‘By Means Other Than Life’: Literature as Posthuman Memory

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Abstract: This essay argues that literature can help us understand posthuman dimensions of memory. Drawing on Bernard Stiegler’s philosophical anthropology of technics, and from the field of cultural memory studies, this new materialist approach challenges the conception of posthumanism that describes contemporary technologies as “transcending” the human. Rather, I maintain that an immanent perspective situates the human as already existing outside of itself, “by means other than life,” as Stiegler puts it. I illustrate this with two examples from postcolonial literature that model an affirmational approach to traumatic material history by way of texts. Instead of posing as detachment or transcendence, these metafictional references foreground present continuities with the past, recovering that which has been forgotten or repressed.

Keywords: Bernard Stiegler, Ecocriticism, Environmental Humanities, Literary Fiction, Memory Studies, Posthumanism

In the close of his 2004 novel *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh depicts an exchange between traditional ecological knowledge and the technological infrastructures of contemporary capitalism. The environmental memory of Fokir, an illiterate fisherman of the Sundarbans, becomes rewritten as a series of GPS satellite data. His patterns of movement allow the marine biologist Piya to store his memory as information about endangered dolphins. Fokir’s movements through the complex waterways of the Sundarbans are translated into traces and metadata points on a digital map. Readers of Ghosh will know that Fokir ends up giving not only his knowledge but his *life* to save Piya. His environmental and cultural memory lives on as a digital ghost, but what is lost are the multiple generations of lived fishing experience in the waterways that Fokir practices.

I begin with this example because Fokir’s sacrifice allegorizes the process that philosopher Bernard Stiegler calls *proletarianisation*, in which the subject is stripped of knowledge as their memory becomes exteriorised through the technics of inscription in the digital economy. For many theorists of technology and culture, these new developments promise (or threaten) to transcend the limits of the human as imagined by enlightenment liberalism. However, in Stiegler’s conception of technics and the human, this process of exteriorisation is *constitutive* of the autonomous interiority that has been associated with the self since Plato. In other words, the human as we know it has *become* through exteriorisation. From language and the lithic tool to algorithms and cloud storage, the *anthropos* is sustained by means that remain outside our selves, and outside life. For Stiegler, then, Fokir’s sacrifice represents not the obsolescence of the human, but rather the recognition that the human is always composing itself by way of technics, through a “grammatisation” process of

collective memory making. Like Ghosh, Stiegler asks us to interrogate the *political* nature of this inscription. Reconceptualizing literature as posthuman memory, I argue, enables scholars and critics to reconnect living memory with its nonhuman genealogies, and resist the process of proletarianisation that is made possible by the tendency to separate the human from its worldly attachments.

In works like the multi-volume *Technics and Time* series, and more recently, *For a New Critique of Political Economy*, Stiegler builds a materialist account of the industrialisation of memory. His philosophical anthropology combines the paleo-archaeology of André Leroi-Gourhan with continental phenomenology, and extends Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis of the culture industry into the Deleuzian economy of contribution (and control). However, Stiegler identifies Plato as "the first thinker of proletarianisation" in the *Phaedrus*, and he considers the Greek distinctions between *anamnesis* and *hypomnesis* central in the contemporary politics of industrial life (35). Plato warns that in writing we risk the loss of a living and active recall (*anamnesis*) in the process of exteriorizing subjectivity through writing as dead memory or simply "knowledge" (*hypomnesis*). Stiegler maintains that Plato's metaphysical oppositions make him unable to appreciate the magnitude of his own argument. It is precisely *because* our memory is prosthetic, and *because* the relative autonomy of our individual and social experience is produced through technics like writing, that we must *take care* of this relation. This is what Stiegler means when he argues that "technics is the pursuit of life by means other than life" (*Technics and Time* 17). When the means of pursuing life are precisely the means of its endangerment, as in the condition of the Anthropocene, we must think the *pharmacological* relation—the relation of both poison and remedy—that links the industrialization of the planet with the industrial organization of memory.

