

I'm Conscious of Time: Pinhole Vignettes of Human Co-Existence in the Anthropocene

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Abstract

This paper explores the practice of hospitality in the context of human-induced climate change. In this new and uncertain geological era, we will be required to re-examine our reciprocity with the earth and our fellow humans. We have over-farmed and over-extracted. Our voraciousness has left the soil close to exhaustion with concerns expressed that we have a finite number of harvests left. We have more mouths to feed than ever, villages are drowning under rising seas and our activities have initiated a mass extinction of the species with whom we share the earth. The grief surrounding this crisis is complex because we do not yet know or fully understand the scale of its impact. Michael Cronin describes climate change as a “hyper object” (2017, 2). We can never see it all at once although we might occasionally feel the burden of its inconceivable weight. I would like to perforate this grief with pinhole vignettes of human co-existence. I would like to present a case for our possessing the capacity to be better hosts and guests; to one another and to the earth. I would like to commit to memory that there were some important and poetic interruptions in our protectionist greed. We did sometimes allow ourselves momentary indulgences of rich human shared experience. Somewhere there was a collective desire for thoughtful conviviality. This paper is a collection of auto-ethnographical observations recorded in public spaces in Paris during a month-long residency at the Centre Culturel Irlandais, juxtaposed with French continental philosophical theory on hospitality. I will tell you stories about transcendence on the metro, carnal hospitality on the banks of the seine and nocturnal catharsis in the Latin Quarter. These small chronicles are not intended as vindication. They do not contain solutions. They might however give pause for something related to hope that we have an inherent desire to better relate to the earth and those that live on it.

Keywords

Hospitality; Anthropocene; memory; climate grief; conviviality

Seine-ario

I remember them in Paris, using the alcoves by the river as makeshift ballrooms, finding dance partners in strangers. Quite big crowds they formed, between the participants and the onlookers. They waltzed and tangoed. Had they chosen a

different style of music, they could have danced without the complication of touching people they didn't know. This was very different to the euphoria of raves, where social awkwardness was obliterated. In those illicit corners we were neuro-transmitted straight into collective consciousness. Dancing exquisitely alone together. I am reminded of neuroscientist Jill Bolte-Taylor's account of the existential release she experienced while having a stroke:

We are energy beings connected to one another through the consciousness of our right (brain) hemispheres and as one human family. Right here, right now we are brothers and sisters on this planet here to make the world a better place and at this moment, we are perfect, we are whole, and we are beautiful.¹

We longed to erase the boundaries of our bodies; to burrow deeper and deeper into the ritual until we forgot where we ended, and others began. What need had we for language. There was nothing to say or prove, no stake to claim or argument to make. We were beyond identity, social status, or belief systems, wholly detached from plans and strategies. We were atoms and molecules pulsating in warehouses or motorway underpasses. Huddling together for survival like a ball of bees.

In Paris it was different. Here, the dancers overtly pursued physical encounter; the reversible "double sensation" of touching and being touched.² They were self-conscious in their advances, navigating the lumpy terrain from spiny stranger to dance partner. They used open spaces and made a spectacle of their maladroitness, like a clunky mating ritual. They seemed to enjoy having the river there flowing past; an indifferent witness. I noticed them in other places too across the city too, fashioning impromptu Guinguettes in front of fountains and facades of grand opera houses, sometimes even just traffic islands. They piled their possessions and entrusted them to the collective peripheral vision. Emboldened by nocturnal catharsis, agreeing to trust each other with their bodies, to suspend language, to move together, not minding about the light layer of dusty urban grease that coated everyone, not minding about heavy hearts. They knew enough to know that they needed to hold on to each other and that there was nothing much they could say.

Sixty More Harvests

These scenes mesmerise me. I am here in Paris on an artist residency at the Centre Culturel Irlandais. To think and dream. I am also working intensely, programming a food discussion tent for a festival about the climate crisis called "Earth Rising."

