

Heather Alberro  
Nottingham Trent University  
[heather.alberro@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:heather.alberro@ntu.ac.uk)  
Twitter: @AlberroHeather

‘Valuing Life in Ecosystems, and Even in Stars’: On Radical Environmental Activists’  
Post-Anthropocentric Worldviews

**Abstract:** The present era of biological annihilation lends particular urgency to the need to radically reconfigure human-animal-nature relations along more ethical trajectories. Thus, this article engages with largely post-humanist scholarship for an in-depth qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with 26 radical environmental activists (REA’s) from a variety of groups, who are posited as contemporary manifestations of ‘post-anthropocentric paradigm shifts’. Despite broadly being categorized as post-humanist/post-anthropocentric, considerable variations abound in terms of who/what REA’s value and on what basis. The article concludes with a brief discussion of the nature of REA post-anthropocentric sensibilities and mobilizations, and their implications for the development of ethical modes of human-animal-nature relationality that value and respect their irreducible singularity.

**Key Words:** Anthropocene, posthumanism, post-anthropocentrism, radical environmentalism, environmental ethics

Though it is increasingly undeniable that we are living during times of severe socio-ecological precarity, it bears remembrance lest we lose sense of the ethical weight of our collective impacts on the earth and its inhabitants. During the current Anthropocene era of extensive anthropogenic disruptions of natural systems (Crutzen 2006), our climate system is increasingly in disarray, wherein the latest IPCC report (2018) warned that the planet could reach 1.5 degrees of warming by as early as 2030 without urgent global political action and structural transformations. Others have documented a twofold decline in plant biomass- through deforestation largely for agriculture and timber extraction- since the start of human civilization (Bar-On et al 2018: 3). Most worryingly from an ethical standpoint is the onset of the planet’s sixth mass extinction event to occur since life’s 3.5-billion-year tenure on earth (Ceballos et al 2017). In a mere few decades we’ve lost a near incomprehensible 60% of monitored vertebrate species per 1970 levels (WWF 2018), and this does not even include the deaths of over 55,000,000,000 land-based animals per year (Mitchell 2011: 38) via industrial factory farming. What makes all of this unprecedented is that this is the first time in the earth’s history that a single *species* has wrought such widespread and destabilizing impacts. Though, one must remain aware that the term ‘Anthropocene’ risks concealing the common yet widely differential degrees of culpability for the present predicament - consider the wildly disproportionate ecological footprints of the world’s 42 wealthiest individuals

in comparison with those of the poorest 3.7 billion (Piketty & Chancel 2015; Hubacek et al 2017). The current era of socio-ecological disintegration which threatens to rewrite geographic boundaries, eradicate a significant portion of the earth's biotic life, and otherwise portends a future beset by instability and uncertainty is also one laden with paradoxes. The aforementioned crises stem from runaway human agency which has, in turn, engendered often violent retaliations by non-humans who no longer consent to being treated as mere means to human ends, and whose responses belie notions of humans as the dominant earth movers (Latour 2004: 156).

It is increasingly evident that fundamental transformations are needed not only in our growth-oriented socioeconomic systems but, crucially, longstanding anthropocentric worldviews that predominate largely in Western capitalist societies. Thus, many suggest the need for a radical rethink of the longstanding denial of non-human agency rooted in the Cartesian reduction of non-human animals to things acted upon, as not *seeing* but merely 'seen' by human subjects (Derrida & Wills 2002: 383), and the positing of (animal) otherness as lack or inferiority (Plumwood 2002). Even the arguably well-intentioned earth stewardship ethos (Heidegger 1962) paves the way for other beings' very existence to "hang on the thread of our attention" (Latour in Sheridan & Law, 1988: 193; Harman 2009). This article utilizes post-humanist (Taylor 2012; Braidotti 2013) and post-anthropocentric (Ferrando 2016) scholarship as a theoretical lens for critically assessing the ecological worldviews, modes of human-animal-nature relationality and action motivators of those at the front lines of ecological defense: radical environmental activists (henceforth REA's). This is done through qualitative analyses of data in the form of organizational documents and semi-structured interviews with REA's from groups such as Earth First! (EF!), Sea Shepherd (SSCS) and the Hambacher Forst (HF) occupation in Western Germany. Overarching research queries included: precisely what is the nature and extent of REAs' ethical valuation of earth others? How do they construct nonhuman 'otherness'? The article goes on to posit that, though broadly categorizable as embodiments of a 'post-anthropocentric' paradigm shift' (Ferrando 2016) in their staunch repudiations of human exceptionalism, general avowal of a flat ontology wherein no entities enjoy a superior status and acknowledgment of non-human agency (Latour 2004), and calls

for more egalitarian relations with earth others devoid of domination (Plumwood 2003), variations abound. Hierarchical value classifications occasionally resurface on the basis of possession of certain characteristics- namely ecological function, sentience, and intelligence. Overall, however, many REA's not only extend bounds of ethical valuation well beyond their traditional remit but, crucially, consistently reflect upon and strive to deconstruct rigid dichotomies around who counts as an ethical subject. Drawing in particular on Latour (2004; 2018), Derrida (2002; 2016) and Plumwood's (2002; 2003; 2010) varied yet related work on boundary deconstruction and anti-hierarchical approaches to human-animal-nature relations, the article concludes with a discussion of core themes elicited from the data and reflections on how we might build more ethical modes of human-animal-nature relationality amid the human and more-than-human entanglements that characterise the Anthropocene. The singular orientations exhibited by REA's and the paradigmatic transformations that they call for appear especially pertinent amidst the present era of widespread climate and ecological breakdown, hence their value as subjects of investigation.

