Wilderness Ontology: CUNY Talk

Here's the initial draft of my CUNY talk on Thursday, September 15th. This is a much more informal talk as it's only meant to outline my relationship to speculative realism.

Wilderness Ontology
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I have never been particularly fond of the term "speculative realism" for I the term "speculation" invites connotations of ungrounded claims and assertions, while the term "realism" tends to fall too much into the epistemological, rather than ontological register. However, if I were to articulate what speculative realism has meant to me philosophically, I would say that this emerging tendency of thought marks an orientation towards what I call "the wilderness", moving away from an obsessive focus on how humans relate to and represent the world. Within the milieu of philosophy in which I was trained the name of the game was an analysis of how humans represent and structure the world about us. Whether we speak of the Heideggarian account of how our intentions and projects produce a world, or a certain then current reading of Derrida that focused on how language produces the world, or Wittgenstein and his famous language games, or Foucault and his regimes of discursivity and power, the issue was always one of showing how humans and culture structure the world. This, of course, was for the sake of the admirable task of revealing the ultimate contingency of these constructions, thereby opening the possibility of changing these things so as to produce more equitable and just society, yet the fact remained that these modes of inquiry were nonetheless human centered.

In my own work I have striven to maintain a rich place for antirealist Marxist, feminist, queer, and semiotic, etc., critique, while simultaneously blunting its overwhelming tendency towards erasure of the alterity of the world and nonhumans. The problem with the Kantian legacy of critique is that it tends to reduce nonhuman entities to the status of mere vehicles for human intentions, meanings, concepts, signifiers, power, and so on. Like Marx's famous commodity fetishism that reduces the alterity of both labor and the material out of which it is constructed to a mere unit of exchange without remainder, there is a tendency within the Kant-inspired tradition of critique to reduce objects to their cultural representation without remainder. In a world where we increasingly witness the ecological devastation wrought by capitalism and our technology, where our sciences daily reveal all sorts of entities and phenomena that act on us and our world without us being able to absolutely master them, where our desire for mastery perpetually produces unanticipated disaster as in the case of the BP Oil spill in Louisiana, where our technology transforms the very nature of society and humanity in completely unanticipated ways, I believe that it is no longer tenable to treat representation, power, and the semiotic as the sole powers and agencies worthy of meditation in the humanities and philosophy. We need a richer ontology that allows us to at least imagine agencies of things completely unshackled from a human index, and that overcomes the unilateral nature of human-centered critique, drawing attention to bilateral modes of conditioning and interaction.

It is this that I have sought under the title of "wilderness ontology". The signifier "wilderness" has connotations of a space outside culture and civilization. As such, the wilderness is diacritically opposed to culture—setting up a nature/culture binary –is is therefore a place that humans can go to. This wilderness seems to be where Meillassoux wishes to travel when he remarks that ...it could be that contemporary philosophers have lost the great outdoors, the absolute outside of pre-critical thinkers: that outside which was not relative to us, and which was given as indifferent to its own givenness to be what it is, existing in itself regardless of whether we are thinking of it or not.

This is not the path I wish to follow in thinking the wilderness, but rather, I wish to place the accent elsewhere. In contrast to this modernist conception of the wilderness where the wilderness is that which is absolutely de-sutured from the human and culture, I would instead like to emphasize the way in which humans find themselves in the wilderness.
When we are lost at sea, go camping, visit the great national parks, and so on, our relationship to the other entities that compose the heteroverse fundamentally changes. Where, in civilization, we are sovereigns and masters of all other beings—at least, we think of ourselves as being sovereigns –in the wilderness we find ourselves among beings and as one more being among beings. Take the familiar experience of camping in Yellow Springs National Park. When we occupy this milieu, we suddenly discover that we can be eaten or attacked by bears and wolves. In other words, where, in civilization, we tend to encounter the world as, following Andy Clark, a set of prostheses extending our body and mind, such that the world—with the exception of our fellow humans –are submitted to our telos and aims, in Yellow Stone we find ourselves in a world swarming with other teloi, with other entities with their own aims, projects, tendencies, and so on. We find ourselves amongst beings rather than as sovereigns of beings.

Now, if we wish to shift this idea of the wilderness from the phenomenological register to the register of a fundamental ontological concept, then we must deterritorialize this core feature of the phenomenological experience of the wilderness: amongstness. As a concept of fundamental ontology, wilderness no longer denotes an experience, but a fundamental feature of the being of beings. Wilderness as an ontological concept signifies the shift from the sovereignity of humans to the amongstness of beings. As an ontological concept, it thus follows that wilderness is no longer a place opposed to civilization. Wilderness is not somewhere one can go, nor can one ever be outside the wilderness. Here in the middle of New York City I am no less in the wilderness than when I am in the middle of Antarctica or on the planet Mars. Wilderness signifies not the absence of humans or civilization, but rather the entanglement and separation of beings without any entity, God or human, occupying the place of sovereign. In this regard, a city, a computer, a blog, and an institution are no less of the wilderness than wild wolves, blue whales, ant-eaters, red cedars, or electric eels.