¹ Jill Bolte-Taylor, "My Stroke of Insight," filmed February 2008, TED Conference, Monterey, CA, video, 18:25, https://www.ted.com/talks/jill_bolte_taylor_my_stroke_of_insight?language=en

² Richard Kearney and Melissa Fitzpatrick, *Radical Hospitality: From Thought to Action* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), 50.

During an early brainstorming meeting in May the term “sixty more harvests” was used by my fellow programmer. I heard this at the time but psychologically filed it away in the category of Things-I-Can’t-Think-About/Hopefully-Are-Not-Real. It is not until three months later, in Paris, watching people dance by the Seine that I revisit this phrase.

Something in the way strangers are reaching for each other is evoking end days and eliciting tears. This feeling of sadness is likely heightened by my recent professional deep dive into food in the Anthropocene. I root around for the origins and validity of this “sixty more harvests” claim. It emerged in 2014 during a United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization forum but is not attributed to anyone in particular.³ There is another linked quote about how it takes one thousand years to produce an inch of soil. I want to encounter disputing articles and of course I do because that is what life on the internet is like.

One could get hung up on the exact quantity of years left to grow food on earth but what registers with me is the sense of an ending; the certainty that we will not live like this for much longer. In the 450 billion years of the earth, humans have been receiving unconditional hospitality. If this is a year, we humans appeared at 11.35 p.m. on New Year’s Eve.⁴ Eons, eras, epochs. There is a skewed consolation in this deep time. If we humans shrink in relevance, does the damage we cause reduce proportionately? There is a heavy hope that after our gracious host, the earth finally sees the back of us, there will be a process of restoration. A worldwide cleansing and rewilding, with whatever species resilient enough to endure, and without us.

I have underlying grief and guilt and shame, and it weighs heavy, especially now, the more I learn. These are pointless, energy-sucking feelings, I know. I grope around helplessly in the enormity of it. It is a problem that can’t be measured. The term “hyperobject” is used to describe the unfathomable legacy of waste materials, such as polystyrene and plutonium, which will far outlast current social and biological forms.⁵ “Hyperobjects invoke a terror beyond the sublime, cutting deeper than conventional religious fear.” Michael Cronin likens the climate crisis to a hyperobject in its inability to be grasped in totality.⁶ We get glimpses alright. The perpetual stillness of the creatures we are stamping out is hard. We have been bad guests. We have forgotten

³ Chris Arsenault, “Only 60 Years of Farming Left if Soil Degradation Continues,” *Scientific American*, 2014, https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/only-60-years-of-farming-left-if-soil-degradation-continues/?mc_cid=9069e78e5d&mc_eid=ega8ccoaid.

⁴ “The History of Life in a Single Year,” Oxford University, accessed February 7th 2024, <https://learningzone.oumnh.ox.ac.uk/earth-calendar-year>.

⁵ Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 130.

⁶ Michael Cronin, *Eco-Translation: Translation and Ecology in the Age of the Anthropocene*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2017), 2.

the necessary humility of ‘earthlings’, the consciousness of beings who realise that they have only one planet and whose well-being is crucially dependent on the well-being and intelligibility of all the other entities for whom the earth is also home.⁷

We progressed from “energy beings”⁸ to extractivist colonisers. We wiped things out to get more. And we turned on one another with shameful cruelty over things that won’t have mattered a damn in the end. Yes, we were bad.

Glitches

It wasn’t everyone however, and it wasn’t all the time. There are those that oppose the term, Anthropocene on the grounds that it holds all of humanity accountable for the damage done.⁹ This is particularly objectionable to indigenous communities who do not generally drive fossil fuel economy or practice intensive agriculture and are not being consulted for their valuable insight now in the strategizing discourse.¹⁰ In considering the aftermath of our species and our repugnant legacy, it seems important to commit it to memory that there were some redeeming features. I do not mean to defend or excuse us. That would be unthinkable crass. Perhaps my motivation is more to add a layer of complexity to the detritus we will leave in our wake; an appendage to the polystyrene artefacts. There was dreadful harm caused, yes, but this dark process was punctuated by some extraordinarily beautiful glitches. There were split second flashes of light; moments of solace, of connection, of pure love. I believe that these ballroom dancers in Paris are creating such a glitch.