### **Desperate Times, Desperate Measures? Enter Radical Environmentalism**

In response to the increasingly urgent socio-ecological perturbations that mark the Anthropocene, from the early 1980s onwards a bifurcation point emerged within Western environmental movements. Many of the large, bureaucratic 'lobbying' environmental movement organisations (EMOs) such as Greenpeace tended to embrace liberal democratic restraints on capitalism (i.e., promoting green consumption) and technological interventions as sufficient strategies for curbing ecological decline. However, deeply disillusioned with such reformist measures, 'political ecologist' or radical environmental groups (Rootes 2004) sought to engage in extra-parliamentary political struggles aimed at initiating profound cultural, socioeconomic, structural and especially onto- epistemological (with regards to more-than-human life) transformations in contemporary capitalist societies. In service of these aims, and driven by their mounting desperation with the declining state of the biosphere, REA's have become notorious for their use of direct-action tactics- tree sit-ins, road blockades, ship-

ramming, and 'ecotage', or the sabotage of environmentally destructive equipment and property- as last lines of defense for stemming ecological decline (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni & Bondaroff 2014) by rendering ecologically destructive activities economically non-viable. REAs' also pose onto-ethical challenges to the status quo via their post-anthropocentric (Ferrando 2016) worldviews, wherein they exhibit especially deep kinship bonds with the more-than-human world and even include the latter within their cognitive and affective representations self. Similarly, the field-like 'ecological self' construal (Naess 1986; Bragg 1996) denotes spontaneous and non-rational processes by which one reacts to the wellbeing and interests of others (mammals, insects, and even inorganic nature) as if they were one's own interests, and as though the bounds of the self were extended so as to encompass all components of the biosphere. The ecological self is a component of the eco-philosophy-turned-social-movement that is deep ecology (Naess 1973), which considerably underpins radical environmentalism. Within deep ecology's relational ontology, traditionally anthropocentric notions of a separate and superior

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<sup>3</sup> However, Sea Shepherd have since ceased with their more interventionist campaigns in the Southern Ocean against Japanese whalers due to, among other things, new anti-terrorist legislation in Japan that explicitly targets radical environmental groups, as well as advancements in military grade technology by the Japanese whaling industry.

humanity ‘over yonder’ are largely dismantled in favor of a holistic ‘human-*in*-environment’ worldview that emphasizes the equal and inherent value of all life.

### **Methodological Considerations**

This project aimed in part to attempt to shed light on Latour’s (2011: 75) poignant and timely query concerning why, given the impending doom of climate catastrophe and the collapse of the Earth’s biodiversity, many do not appear to exhibit the sense of urgency warranted. More fundamentally, of interest was the precise nature and extent of REAs’ ‘deep ecological’ or ‘post-anthropocentric’ worldviews, which seemingly compel them to risk life and limb for the protection of the Earth and its myriad inhabitants, the nature of which remains relatively under-investigated (Pellow 2014: 30). Existing literature has laid the essential groundwork by investigating the general parameters, identities, historical trajectories, deep ecological orientations, tactics, and organizational dynamics of such REA groups as Earth First! (Taylor 1991; Lee 1995; Bragg 1996; Ingalsbee 1996; Wall 1999; Marangudakis 2001; Scarce 2016) and Sea Shepherd (Hoek 2010; Nagtzaam 2013; Stuart et al 2013; Cianchi 2015; Woodhouse 2018). Cianchi’s (2015) work has been especially instrumental in shedding light on REA kinship bonds with earth others and their depictions of more-than-human agency. Nevertheless, the nuances regarding their singular worldviews warrant further elucidation, specifically around how they construct (and deconstruct) the ever-shifting and perpetually contested boundary of moral-ethical valuation with regards to nonhuman others: Does it only include beings who are self-aware, intelligent, and otherwise *similar* to humans, or all *sentient* beings? Do they exhibit a biocentric (Agar 1997; Botar 2017) affinity for all *living* entities? Do they extend the same value and consideration to a ‘red tide’ algal bloom as they would a humpback whale (Chiew 2014)?