For me, speculative realism has functioned as an invitation to think the wilderness. To see what this might mean, let us return to my critique of the modernist project of critique earlier. There I suggested that in its focus on humans and culture, modernist critique suffers from a tendency to reduce nonhuman things to vehicles of human representations, intentions, meanings, signs, signifiers, and power. What does this mean? It means that the alterity of the thing that carries the representation or sign is erased behind the representation or sign, such that it is reduced to a blank screen upon which humans and culture project their meanings. The world becomes a text to be read. In a Marxist framework, for example, we show how the value of the commodity is not something that resides in the object itself, but which is, rather, produced by the labor that produced the commodity. Here, I hasten to add, I do not reject the essential correctness of Marx's analysis on this issue; nor the correctness of many modernist critiques of this kind.

However, what disappears in this form of analysis is what Jane Bennett has called “thing-power”. This thing- power, different for every entity, is the power or activity of entities anterior to and in excess of the manner in which they function as vehicles for human and cultural significations, power, and meaning. Thing-power, as I argued last night, is composed of the powers or affects of which human and nonhuman things are capable of. The philosopher Thomas Nagel famously asked “what is it like to be a bat?” Wilderness ontology would like to take questions of this sort seriously, just as it would also like to take questions such as “what is it like to be the H1N1 virus, a neutrino, the CIA, Greenpeace, a novel, a meme, a tardigrade, a rock, etc.?” seriously. The desire to take such questions seriously arises not out of any animistic perversity, but rather out of the conviction that where the world is reduced to vehicles of human intentions, signs, meanings, power, etc., we are missing a tremendous part of the equation, such that we are unable to understand why assemblages take the form they take, why some—especially oppressive assemblages –persist as they do, and how we might change things. How are we to think, for example, climate change without, drawing on Bennett’s memorable example, thinking of those processes going on in a garbage heap? These processes aren’t mere text or signs or discourses or power, but have a trajectory of their own irreducible to any of these things. Wilderness invites us to think this thing-power without endlessly indexing this power to human representation. Wilderness strives to think—drawing on Karen Barad’s concept –the entanglements of thing-power.

However, in striving to think the wilderness and depart from the paradigm of Modernist, anthropocentric critique, I find myself conflicted. As a former Lacanian psychoanalyst, a theorist deeply grounded in semiotics and semiology, and a Marxist, I have been deeply entrenched in the project of Modernist critique and believe that this style of critique has delivered something of inestimable value for social and political thought. In this regard, I have no desire to follow the classical and naïve realist in arguing, for example, that Marx got it all wrong in his critique of commodity fetishism and that value really is a genuine property of the things themselves. Rather, I wish to integrate the findings of this style of critique that has been so deeply important in psychoanalysis, critical theory, feminist thought, queer thought, textual analysis, and so on. I thus find myself in the awkward position of needing a theoretical framework strong enough to integrate the anti-realist tendencies of critical theory and its variants, while maintaining the realist thesis of the irreducibility of entities to the manner in which they function as vehicles for the projections of humans and culture.

Towards this end, I have sought to radicalize the self-reflexive turn that arose out of Kantian thought and to marshal the conceptual resources of dynamic systems theory as developed in cybernetics and autopoietic systems theory. Kant’s great discovery was not so much that “objects conform to mind rather than mind to objects”, but rather the distinction of opening the prodigious and inexhaustible domain of self-reflexive

analysis. Kant taught us to observe the observer. Rather than focusing on the referent, Kant argued, we should instead engage in a self-reflexive analysis of how mind apprehends and structures the referent. This self-reflexive turn has—with notable and important exceptions –been inherited by all forms of Continental and Anglo-American thought. Whether we are talking about the self-reflexive analysis of the experiencing subject in phenomenology, or the self-reflexive analysis of how language constructs its referent in later Wittgenstein, the structuralists, and the post-structuralists, everywhere there’s been a shift from the referent to how observers observe and construct their referent. De-sutured from the Kantian reference to universality and necessity, this self-reflexive

