In Human: Parasites, Posthumanism, and Papatūānuku

Emilie Rākete

This is a story about us – about all of us, although it will come to trouble the notion of an 'us'. Like all essentially Māori stories, this one has a whakapapa without which it does not make sense. To tell this story about us, of how we relate to one-another, it is first necessary to tell a story about Papatūānuku. With our mother fixed in our minds, we can begin to talk about ourselves.

In the beginning is te Kore, and nothing is. There is the potential that things will *come to be*, but at this point they are not. There are countless permutations of te Kore – the fertile void iterates and reiterates, and eventually te Pō, the night, emerges. Within te Pō are the ancestors who simultaneously constitute and precede materiality. There is no universally agreed order of events here,[1] but we can satisfy ourselves by accepting that among these figures are Tangaroa, Ranginui, and Papatūānuku, and that in some configuration the sea, the sky, and foremost the earth produce everything which exists. We see in this cosmogonic cycle the beginnings of a political ecology rooted in relationality, in whakapapa.

Sitting on the beach as a young girl, I picked a squirming insect from my scalp and watched in horror as my own blood leaked out of its crushed body.

Ani Mikaere explicates human relationships with Papatūānuku – 'Papatūānuku is atua, tupuna and the land simultaneously: there is no sensible way of separating out the ways in which humans experience our relationship with her.'[2] We can also be understood to relate to *one another* within Papatūānuku in similar terms. It is within this unitary and holistic system of relationality that we can address the raruraru raised in Jane Bennett's *Political Ecology*[3] – which actions constitute political actions, what roles do the human and the inhuman play in these processes?

Political Ecology queries the level at which political agency exists, and the kinds of actants which are capable of 'authentic' political acts. Bennett interrogates the potentialities of nonhumans to whom political agency can be assigned – questioning the anthropocentric assumption behind both John Dewey and Jacques Rancière's definitions of politics. Bennett argues that 'agency' and 'political action' are not functions of a body which must *necessarily* be a human one to enact them, but that

1 The details of this history vary immensely by iwi and even hapū; in the interests of neither reifying my own northern Māori cultural hegemony nor presenting an ahistorical 'composite' story I have elected to leave the details vague.
2 Ani Mikaere, "Implications of a Māori Worldview," In *Colonising Myths – Māori Realities: He Rukuruku Whakaaro* (Auckland: Huia, 2011), 318.
3 Jane Bennett, "Political Ecology," In *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

political action occurs regardless of human input[4] – that inhuman forces interacting with one another, inhuman forces interacting with humans, and humans interacting with humans are not fundamentally dissimilar actions.

In ngā tikanga Māori, we also find the idea that political agency is not the sole realm of human individuals. Rather than a hegemonising Chain of Being which hierarchises humanity as an epistemological category above worms, lice, and land, tikanga Māori's organisational principle is whakapapa, which affirms the shared heritage through Papatūānuku and therefore the fundamental sameness of all of these things. As Mikaere says, 'Everything in the natural world, ourselves included, shares a common ancestry.'[5] The term "tangata whenua", then, can be translated in two ways. "People of the land" implies that we are people foremost and that we relate *to* the land. This translation relies on the primacy of a human subject which is rapidly becoming analytically irrelevant. From a political ecological perspective rooted in Papatūānuku, we could translate 'tangata whenua' instead as 'land-people' – 'people' not as its own epistemological category, but as a function of the land, of the whenua. We are not beings who are *of* the land but the land itself in the act of being. We are a function of the ecology, we are ecology foremost.

When I sat on the beach and crushed the louse, my disgust came from what psychoanalyst and philosopher Julia Kristeva terms abjection[6] – the horror of neither-neither – the muddying of the border between subject and object. Was I an individual unit, whole within myself? Or was I forestalling, as Bennett quotes of Dewey's *Art as Experience*, 'acknowledgement of this dependence of the self for wholeness upon its surroundings'?[7] In my experiences up until that point, the sensation had been that I was an individual subject with bounded and inviolable borders. What the parasite demonstrates is that this frame of reference is insufficient. In actuality, what we perceive as our self is only a part of the ecology. We think of ourselves as individuals operating within a static and passive environment – the parasite allows the understanding that we ourselves are the environments in which other 'individuals' may also operate. There's a sense of fractalisation here – that we are Papatūānuku writ small. We are in her, parasites are in us, and (as I found when I crushed one) we are inside them.