As the interest was in uncovering the precise nature and extent of REA ecological worldviews and modes of relationality with regards to earth others, and the ‘why’s’ surrounding such singular orientations towards human-animal-nature relationships, qualitative methodologies were deemed most suitable (Braun & Clarke 2006). Semi-structured interviews were utilized as they allow for rich elucidation on behalf of the participants, therefore helping to increase the validity of responses by providing respondents with more room for organizing their answers according to their own frameworks (Aberbach & Rockman 2002: 674). Interviews were conducted with 26 REA’s largely through the use of internet communications technologies (ICT’s) such as Skype due to its suitability for research with ‘difficult-to-reach’ populations concerned with preserving anonymity (Janghorban et al 2014; Alberro 2019). Initial recruitment proceeded via snowball-sampling (Cohen & Arieli 2011) with the help of a gatekeeper- in addition to extensive periods of face-to-face interaction- who assisted in the establishment and maintenance of trust with other activists. Confidentiality of all data and participant identities was ensured through the secure storage of the data on an encrypted drive as well as the use of pseudonyms throughout the coding and analysis process. All data was processed via the NVivo software program (Bazeley & Jackson 2013) and analysed via the foundational analytical method of thematic analysis, or the analysis of themes (patterns of meaning) as they emerge within and across data sets (Braune & Clarke 2006), and guided by a critical post-humanist theoretical framework. Lastly, the use of ICT’s and access facilitated by key gatekeepers allowed for an eclectic assortment of REA’s from an array of national, cultural and gender backgrounds, although the lack of socioeconomic and racial diversity amongst participants constitutes a noted limitation of the present study.

## **Results:**

### ***Delineating REA Ecological Worldviews***

The term ‘post-humanism’ (Taylor 2012; Braidotti 2013) most adequately encapsulates the overarching theme uniting all subsequent variations in REA ontological and ethical orientations towards the nonhuman world. Though it has many strands and genealogical tributaries, at its core post-humanism entails a dissatisfaction and/or rejection of the “two central tenets of humanism”: namely, the belief that humans are the center of the world (i.e., anthropocentrism) and that, as superior rulers of existence, we have the right to subdue, exploit, and/or otherwise reduce the unruly ‘other’ to the status of object (Taylor 2012: 37). Similarly, post-humanism rejects such longstanding assumptions (Heidegger 1962) as that human ways of knowing and being in the world are *essentially* different from and superior to those of nonhumans (Chiew 2014; Plumwood 2002). As will be further elucidated, many REA’s start from such post-humanist premises and further follow along the lines of some post-humanist scholars in problematizing and deconstructing dualistic distinctions between humans and animals (Wolfe 2010) as well as interrogating and reconceptualizing humans’ ethical responsibilities towards nonhuman others (Morton 2010). In particular they often exhibit critical posthuman (Braidotti 2013) modes of relationality that emphasize the multiple interconnections between the human ‘self’ and earth ‘others’, and eschew the ‘perverse form of posthumanism’ found in advanced capitalist systems characterized by hyper-individualism and bio-genetic technological advancements for the commercialization of life itself (7). Nevertheless, as discussed below, staunch rejections of human exceptionalism occasionally morphed into subtle inversions of traditional hierarchies of being with homo sapiens relegated to the very bottom. Moreover, variations abounded in terms of where bounds of valuation are drawn and the underlying rationales for valuing certain entities in relation to others.

*Lingering Traces of Hierarchical Valuation*

Curiously juxtaposed alongside claims of the inherent and equal value of all living organisms were traces of hierarchical value classification, mainly amongst Sea Shepherd (SSCS) participants<sup>1</sup>, around two traits in particular: a species or individual's perceived degree of sentience/intelligence, and the perceived significance of a species' ecological role. For instance, the following are somewhat typical responses in this vein:

*"I said to myself, 'Here we are killing this incredibly intelligent, beautiful, self-aware, sentient being for the purpose of making a weapon meant for the mass extermination of human beings', and that's when it struck me, as a species we're insane. And from that moment on I said I would do everything I could to protect them against us... and I've been fighting against this anthropocentric- dominated culture ever since"* (Captain).

*"I very much value the life of an animal the same as I do that of a person, even though this might bother others. Neither will I value them less but, in principle, the same, though then one would have to see. If I look at it from a biological-conservationist perspective, a whale is far more valuable than a human because whales perform vital ecosystem functions in the seas, which helps maintain phytoplankton populations, and therefore more oxygen. Humans don't produce anything, they destroy"* (Delfin).

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<sup>1</sup> This is likely due in part to the decidedly hierarchical structure of the organization, whereas many other REA groups operate along anarchist principles of horizontal and non-oppressive modes of organization.