mode of analysis has provided powerful conceptual tools for denaturalizing the phenomality of the referent and for revealing the contingency of these constructions.
I have no intention of abandoning the self-reflexive turn— indeed, I wish to radicalize it –but rather have arrived to the party of the self-reflexive orgy that characterizes
contemporary thought as the idiot that points out that observers are things, objects, or entities. In other words, I argue that paradoxically those who invite us to engage in self-reflexivity or an observation of the observer —whether that observer be the lived body, Dasein, a language game, a text, a social system, etc. –nonetheless seem to miss the point that observers are not nothing, but are real entities in their own right. Following Žižek who follows Wagner in claiming that we are healed by the spear that smote us, or that we must learn how to see that what we take to be the impediment to a solution is itself the solution, I argue thus argue that the solution consists not in explaining how a self-referential and enclosed observer can touch true reality, but rather in seeing that the reality of any substance lies in being a self-referential and enclosed observer of other entities. However, this move is only to be made where observers are not restricted to human beings, but where every entity is treated as an observer, whether that entity be a person, an institution, an economic system, an army, a smart phone, climate, a tree, a coral reef, a militant activist group, etc. Each entity is— with suitable modifications –as Leibniz said: a self-enclosed monad that metabolizes other entities in the universe from a particular point of view; and, as Leibniz observed, each drop of matter consists of observers, wrapped in observers, wrapped in observers without end.

Second-order cybernetics and autopoietic systems theory provide me with the conceptual resources to make this move. Second-order cybernetics and autopoietic systems theory de-sutured the theory of self-referential and self-reflexive observation from its exclusive index to the human, showing how entities as diverse as thermostats, bacteria, atoms of hydrogen, animals, plants, and social systems can be understood, in their substantiality, as observers. All observers are anti-realist with respect to the manner in which they encounter everything else in the world, but every observer is nonetheless a real and irreducible entity in its own right.

Through this gesture I am able to recoup the resources of both deconstruction and the findings of anti-realist critical theory within a realist framework. Following Niklas Luhmann, deconstruction becomes a second- order observation of the distinctions an entity mobilizes to observe its world, coupled with a disclosure of the essential contingency of these distinctions. By contrast, following the cyberneticians and autopoietic systems theorists, every system constitutes its own elements. The elements of which a system or substance is composed do not come ready-made, they are not ontologically pre-given, but rather are constituted as elements related within the substance in a particular way by the substance to which they belong. An element, we can say, is what an object is for another object. Thus, for example, commodities do not exist as pre-given elements outside the capitalist social system (a higher-level object), but rather are elements constituted by that higher-level or larger-scale object known as capitalism. Likewise, gendered subjects are not pre-given entities, but are entities—as the ethnographers and queer theorists have shown us –that are constituted as elements by the particular social system or larger-scale object to which they belong. Just as the cells of which my body is composed are not ontologically pre-given, but rather are constituted by my body and each other, and just as the relations between these cells is not pre-given, but rather is constituted by my body and the interactions between my cells, every substance, whether it be a body, a tree, a family, an institution, a state, etc., constitutes the elements of which it is composed. Moreover, each entity constitutes the manner in which it is open to these elements, what counts as mere noise, and so on.

The important point is that the elements that substances constitute are not constituted ex nihilo or out of nothing. Capitalism doesn't create commodities out of nothing, but rather out of human beings, other objects, other entities. Gender normalized subjects are not constituted by particular social substances—say the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea –but are constituted out of human bodies. In this regard, we must distinguish between elements and parts. An element is a unit defined in terms of a larger-scale object that has no independent existence of its own. A part, by contrast, is a substance or observing system in its own right that is irreducible to the manner in which it has been enlisted and constituted as a component by a larger-scale object. Parts do not cease pursuing their own ends, nor entirely lose their own singularity in being constituted as components. Thus, in any larger-scale object, there is always a bit of entropy or chaos that the object cannot master in striving to metabolize its parts. In this way, I believe I get the beginnings of an account of how something like resistance is possible in social systems. For in the distinction between elements and parts, we encounter the fundamental contingency of how elements are constituted and related, and thereby the possibility of other organizations. The failure to distinguish between elements and parts—for example, the reduction of human bodies to the manner in which they're constituted as gendered subjects by a particular social system –renders, in my view, the possibility of such resistance completely unthinkable.

What wilderness ontology invites us to think is this dizzying array of observing systems or autonomous substances, where no one substance—whether it be God, humans, or cultures –can successfully occupy the position of sovereign mastering all the rest, and to think the entanglements or structural couplings, the intrigues, and aleatory dramas that arise between these entities. Wilderness ontology invites us to become second-order observers, becoming cognizant of both how we observe or construct our referents or openness to the world, but also to begin observing how other entities do this as well. As such, it invites us to become posthuman.