our perception of more-than-human-worlds—we are not equal in our “capabilities” or “capacities” (Nusbaum 2006 and Rapport 2012 respectively) with each other, let alone with other forms of life or our ability to understand and empathize with Otherness. Wadasan is both capable and has the capacity to choose to make his living ‘off of’ human and non-human workers. And he is aware that he does this at the expense of the local ecology in socioeconomic and political terms, as many of his workers are foreign laborers on ethically dubious government brokered contracts (Hansen 2010), and environmentally, as the effects of such intensive monocrop agriculture are well documented (cf. Kirby 2010). And readers, let’s not cast any morally charged stones from our glass houses, many humans (myself zealously) choose to enjoy the bacterial cultures (cheese and yogurt for example) produced by this form of agri-*culture*, where bigger and cheaper is often sold as better (Hansen 2014b).

Fostering or nurturing a more-than-human worldview means attempting to understand others, others that may not be immediately easy to empathize with. Taking this beyond humans and their multivalent spiritual beliefs, other lifeforms, cow to corn, are meticulously managed via technologies and cannot choose motivations from the pantheon of abstract human concepts like belief. They are human engineered, to fit this highly automated system of production, yet the system itself does seem to have ‘a life of its own’ at times (Hansen 2014a). In this unequal cycle of choice, planning and individuated agency, actions that enliven vast bodies of production and consumption can also be found in pluralistic “forced cosmopolitan connections” (Beck 2009) of more-than-human agency, conditions that remain beyond the control of any individual actor, from the whims of global markets to the as yet misunderstood dynamics of mycobacterial infections. When faced with such unpredictable, even inexplicable, influences of being and becoming, are belief ‘in the system’ or actions, scientific though their basis may be, with untraceable or irreducible results so distant from accepting the agency of unsettled souls or praying for and to a more-than-human unknown?

Notes

¹ For more detailed accounting of the ethnographic encounter that follows see (Hansen 2018).

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