Captain specifically references a species or individual animal's perceived level of sentience as a justification for their preservation and ethical consideration. The consequentialist emphasis on sentience (Singer 1995)- or the elusive capacity to be aware of oneself, one's interactions with the surrounding environment and other beings, and to experience pleasurable (happiness) as well as aversive states (pain, fear, etc.) (Broom 2007: 100)- has long been utilized in order to substantiate calls for the ethical treatment of *certain* non-human animals deemed to possess such capabilities. Similarly, Regan ([1986] 2004) notably emphasized animals' advanced cognition and their capacity to be self-aware as essential foundations for their moral considerability and categorization as rights-bearing individuals. Regan's ([1986] 2004) definition of 'subjects of a life', though at times expansive in including individuals who have desires and perceptions, similarly prioritizes vague- and often human-centered- criteria such as the capacity to have beliefs, a sense of the future, and emotional lives in order for a particular being to count as an inherently valuable and therefore as an ethical subject (187). While such a position undoubtedly serves to enhance empathy for species perceived as 'intelligent'- such as great apes and cetaceans- or even 'sentient', it still evaluates animals' relative ethical worth vis-à-vis the human.

More problematically, this approach allows for the antagonistic 'othering' of beings deemed to lack such characteristics, who are in turn construed as 'lack' in relation to the Master 'human' identity (Plumwood 2002). Moreover, ethical valuation on the basis of arbitrary characteristics such as sentience and intelligence functions as a conditional mode of justice wherein beings are granted rights or consideration on the basis of their possession of 'morally significant characteristics' (Wolfe 1998: 13). Captain calls on others to be concerned for the plight of the whale, exemplar of the charismatic megafauna that have (understandably though not unproblematically) captivated the public imaginary, because they are 'intelligent, beautiful, and self-aware'. However, what of the decimation of arthropods such as the rove beetle, now

critically endangered due to extensive land-use changes in its native habitat in the Portuguese Azores? (IUCN 2018). Thus, it can be argued that the aforementioned, though underpinning impressive direct-action feats for the preservation of highly endangered megafauna, is still infused by aesthetic-based valuation (Rolston 2002) and harbors inklings of an ‘ontology predicated on affection for sameness’ (Sargisson 2000). The lack of explicit appreciation of singular otherness *as such* fails to entirely deconstruct entrenched anthropocentric paradigms that structure Self/other relations along antagonistic lines (Sargisson 2000: 132; Bookchin 2005; Gruen 2015).

### *Misanthropic Inversions of Traditional Human-Animal Hierarchies*

The excerpt above by Delfin represents another relatively common orientation amongst REA’s: hierarchical valuations predicated on a particular species’ ecological function. Thus, some not only subverted but, in their deep dismay over the deleterious impacts of human activities on other species and the natural world, invoked a misanthropic inversion of the traditional hierarchy of being with humans typically positioned far above non-human life (Nee 2005). At worst, humans were depicted as a hazardous blight upon the earth, wherein some REA’s surmised that we are not needed for the sustained viability of the planet, that in fact we are the ones who are wholly dependent upon innumerable other species for our survival, and that the earth would likely greatly benefit from our absence or at least a substantial reduction in our numbers. On the other hand, numerous other species- photosynthetic organisms such as phytoplankton and trees, keystone species such as sharks, and pollinators- are deemed vital for the continuity of life on Earth and are therefore particularly cherished. These participants’ misanthropic inversions of the human-animal hierarchy seem to largely stem from a complex amalgamation of negative emotions such as grief and resentment at the utter scale of loss- of more-than-human species, biospheric integrity, a viable ‘future’- that characterizes the

Anthropocene (van Dooren 2014; Pike 2016; Head 2016). Moreover, such orientations might further stem from what Amis (2001) has referred to as ‘species shame’ resulting from our perceived culpability in contemporary ecological breakdown. Pike (2016) applies this concept in the context of her work with REA’s in the US, denoting feelings that we are culpable to varying degrees for what is taking place, and thus that the earth and other species might indeed thrive in a world without us:

*“I’d be personally glad if the human species ended. So, I guess that doesn’t make me particularly anthropocentric. I think the human species is the most violent species that has ever existed...our violence towards other species goes beyond anything that any other species is capable of. You know, 70 billion land animals and trillions of fish every year. So, I think it would be a significant net benefit to the world if the human species ended tomorrow” (Meadow).*

*“...if it came down to choosing between a human and a non-human species as far as, like, one-versus-other survival, I would always, always choose the non-human species. I mean, I don’t hold one more valuable than the other, and in some ways I would hold a human life slightly less because, from a survival standpoint, I’m not necessary; I’m part of the problem just by living in the modern world” (Warrior).*