4 Ibid., 108.
5 Mikaere, "Implications of a Māori Worldview," 312.
6 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 8.
7 John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch & Company, 1934), 59.

The parasite collapses these constructed borders and opens our impressions of our bodies to deep new understandings of interconnectivity – moves us into a post-human conception of the self as ecology. Under liberal individualism, a dialectic is formed between self and environment. The parasite poses a synthesis to this model – that the self *is* an environment, and conversely that the environment *is* a self. I am not (only) in me but in everything with which I share whakapapa.

From a liberal individualist perspective, we are all distinct units, but from Papatūā nuku's perspective, or from the perspective of one embracing Papatūānukutanga, we have always been one system. Parts of this system express themselves materially as what we identify as humans. Other parts of these functions of Papatūānuku's ecology do not express themselves this way, but as rivers, lakes, hills, plants, insects, buildings, birds, animals, bacteria, viruses, wind, sunlight, heat, warmth, presence, absence – and within Papatūānukutanga, none of these systemic ecological functions is epistemologically or ontologically hierarchised above any other. There can't be any difference. The ecology is a horizontal system, and every function of the ecology is equivalent to every other function of the ecology. To decide, as Rancière does, that politics presupposes a human subject[8] is a decision based not on the material capacity of an agent to act within a public to address its problem but on the metaphysical idea of "authentic" actions.

Political action does not require 'human actants' to have occurred but under our present understanding of politics an action does need to be produced by human actants to be categorised as political. The issue is not one of causation (i.e. *can* an actant produce Rancière's 'argumentative utterances'?)[9] but of categorisation (i.e. which actants' utterances will we *consider* 'argumentative') – not that inhuman politics are fundamentally different to human politics but that we have not been *regarding* them as such. Such a distinction is based on anthropocentric transcendentalism and is ultimately meaningless. Transcendence requires dictation from above, from some authority which dreams it is separate from this system – our politics look below, to the warm earth and the immanent tendencies which guide its billions of inhabitants. Papatūānukutanga allows for a model of the political ecology in which the politics of the inhuman are once again recognisable.

8 Bennett, "Political Ecology," 106.
9 Jacques Rancière and Davide Panagia, "Dissenting Words: A Conversation with Jacques Rancière," *Diacritic 30*, no. 2 (2000): 125.

Consider, for example, the tikanga of death. When a tūpāpaku rests in a body of water, for instance in a drowning, the lake, river or stream becomes tapu and humans in interaction with that body become subject to certain restrictions on their behaviour. Here we see that relations between 'humans' and 'objects' have become political ones – the community, the individual who has transgressed and the material environment itself all exist within a cohesive political ecology. Inhuman actants which would otherwise be considered passive and environmental become engaged participants in a political intercourse. A human who transgresses the tapu of a body of water might fall ill as a form of reciprocation, and amends would need to be made. Likewise, the practice of rāhui expressly demonstrates the posthuman principles of tikanga Māori – at human expense, certain species are not subject to hunting or fishing to allow their regeneration. In these examples of Papatūānukutanga, the hierarchy between human subjects and environmental objects is completely deconstructed. Relationships between actants take place within a relational ecology without hierarchies or hegemonies. Humans are no more or less than any other components of the ecostructure.

Ironically, a political ecological perspective of power relations between human and inhuman bodies actually renders parasitism as a phenomena incomprehensible. Why should a louse surviving on the surface of my skin be categorised as parasite and I should not, when we are both crawling on the skin of a larger ecology and surviving there as best we can? As Dewey says, 'The epidermis is in only the most superficial way an indication of where an organism ends and its environment begins.'[10] With the boundary between even organism and environment deconstructed in favour of a whakapapa-system of relationality and political ecology, how can we talk about insides or outsides? Margins? Everything exists in deep fundamental relation to everything else, and while functions of the ecology may interact with one another, no relationship of sub- or superordination can be established between them. The louse is not inside me and I am not inside Papatūānuku. All of us exist in dynamic equity with each other.

Through Papatūānuku I can sit on the beach, and know that my self is not in the louse's guts inside the louse, nor in the louse inside my hand, nor in my body inside Papatūānuku, nor in Papatūānuku herself, but distributed at every possible point throughout that system.

10 Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 59.

Emilie Rākete is a trans woman + wahine māori living in tāmaki makaurau. She is a rude and reckless public fuss-maker and cannot be trusted to keep quiet about structural violence. She writes and publishes zines at patreon.com/holyerrorpress and dreams of a decolonised planet.