Hosts and Guests

I need different information. So, I embark on an expedition to the François-Mitterrand branch of the National Library of France. This proves to be quite the quest. It involves a hot sticky climb up a mountain of concrete steps up and over a sunken forest. There are four glass towers shaped like open books, but they appear to be vacant. I can see down into rooms inhabited by calm slow-moving people. There are countless entrances but none of the doors open. When I eventually cross the threshold and make a case for the research I wish to undertake, they tell me it is the wrong time of day for that kind of research. My frustration escalates and draws the attention of one of the librarians who overrides the original naysayer and secures

⁷ Cronin, 5.

⁸ Bolte-Taylor, “My Stroke of Insight.”

⁹ Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg, “The geology of mankind? A critique of the Anthropocene narrative”, *The Anthropocene Review* 1, no. 1 (April 2014): 63.

¹⁰ Zoe Todd, “Indigenizing the Anthropocene,” in *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, ed. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 245.

me a reading card. The elongated escalator down to the research floor does not function and nor does the lift. You have to really, really want information. The research floor has an enchanting separateness to it, with textured concrete walls, rusty red carpets, lustrous lamplight and the reassurance of old books.

I want to understand why strangers are holding on to each other in the streets. I didn't say this at the reception. A complex database search ensues. It takes some days to form my pile of books. I decide to approach this as a manifestation of hospitality because it involves strangers and risk (and because I like hospitality). I begin with Luce Irigaray who looks at the dramaturgy of meeting strangers and positions us humans as guests in nature. Her portrayal of hospitality as coexistence, with all humans as children of nature seems a good jumping off point.¹¹ In considering the use of cultural constraints we impose upon each other, she uses the analogy of a chessboard "in whose frames we apparently can move, but without our movements being really free".¹² I think of my dancers, elegantly softening the corners of these frames. Language forms part of this "culturally constructed grid" and she strongly advocates its omission: "The first word that has to be said to each other by way of welcome is our capacity for remaining silent".¹³ This wordlessness is ringing a bell. My dancers by the river are operating independently of verbal exchange.

In a recent publication linking hospitality to the climate crisis, Richard Kearney identifies a critical moment in the process of reconciliation:

...in the step toward a higher poetics of pardon there comes a point where narrative exchange - of histories, traditions, confessions, testimonies - often needs to be supplemented by an exchange of physical gestures, a point where narrative hospitality calls for carnal hospitality: where the textual solicits the tactile, where word gives way to touch.¹⁴

This phenomenon, of strangers holding one another in the middle of the city, this timely discarding of words, is telling us something.

Out of courtesy, I check in with Derrida. There is a poignant tension in the interaction of these dancers that is reminding me of the "insoluble antinomy" between the law of hospitality and the laws of society discussed in *Step of Hospitality/ No Hospitality*.¹⁵ Derrida is arguing that the law of hospitality, that is to give without asking, is unfeasible in our daily lives. I am looking to poke holes in this

¹¹ Luce Irigaray, 'Towards a Mutual Hospitality,' in *The Conditions of Hospitality- Ethics, Politics, and Aesthetics on the Threshold of the Possible*, ed. Thomas Claviez (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 42.

¹² Irigaray, 43

¹³ Irigaray, 48

¹⁴ Kearney and Fitzpatrick, 49.

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000)

claim based on what I have seen unfold in these informal ballrooms: unexpected, ill-advised trust in the stranger. These meetings require a relinquishing of suspicion and require participants to revert to open-hearted earthlings, cuddling together.