In these examples, profound disillusionment with the human enterprise hasn’t to do with perceived inferiority of our ecological function per se but more from shame over the sheer extent of harm perpetrated by us onto other species and the earth system. Both Meadow (EF!) and Warrior (SSCS) as life-long REA’s have repeated first-hand experiences of the death and destruction of cherished earth kin constituting the sixth mass extinction (Ceballos et al 2017), which only continues to gather momentum. Such ‘interspecies genocide’ (Cafaro 2015),

resulting largely from our continuous expansion and appropriation of ever larger portions of the globe for ourselves while leaving increasingly little for others, is something that REA's have come to deeply resent. Hence, for Meadow the best thing to do *for the benefit of all* (presumably humans as well) is a wholesale eradication of the wayward *homo sapiens* so that other species and the earth itself might regain their capacities to flourish. However, such sentiments, like the former which paved the way for the exclusion from moral-ethical concern of organisms deemed ecologically deleterious or insignificant, still exhibit traces of hierarchical valuation wherein humans are posited as *less than* other species. Moreover, the pitting of a destructive humanity and artificial social world against 'nature' denies their entanglement and the need for a progressive composition of our common world (Latour 2004: 18). Similarly, some participants' references to an objective 'natural law' as that which will once and for all silence and impose restraint upon a rogue humanity is redolent of the modernist distribution of roles between "the necessity of things [Nature] and the liberty of subjects [humans], either to chasten nature and elevate man, or to glorify nature and belittle man" (Latour, 2004: 81). Thus, traces of Western conceptions of an ontological hyper-separation between 'Nature' and the 'human/social' realm persist (Plumwood 1991; 2002), even though often only implicitly.

### ***Deconstructing Hierarchies***

Despite the occasional resurfacing of hierarchical valuation, many REA's- in the post-humanist tradition of skepticism towards and critique of pure categorizations and rigid dualisms that override the hybrid entanglements that constitute reality (Latour 2004)- sought to deconstruct hierarchical and dualistic classifications. Jellyfish and Delfin, for instance, are two long-standing Sea Shepherd activists who eloquently problematize the very notion that there is a separation between 'human' and 'animal':

*“For some reason we’ve separated the world into these three spheres where there’s nature, there’s animals, and there’s us, and it’s one of the most arrogant, kind of, separations in the world...So I think we need to reinvent that [notions of human separateness from the natural world] ...we are animals” (Jellyfish).*

*“...one of the biggest issues we have as humans is that we deny that we are animals. It’s always mankind and the animals, and no; we are animals” (Delfin).*

Jellyfish emphasizes that the rigid hyper-separation between humans and animals (Plumwood 2002; 2010) is a myth and that, in fact, we *are* animals. What’s more, this hyper-separation is ontologically inaccurate; the purportedly sovereign ‘Human Self’ is *always already* a ‘We’, constituted as we are by the microorganisms in our gut that aid digestion and compose part of our skin as the very barrier differentiating the inside (*oikos*) of the ‘human subject’ from the outside, as well as the hundreds of thousands of fragments of ancient viral DNA mixed with our own (Emerman & Malik 2010). No self, human or otherwise, is ever wholly self-contained; rather, we are thoroughly and perennially constituted by our relations with others (Morton 2010). Elsewhere, Warrior rejects the Heideggerian (1962) call for humans to be as stewards over the rest of creation, instead emphasizing that we should conceive of ourselves as not ‘lords over the universe’ and other species but as ‘one part of the cosmos as anything else’. As denoted previously, the stewardship approach, though arguably well-intentioned and perhaps an improvement upon more reductive modes of being that would frame the more-than-human world as no more than mere resource for unhindered human exploitation, still amounts to a hierarchical positioning of humans as the privileged shepherds of being (Latour 1988). Similarly, Horse, a veteran EF! activist, ruminates on the arrogance of human exceptionalism:

*“I went out for a walk with some friends today, and we came across a massive tree that had fallen down, and we were talking about that saying, you know, that, ‘If a tree falls in a forest does it make a sound if nobody’s around to hear it?’ And my friend sort of said, ‘You know, that’s just so bloody arrogant to think that things only happen if humans are there to perceive them.’ And it’s like, yeah, that’s exactly where I come from on that, you know. Why do we always put ourselves at the center of these things?”*  
*(Horse).*

Horse is critiquing the anthropocentric reduction of non-human others to mute, lifeless and *unseeing* objects that are merely *seen* by human subjects (Derrida & Wills 2002: 383), lacking any agency or power to shape phenomena on their own (Latour 1988; 1991; 2004) and in need of a human observer to legitimize and lend meaning to their existence. Crucially, she alludes to the notion that more-than-human ways of being-in-the-world are undoubtedly different from ours yet every bit as meaningful. All REA’s discussed thus far as well as subsequently exhibited post-anthropocentric worldviews (Ferrando 2016) and regarded the more-than-human world not as means but as an end in itself (Kant 2002)<sup>2</sup>, despite variations surrounding conceptions of who ‘matters’ and why. Below, however, REA’s exhibiting more biocentric worldviews and modes of relationality are explored, wherein boundaries are not only further extended but critically reflected upon and in some instances dismantled altogether.

*‘All Life Really Should Matter’*

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<sup>2</sup> Kant in traditionally anthropocentric fashion regarded only *rational* beings as worthy of being treated as ends in themselves; non-rational beings (i.e., animals) had only “relative worth, as means, and are therefore called *things*” (Kant & Schneewind 2002: 496).