This perspective differs from varieties of "historical posthumanism" that maintain we were properly human until some particular technology (or event) came along that turned us into something "post." A "historical posthumanism" with such a linear trajectory should be answered by a "posthuman historiography" that aims to transform accounts of historical becoming through a more-than-human genealogy. Donna Haraway's cyborg manifesto, for instance, is often interpreted as the former, as a claim that post-war information technology makes us all hybrids. However, Haraway's later engagements with animality lead her to conclude that "we have never been human" (2). Her twist on Bruno Latour's assertion that "we have never been modern" invites readers to situate practices of ontological separation, questioning the distinctions between relations and objects that have always been mixed or unfinished. A prosthetic history of this sort rethinks the human immanently, as a figure made possible through its composition along with the nonhuman. Domestication, for instance, is an incorporation of "life" as organized death into the temporal economies of human societies. Where once seasonal harvests and gestational periods of livestock set cultural rhythms, now genetic science intervenes to manipulate life so as to meet global market demands. What is the CAFO or Monsanto operation, if not a means of abolishing time and re-inscribing biological exchange on a planetary scale for the purposes of accumulation (i.e., storage)? It is this double sense of history as both material accumulation and the extraction of cultural memory from workers by means of industrial proletarianisation (alienation), that famously concerned Marx. For Stiegler, this tension shapes the genealogy of the *anthropos* itself. It is a struggle over and with the prostheses through which knowledge of how to be human (intergenerational memory) is both maintained and transformed across environments and diverse social milieus. As a materialist political

project this requires apprehending the technical means through which temporality is produced in the present, rescuing it from the biopolitical and attention economies of contemporary capitalism.

To explain how *anamnesis* can get a grip on *hypomnesis*, Stiegler builds on Edmund Husserl's temporal phenomenology of primary and secondary retention by introducing a third dimension: tertiary retention. Whereas primary retention refers to the recent past contained in the present instant, secondary retention is the ability to recall the primary in a new context. Tertiary retention, on the other hand, is the material support that enables this interplay between the primary and secondary. It is exteriorised memory supported by technical objects that we don't think of as memory precisely because it constitutes our ordinary experience. Put simply, if *anamnesis* can get a grip on tertiary retention, it can achieve a relative autonomy from *hypomnesis*. By foregrounding the technical nature of tertiary retention, Stiegler offers a history of what Derrida, in his own reading of Plato, identifies as "the logic of the supplement." Consequently, histories of supposed ruptures and revolutionary breaks are now seen as hiding the continuities that make such becomings possible. This inversion is transforming the way scholars conceptualize the archive and literature's relation to it. In a recent roundtable on "Memory Studies in the Anthropocene," Claire Colebrook argues:

[F]orms of explicitly external memory, such as writing, do not create a break or rupture with 'natural' human memory nor with inscription in general. Rather, something akin to writing—a system of dispersed traces that maintains itself [or decays] through time—is what makes the flow of conscious time and memory possible. (10)

Literary texts not only depict the workings of memory at the individual and collective level, they also serve as storage for cultural memory, carrying it from one generation to the next (Erll 151). Simultaneously transmitted and actively received, literature thus offers a means to challenge official memory in that it enables living memory to apprehend the dead (or zombie, ghostly, angelic) memory contained in the form. To illustrate this, I turn to a 2012 novel by Trinidadian-British author Monique Roffey. *Archipelago* is the story of a multi-ethnic, middle-class, Trinidadian family recovering from a tropical storm where a catastrophic flood destroys their house and kills their infant son. The main character Gavin looks to restore meaning in his life, and takes his daughter and their dog on a voyage to the Galapagos Islands in his small boat. On the way, the characters confront their personal trauma as they travel through the anthropogenic environmental history of the Caribbean. In this double confrontation with the past, Roffey connects personal encounter with climate change to collective historical suffering. More than simply "cli fi," Roffey writes this encounter with climate change into the broader cultural memory of western humanism from a postcolonial perspective. This textual short-circuit raises the *political* question of which human is referred to in the Anthropocene, and the *philosophical* question of which description of the human are "we" post?