Derrida's absolutism begins to grate on me. After some sighs and eye rolls, I step out of the reading room and wander a little through the strange underground conservatory. I visit the small cafeteria and sit briefly, watching chic French intellectuals flirting in low voices over tiny one-euro cups of coffee. I imagine Derrida sitting here next to me, in his 1980's tweed coat era, arguing softly, us whispering to one another about unconditional welcome. "Enter quickly for I am afraid of my happiness."¹⁶ I am familiar with my proclivity towards erotic daydreams in libraries, but Derrida's cameo is amusing and unexpected. Paris must be getting to me.

Pockets

In Place St Suplice one warm Wednesday evening I spot a small clump of people next to the fountain moving slowly to scratchy Kurt Weill songs. Over my shoulder a group of military policemen with assault rifles, perplexingly wet behind the ears, stand next to their armoured vans. They are not actively policing us but nor are they softened by the scene. The music is carried their way in whisps across the heavy air but does not penetrate the shield of post-pubescent bravado that has formed around them. "Speak low, darling speak low..." They do not yield. The dancers perhaps register as oversized, animate pieces of litter. A young man appears nearby. He lets down his bag and removes his hoody to reveal a makeshift Superman costume. He begins to pace rapidly, dissecting the square over and over, spitting out curses to everyone or no one. He is thoroughly unselfconscious. He has come here to this grand Parisien square perform this job of work.

I notice my strange relief as I witness this display. To me the severity of anger is utterly appropriate. I am thinking of my shame and guilt and imagine us both trundling along on our respective grief journeys. I have heard of people meeting to perform collective *caoineadh* or keening for the earth.¹⁷ There is something to be said for feeling awful in the company of others who are also feeling awful. I feel tied to him, this fellow human, responsible even. I have his anger and his grief, but I still know how to hide it. I am a better liar.

¹⁶ Derrida and Dufourmantelle, 131

¹⁷ Marion Caulfield, *Caoineadh Dúlra: An Evening Exploring Caoineadh and Climate Grief*, event Aughakillymaude Centre, Co. Fermanagh October 15th, 2023, <https://visualartists.ie/events/event-an-evening-exploring-caoineadh-and-climate-grief-at-aughakillymaude-centre/>.

Through the performance of this ritual, this individual is causing a shift in the evening air. He is charging the atmosphere. He is forming what Kathleen Stewart refers to as a “pocket”.¹⁸ This “atmospheric attunement”¹⁹ is pulling the senses into alert. “There’s a pause, a temporal suspension animated by the sense that something is coming into existence”.²⁰ Spectators have become active participants in a potential situation. We have entered each other’s lives. The military police are now standing upright. In an effort to shrink the spectacle and diffuse the charge, I leave.

A non-allergic reaction

On the metro a man is moving unpredictably around the carriage. His twitching body is accusing the space around it, unhinged limbs stabbing indiscriminately, like an agile juggernaut. Those seated nearby are mindful of his orbit; our receptors go on extra high alert when another man in his early twenties wearing sunglasses, headphones and his hood pulled over his baseball cap, steps onto the train trespasses unwittingly into his arena. We are worried about the impact of this new spatial intrusion. We are not angling for an altercation. The newcomer is remarkable in his response to the pointy advances of the contortionist. He meets the scene without defence, unflinching. He allows space for the unpredictable jabs at the air next to him. His willingness to remain within the unstable orbit is commendable. It communicates a profound, wordless empathy which moves me, and I find that I am crying.

Here we are – humans going from one place to another, coming asunder in public and there are those willing to receive our anguish. This man’s acceptance of the unwieldy other echoes the unambiguous position of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas for whom “hospitality does not start with fear of the Other... it begins even before fear arises; it starts with the I who is uniquely chosen – the chosen one – to be host to the Other.”²¹ In Levinas’ own words, “the relation with the Other is a non-allergic relation.”²² These humans concern each other.