Many REA's exhibit ecological worldviews which value earth others for far more than their mere behavioral, cognitive, aesthetic, or any other characteristics arbitrarily deemed of moral significance. Such activists exhibit variations of biocentric (Agar 1997; Botar 2017) environmental ethicists' arguably more expansive- though equally difficult to delineate- valuations of not merely vertebrate or sentient organisms but *life itself*. However, even here one can detect much ambiguity and contention amongst participants around what exactly constitutes 'life', wherein some even contemplated the degree to which inorganic matter might be similarly valued. For instance, Jellyfish and Badger provide sophisticated accounts of who/what should matter and why:

*"when I was on the SS ship and we were pulling up nets, there were jellyfish in the nets. Now, jellyfish aren't sentient, as far as I'm aware, and I was pulling them out and I cared a lot about whether that jellyfish was alive or not, and I was kind of rescuing jellyfish. Now for me, that's kind of, like, 'why would I rescue something that's not sentient?' But, it's alive, and so I feel like, even if I don't recognize it as sentient, perhaps it is, and perhaps there's something I can't see. We by no means have the senses of a god that can tell what is sentient and what isn't, but...all life really should matter" (Jellyfish).*

*"we've become very nervous-system-[focused]. Like, a lot of Animal Rights folk won't give credence or any time to any kind of theorizing or philosophizing, or experiential musings on the fact that plants, trees, etc. might have a degree of being, or sentience and intelligence that we can't comprehend as yet because they lack a central nervous system, in the same way that a lot of vegetarians will say, 'Oh no, it's alright to eat fish because fish can't feel pain', kind of malarky. And again, it's this grading of superiority" (Badger).*

Jellyfish and Badger are articulating a biocentric (Agar 1997) ethic wherein merely being alive and possessing agency constitute sufficient grounds for ethical consideration, and crucially, wherein no hierarchies are admitted between life forms. Animals such as jellyfish are ideal candidates for testing the parameters of an environmental ethic; as ancient, gelatinous invertebrates lacking a stomach, intestines, lungs, and even a face (Levinas 1985), a diffuse network of neurons in place of a brain, and possessing among the most rudimentary nervous systems known amongst multicellular organisms, few beings are less ‘human-like’ in their other-worldly appearance and constitution. Thus, they thoroughly challenge general conceptualizations of what classifies as an ‘animal’, and as such, what/whom should warrant moral-ethical consideration. Participants Jellyfish and Badger further problematize the (anthropocentric) assumption that life can be defined by what humans know, denoting our limited epistemological capacities to even define such elusive concepts as sentience and life. We likely will never know what it’s like to be a bat (Nagel 1987), or whether a bat can dream, think, and experience joy like us, but this doesn’t mean that their experiences are any less meaningful or valuable than our own. In other words, difference need not equate to less than (Plumwood 2002).

One intriguing and underexplored query with discussions of life-based ethics and environmental politics more generally is, by what mechanism does one decide whose interests should be prioritized in a given situation if all living beings are valued equally? How to negotiate conflicting interests amongst multiplicities of different beings? Meadow ruminates on the internal struggles he faces with regards to mosquitoes, who, like other ‘vermin’ and ‘pests’, often invoke feelings of repugnance and detestation. Perhaps more than most other non-human animals, mosquitoes are often relegated to the realm of the absolute, external, vilified *other*. They are not merely unacknowledged as ethical subjects but actively despised

and exterminated or, as with more recent developments, utilized as experimental subjects of annihilation via genetic engineering (Kyrou et al 2018). Meadow notes:

*“of course, I do inhabit a human body...like, I do find mosquitoes problematic, and I will instinctively swipe at them to get them away from me, and then I’ll go, ‘Oh!’ and try to catch them in a glass jar and throw them out the window”.*

Meadow’s sudden realization and consequent interest in the mosquito’s wellbeing provokes further reflection: “I’d like to sit still and let a mosquito just bite me and take my blood. It’s like, ‘Oh, poor little thing’. *I see its impulse for life*”. The use of the phrase ‘impulse for life’, akin to intentionality, is redolent of the deep ecological use of the Spinozan concept of conatus, an allusion to the motivational force or substance that purportedly compels all life towards self-actualization (Naess 1979). Though Meadow is thoroughly aware of the boundaries delineating his ‘Self’ and the ‘other’, his concern for the mosquito’s interests and wellbeing evokes conflict with concerns for his own wellbeing, to the extent that he actively strives towards ensuring that the former’s aren’t permanently hindered. A respect for agentic earth others’ interests in flourishing and wellbeing appears to exert a similarly powerful ethical pull on Thunder, a Sea Shepherd ship captain, for whom such proclivities- rather than the capacity for pain or pleasure- are of paramount ethical significance:

*“...we tend to get overly philosophical about things, like, about, ‘Do animals have souls?’ and, like, ‘What is pain?’ and ‘How do you measure pain?’ Everything living, whether it’s a tree, or we’re talking about a fish, or whether we’re talking about you or me, if given the choice between living or dying, we choose to live. Every animal will avoid danger or threats to their lives. Trees will grow, like, out of danger zones.*