Roffey follows in the Caribbean tradition of rewriting Homeric epics in a postcolonial context. *Archipelago* combines an Odyssean desire to feel at home again in the world with a post-traumatic quest to repair the disjuncture with a Nature that is wondrous as it is dangerous. The father and daughter routinely compare their voyage to *Moby-Dick*, although decidedly from the critical perspective of Starbuck (175). Roffey offers a different kind of epic hero, a different social unit, and geocultural space, as well as miraculous beings that remind the characters how "unnatural" nature can be. By including the dog as a character whose perspective and emotional states are

worthy of narrative attention, the novel expands the emotional universe typically limited to the human protagonist. Likewise, encounters with nonhumans do not serve as plot devices for the hero to transcend or sacrificially outwit, but are rather moments of shared animal vulnerability. Yet the most miraculous moment occurs when an albino whale emerges and watches them, as if to confirm the characters' interpretation of their voyage as an inversion of Ahab's revenge (318).

This whale is a figure of oil which seeps through the novel. The omnipresent infrastructure of Dutch refineries and extraction sites are a material legacy of earlier waves of colonization. Yet this infrastructure is currently leased by Venezuela, whose industry proves no less destructive. If Venezuela is a narrative repetition, or secondary retention, of Dutch oil imperialism, we must consider the kind of memory work the white whale is doing. Whale oil was the first transnational oil industry in the hemisphere, and the white whale its most famous literary figure. When this figure resurfaces to "save" the characters at a key turning point, readers must ask what it means to be saved by this figure from a literary past whose appearance connects the present crisis within a longer industrial history. To encounter "oil" as a living subject, and to be watched by this living memory (or perhaps a ghost) of the energy past, is an encounter with tertiary retention. The bodies (and brains) of these beings fueled the later development of petroleum in the Americas. Roffey uses this intertextual figure to reinscribe the forgotten material history of the present climate crisis back into living memory. She takes what many might see as a dead infrastructure of narrative tropes, clichéd experiences, and textual references—in other words, *hypomnemata*—and gives it over to an *anamnesis* awakened by the urgent questioning of climate change. Not only are the characters able to locate their family trauma within its genealogy, but readers are as well.

Roffey maps a different cultural memory of the Caribbean that connects climate change to earlier waves of colonial inscription. The characters refuse the memory constructed by "global" media networks of the north that present their own condition to them through disjointed images of natural disasters without history. Instead, *Archipelago's* characters model a kind of *anamnesis* by adopting elements of the past as their own, elements which, like the whale, enable the characters to recognize themselves as later moments within an immanent material history. The pink slave houses of Bonaire, Sea Empress cruise liner, and a tidal wave unleashed by the earthquake that hits Fukushima, enable a new organization of retention and a new connection with that archive. This vision of the human is not the subject of a world-historical break or transcendence of an old "Nature" as in some conceptions of the posthuman or the Anthropocene. Rather, it is a human that is individuated through its worldly attachments. "I thought I was separate," Gavin tells his wife, "Me against the world. I wanted to escape that house, everything. But really, I'm part of it all, the earth, the sea. I can't get away" (356).

As a metafictional text, *Archipelago* illustrates the posthuman workings of memory. More importantly, it may serve as memory support for future generations as it consciously inscribes itself into, and thus re-inscribes the archive of "the human" in the era of climate change. It is a posthumanism that recognizes the *composition* of the human with earthly life, through technics and narrative, and recognizes that it is precisely these continuities which enable iterations of the new. This perspective supports the work of environmental humanists to rethink the periodization of the literary archive according to "the Ages of Wood, Tallow, Coal, Whale Oil, Gasoline, Atomic Power, and Other Energy Sources" (Yaeger et al. 2011). The image of the posthuman as a break or

liberation from the past, the planet, or from the body, conceals a will to forget. At its worst, it becomes a fetish for the operations that extract living knowledge, traditional and otherwise, into storage banks—mausoleums or pyramids—to await reanimation by speculative capital. Because literature can make the material archive of its own narrative conscious, it can enable the kind of *anamnesis* Stiegler's posthumanism prescribes so that, if the future is to be haunted by ghosts, they may, like the white whale, come to our rescue.

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