I feel suffering and love on this metro, it is palpable, and it is connecting us fleetingly. Another stop. More people enter the arena, and more again. The “pocket” has evaporated. The bomb is diffused. There is a collective sense of relief. I lose sight of the proceedings but glimpse some variation of a handshake between the two men.

¹⁸ Kathleen Stewart, “Atmospheric Attunements,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29, no. 3 (June 2011): 445.

¹⁹ Stewart, 445.

²⁰ Stewart, 446.

²¹ Kim Meijer van Wijk, “Levinas – Hospitality and the Feminine Other, in *The Routledge Handbook of Hospitality Studies*, ed. Conrad Lashley (Oxford: Routledge, 2017), 47.

²² Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1968), 51.

“Instead of reaching for a word, one offers one’s hand. The fist unfurls into an open palm.”²³ I leave the train and climb the steps up to the street.

Earthlings

It’s Friday evening and it occurs to me that I am ovulating. There is a heaviness in my right side. I go the mirror and lift my dress to see the tell-tale visible veins on the active side. I try to disregard this obnoxious endocrine assault. I carry on with my plans to visit a friend. The invitation is nicely open-ended so it’s late when I arrive. Her other visitor is a primary school teacher/burlesque dancer. There is a table full of oozy cheese and strong bold food. We spur each other on, talking about intimate things. We drink a lot of champagne. I don’t know where it all can be coming from. I recall the image of the inexhaustible cauldron which was a legal requirement of the Irish Medieval hospitaller.²⁴ I wonder if my friend is hiding one here in this tiny Parisian apartment and if it has adapted to its surroundings and evolved to produce champagne. Eventually the other guest falls asleep, and I find myself getting restless in the August heat of this apartment.

The lump of life that is bulldozing its way through me has grown disproportionately engorged, I suppose it’s now turbo-charged with champagne. I consider this egg as a guest that is also part of me. It feels different to a parasite because it is inherent. It was there when I was born after all. Although it does affect my behaviour and try to trick me into situations which might result in its fertilisation. Each month, for a day or two, I inhabit a realm in which the laws of nature supersede human rational thought. I am an earthling; an “energy being.”²⁵ Here’s another “insoluble aporia”²⁶ for you, Derrida. I do not want to conceive a child but yet find myself getting swept along in the currents of something bigger than me, like a big lusty lemming.

It’s very late now and I am walking alone in the soft warm rain, roughly in the direction of home. I circumnavigate the Pantheon, thinking about Josephine Baker’s recently interred coffin, filled not with her remains, but with soil from places that she loved (United States, France and Monaco). Her remains remain in Monaco at the behest of her family. I find great heart in the idea that we leave behind a special residue in places where we have been extra alive. I imagine this vibrant humus in the post-human detritus and wonder how long it will endure in relation to

²³ Kearney and Fitzpatrick, 49.

²⁴ Katherine Marie O’Sullivan, *Hospitality in Medieval Ireland, 900-1500* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004), 233.

²⁵ Bolte-Taylor, “My Stroke of Insight.”

²⁶ Derrida and Dufourmantelle, 77.

polystyrene and plutonium. I imagine the soil in Josephine Baker's coffin reverberating with her songs for the next species, if they know to listen.

Now I am walking down Rue Mouffard. The bars are closed but there are still little clumps of people not yet finished with the night. A food courier cycles past and then turns to get off his bike to talk to me. He invites me to go somewhere with him. I am not clear where, but it doesn't matter. The bold egg inside me knows that the night is drawing to a close and has emitted a pheromone transmission, which this young fella has received. He is having a conversation with my egg and using words like "need" and "want". We are both pawns. I try to explain this, but my dismissive air is only spurring the *créatúr* on, and my words are drowned out by the obstreperous transmission that is coming from my womb, inviting him in. "Enter quickly..." Carnal hospitality. After a time, he cycles away for himself, and I am left in peace to be an earthling and smile with nature.

I am walking hospitality. It is hard to go to bed.