*So, that clearly shows that each one of these individuals has an interest in wellbeing, and because they have an interest in wellbeing, we should respect that interest”.*

The aforementioned constitute further intriguing examples of activist attempts at grappling with and resolving tensions surrounding boundary constructions and deconstructions, and crucially tensions surrounding who/what they deem to matter and *why*. Meadow and Badger remark on what they perceive to be a fundamental drawback of traditional animal rights and environmental activists’ emphases on ‘large’ mammals while neglecting smaller creatures such as insects and other invertebrates. Meadow’s ruminations on the mosquito, and Jellyfish and Thunder’s exhortations that *life itself* (presumably not only sentient animals but all carbon-based and water-dependent entities including plants, fungi, bacteria, and potentially even ‘borderline cases’ such as viruses) should serve as the basis of moral consideration and valuation rather than a certain set of characteristics arbitrarily deemed of significance by humans, are based on the biocentric notion that life in its myriad manifestations exhibits a propensity towards flourishing that should be respected. Stonehenge, though she has only been involved in radical environmental activism for a few years, has already engaged in astonishing direct-action feats as part of wider mobilizations with Extinction Rebellion and EF!, including a 3-day occupation of a site home to an ancient tree under threat by pro-development forces. She sheds further light on the ethical paucity of rigid boundary delineations detected occasionally in environmental and animal rights discourses, which can result in a callous disregard for non-animal beings:

*“this is where, you know, other people within the activist circle have differences with me, in that I want some acknowledgment and engagement with the life in a stock of corn, where we recognize that in taking its life for us to sustain ourselves, that there is something given back...I can’t get on board that veganism is the answer to save us,*

*because we have done the same in our agricultural techniques of poisoning the very things that we see as sustenance- the vegetables and corns and grains that we grow have been tortured and poisoned to grow the way they do. Not cultivated and nurtured in the places they spring up, but forced to grow in places they were never meant to grow, on great, vast, water-sucking...you know, we've done the same to the life of flora that we have done to our animals”.*

Stonehenge further directs our gaze towards a class of earth others who are often overlooked: plants; and in other instances she crosses the animate/inanimate divide and refers to stones as ‘beings’, refuting the Heideggerian (1995) designation of stones as wordless, animals as poor in world, and humans as the privileged world-formers. For Gruen (2015), empathic entanglement and engagement can only occur with beings whose life-worlds we can imagine (a line that she draws at vertebrate life). Plumwood (1993: 193), on the other hand-like Stonehenge- advocates a philosophical animism that sees both the sentient and more-than-sentient world as a wellspring of agency and intentionality, and with whom we can and should attempt to cultivate mutual empathic interchanges despite the difficulties laden therein. To do so is not necessarily to effect a ‘narcissistic projection’ of our own interests and desires onto the ‘other’ (Gruen 2009: 32), though of course this risk always remains to some degree and can at least be partially overcome by attention to the specific context in which ethical relations are situated. Jellyfish and Stonehenge’s empathetic encounters with non-vertebrate and non-animal life forms would seem to support Plumwood’s (1993) position, suggesting that there is much scope for broadening existing conceptions of empathy and human-animal-nature relationality.

*‘Valuing Life in Ecosystems, and Even in Stars’*

One participant entertained vital materialist (Bennett 2009) notions of *matter itself* (albeit, organic matter) as a seat of valuation:

*“...you could say I live a bit in two worlds, and this other world consists of living more than one lifetime, and valuing life in itself, life in plants, life in animals, life in ecosystems or even in stars, or like, matter that exists. And with all of my reflections, what I see is something more natural, like organic value, in comparison to artificial inventions- plastics, stone, concrete, whatever. Like, I’m clearly in favour of the more organic nature out there, and, like, when I see how the one is destroying the other, that’s where my wish to resist comes into existence”*  
*(Forest).*

In many of the excerpts in preceding sections, the participants don’t deconstruct dualism *per se* but merely extend ethics to include a wider class of entities: all that is *living* and/or exhibits purposiveness (Plumwood 2003), and as such the structural underpinnings of antagonistic portrayals of otherness remain. However, although predicated on yet another dualistic construct- that between the organic and inorganic- and therefore redolent of the modern consigning of certain beings or forces to the realm of an objective ‘Nature’ while artificial ‘human’ forces are consigned to the ‘Social’ (Latour 2004), Forest’s (HF) ruminations constitute a notable attempt at pushing the sphere of moral consideration into realms hitherto rarely trodden in traditional environmentalist and animal rights discourses. This paves the way for theorizing ethical relationality beyond individual species or even life itself but rather centered around an elusive, living ‘matter’ (Bennett 2009) and diffuse agency (Latour 2004) extending from viruses to whales and even stellar bodies; though of course, establishing and navigating ethico-political relations with these entities would be a decidedly complex (and messy) endeavor. The aforementioned excerpts seem to suggest the presence of a unique onto-ethical orientation that often goes beyond mere empathy predicated on sameness in its attempts

to include radical difference (Sargisson 2000: 146). In shifting the ethical focus to other entities such as jellyfish, mosquitoes and even matter itself, REA's create the space for challenging hierarchical orderings of significance that have traditionally underpinned conceptualizations of 'Nature' and help to further more inclusive conceptualizations of ethics and the cosmos (Latour 2004).

***Discussion:***

*Towards a Post-Anthropocentric Sensibility for the Anthropocene*

REA conceptualizations and modes of relationality with regards to the more-than-human world, though variegated and occasionally laced with hierarchical and dualistic modes of valuation, gesture towards potentially more harmonious ways of relating to earth others. Far more than previous environmental movement incarnations, they emphasize the need to launch a thorough-going disavowal of the Western humanist tradition of denying humans' ethico-political responsibilities to non-humans in light of the purportedly insurmountable ontological divide between them (Plumwood 2002; Latour 2004). Particularly noteworthy are the depths of REA kinship bonds with other species and the wider natural world, which compel them 'into spaces of absolute sacrifice' (Derrida 2016: 154) in order to ensure the continuity of the latter. For them, as for van Dooren (2014: 27), extinction entails the loss not of isolated individuals or species but of 'embodied intergenerational achievements' situated in complex co-evolutionary spatial-temporalities that extend from their past descendants on through the now and towards futures of infinite potentiality and diversity. This is also why the sixth mass extinction weighs so heavily on REA's, while the widespread loss of non-human lifeforms rarely registers as a phenomenon of profound ethical significance for most of the world's

multitudes. While an in-depth discussion of the myriad potential factors at play in this is beyond the scope of this paper, the following observation by Latour (et al 2018) points to a response:

“When you have to defend your own life or goods you don’t need a long time to be convinced by an argument, you just do it. Why is this not the case when you defend your Earth? Because you don’t own it. It is outside you. The only question is figuring out how we can shift this from outside to inside; the former being synonymous with passivity, and the latter with energy and mobilization” (358)

REA kinship bonds with earth others are not external to but co-constitutive of them, so that concern for the latter’s wellbeing appears to have been internalized to the extent that it fuels REAs’ fervent mobilizations on their behalf. REA’s seem to feel so emotionally and socially ‘at stake’ in the lives of these earth kin that their loss is experienced as no less than a ‘severing of a social bond’ (van Dooren 2014: 136). Such close-knit ties in turn translate into powerful emotional and physiological experiences of grief when they are destroyed (Head 2016; Cunsolo & Ellis 2018), emotions that REA’s consistently grapple with. Van Dooren (2014) enquires: “What does it mean that, in this time of incredible loss, there is so little public (and perhaps also private) mourning for extinctions?” (140). He suggests by way of a response that at the core of this pervasive apathy is an inability to grasp the multiple connections between ourselves and earth others, an orientation that can partially be explained by the still dominant paradigm of human exceptionalism (van Dooren 2014: 141; Plumwood 2009). Lacking such human-exceptionalist views and bolstered by high valuation of- and a sense of intimate entanglement with- earth others, REA’s feel compelled to go to extraordinary lengths to prevent their further decline. In applying post-humanist philosophy as a lens for making sense of REA worldviews and mobilizations in response to Anthropocene crises, this article has

sought to reveal and critically assess the nuances of an emerging post-anthropocentric sensibility and its practical effects in the form of contemporary REA mobilizations.

More harmonious modes of human-animal-nature relationality would not be devoid of an ‘obliteration of distinction’ (Plumwood 2002: 177; Derrida & Wills 2002) but rather celebrate ‘radical Otherness’. That is, an approach to difference that neither reduces it nor seeks to subsume it within the same ‘Self’ (Sargisson 2000: 137) but is instead predicated on a unity *through* diverse multiplicities (Bookchin 2005) of beings- beetles, orcas, humans, California redwoods, ad infinitum. Perhaps it’d be helpful in this respect to recall Derrida’s apt reference to the (animal) other as an unsubstitutable singularity that always regards us, as we do it, from the point of view of an ‘absolute other’ that is always to a degree inaccessible (Derrida & Wills 2002: 381). This is the very nature of alterity as articulated by Plumwood (2002), a conception of otherness and singularity that moves beyond rigid binaries of Self/other, Human/animal, Male/female, Culture/Nature, etc. and wherein, crucially, difference as such is valued and does not equate to ‘less than’. From this standpoint, we can begin to co-construct radically new ways of relating to earth kin, namely modes that entail shifts away from ontologies of separation and epistemologies of domination towards dialogical interactions and partnerships predicated on negotiation (Plumwood 2010: 123; Latour 2018). REA’s as well as post-humanist scholars such as Plumwood (2002; 2010), Latour (2004; 2011; 2018) and Derrida (2002; 2016) remind us of the ever-present need to be critical of boundary delineations, of what they include and, crucially, what they leave out, and that ethics requires us to treat the ‘other’ as an irreducible singularity who is always with us rather than for us.

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