

## *The Ecological Thought*

Timothy Morton

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With *The Ecological Thought*—let’s call it *ET*—Timothy Morton offers a 'prequel' to his more programmatic engagement with ecocriticism, *Ecology Without Nature* (2007).<sup>1</sup> *ET* delivers on its predecessor’s promises, and on its own. The book’s thickly entangled thoughts vibrate with intensity. Each page draws readers further into an ambitious ecological and political program that casts material reality as a strange wonderland of coexisting beings. Morton’s central terms are 'the mesh' and 'the strange stranger'.<sup>2</sup> His concept of the 'hyperobject' shows up with less elaboration toward the end.<sup>3</sup> Before I engage these concepts’ development in the four chapters of this short book, it is important to specify what exactly Morton means by 'the ecological thought'.

The ecological thought is an encounter with and effort to exorcise the ghost of modernity: Nature. For Morton, Nature is “alien and alienated”; it’s even “a special kind of private property.”<sup>4</sup> Morton’s Nature is the fantasy of a cold, authoritarian, masculine externality to human existence. Exorcising this ghost entails experimentation. Experiments may be artistic, scientific, or both. Moreover, the 'ecology' of ecological thought is both method and object. We must think ecologically, considering the interconnectedness that makes thought possible and efficacious. We must also treat thinking as an act of radical engagement with the ecologies that we inhabit and that inhabit us.

Morton’s effort to build an ecology without Nature differs from those with similar projects, such as Bruno Latour.<sup>5</sup> Through his eclectic induction of symbiosis between Continental philosophers (principally Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas) and popular evolutionary biologists and philosophers (Charles Darwin, but

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 3. Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 14.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 130-5.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>5</sup> Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

also Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett), Morton asserts that good evolutionary science entails radical openness and willingness “to admit that you’re wrong.”<sup>6</sup> In this vein, he effectively persuades that Derrida’s thought is conducive to an ecological empiricism and Darwin’s conducive to anti-essentialism and radical uncertainty. By aligning these far-flung fields, Morton pursues an alliance between the humanities and the sciences, urging humanities scholars to pose experimentally actionable questions for scientists. I suspect that such dialogue would require better listening on both sides. But *ET*’s a good start, and one with wide-ranging resonances in science studies and speculative realism today.

*ET*’s first analytical chapter, “Thinking Big,” introduces readers to the unthinkable expanse of the mesh and to our endless uncanny encounters with strange strangers. The mesh is “the interconnectedness of all living and non-living things.”<sup>7</sup> To think the mesh is to consider the immensity of the cosmos, a profoundly decentering act that highlights the fragility of the earth and the beings that comprise it. I find the mesh an especially provocative tool to think (and, hence, act) with because it lends no ontological or epistemological primacy to the living: “All life forms are the mesh, and so are all dead ones, as are their habitats, which are also made up of living and nonliving beings...Death and the mesh go together in another sense, too, because natural selection implies extinction.”<sup>8</sup> In this sense, Morton attends to a multiplicity of beings (those that we problematically reduce to ‘the dead’) in a manner likely inconceivable for contemporary biopolitical thinkers.

Acknowledging our interconnectedness with all other beings in and as the mesh means remaining open to the vastness of the universe and remaining uncertain about what we are. What we can know, perhaps, is that we exist in a constant flow of encounters with new beings. Derrida termed this *l’arrivant*, which Morton translates as ‘the strange stranger’.<sup>9</sup> Being is a picaresque wandering, an uncanny experience of coming face-to-face with an endless stream of strange strangers (though faces, in fact, aren’t required). Readers will find that this ecological wandering surpasses Nature, surpasses holism, surpasses the superorganism, and surpasses the “more than human world.”<sup>10</sup> For Morton, it even surpasses Gaia. I’m less sure about this last one. Morton gives Lynn Margulis much more due when he treats her discussions of endosymbiosis, the fecund entanglements of microbial strange strangers within bodily microbiomes, than

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<sup>6</sup> Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 13.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

when he covers Margulis and James Lovelock's framing of the earth as a self-regulating organism. But such occasional inconsistencies, perhaps attributable to over-reliance on Dawkins and Dennett, are minor points in a book with far-reaching implications.

The second analytical chapter, "Dark Thoughts," guides readers into the musky, shadowy cave of interconnectedness. Morton resists romanticizing our ecological co-constitutions. Ecology, as it turns out, is dark. You never know which strange stranger will arrive. The more we grasp interconnectedness, the more uncertainty we face. Morton's dark thoughts wander, in the best possible sense. Wandering as method. Sped up a bit, it feels like this: Darwin describes the history of life forms as a book. "Is there something in the blanks, or nothing? How can we tell? Derrida, eat your heart out."<sup>11</sup> Causality works backwards. All organisms are chimeras. The strange stranger is strange to herself. Evolution deconstructs life itself. "All the way down, it's mutation, mutation, mutation."<sup>12</sup> Animals, in the end, are vegetables (and vegetables are minerals?). "Biological race is a racist concept."<sup>13</sup> Butterflies make choices. "If an earthworm can be Buddha, then not all people are human. Personhood is strange strangeness."<sup>14</sup> We can neither negate nor preserve the difference between humans and nonhumans, and this "bind is a sign of an emerging democracy of life forms."<sup>15</sup> Intimacy, not inclusion. "The stranger is infinity."<sup>16</sup> "If you ignore the nipples, males look almost male."<sup>17</sup> "Biological beings are all queer. All food is Frankenfood."<sup>18</sup> "Environmentalism is a work of mourning for a mother we never had."<sup>19</sup>

Morton's wandering in the dark, pace after pace, quip after quip, can be dizzying at times, but it's a strangely pleasurable dizziness. Nausea never sets in. The final chapter, "Forward Thinking," makes sure of this by developing the stakes of the ecological thought with more precision. Ecological politics can move beyond environmentalism and posthumanism through an intellectual radicalism that seeks to enchant the world, bringing about new practices of intimacy, sites of openness, and experiences of wonder. This is enchantment, and not re-enchantment, because we must avoid nostalgia for a pristine world that never was. We don't live in ruins;

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 95.

we've always been interconnected; and, thus, what 'we' means remains the question. We have no recourse to clear background-foreground distinctions. Marx, Freud, Darwin, and Derrida each challenged the primacy of the human subject by making different kinds of background matter. Today, unfortunately, climate change does the same. It's hard to talk about the weather now. 'Weather' slips to 'climate', and then what?<sup>20</sup>

Climate change installs a double movement. At the moment we realize that we've destroyed our environment, we realize it was never 'ours' at all. We live in uncertain times: "Just as the two World Wars were appropriate disasters for the age of nationalism, so global warming is appropriate to the age of globalization."<sup>21</sup> To face the horrifying monster of climate change, we need more passionate and sustained forms of thought (and other actions). We live with the pain and pleasure of human consciousness, and with the "ironic gap" between coexisting humans, the impossibility of knowing the neighbor with finality.<sup>22</sup> Through art, religion, and science, we must build new forms of collectivity, forms sutured together through common acts of caring for other kinds of beings precisely because they're *not* Natural. This will require a great deal of meditation and even more improvisation. We have to be "responsible for the neighbor, even if she persecutes [us]."<sup>23</sup> This means, among other things, being responsible for the lasting legacies of our era, particularly the hyperobjects that we've produced. Hyperobjects are things that don't rot and transcend our personal deaths. They're ultimately incomprehensible things, matters of "terror beyond the sublime," such as Styrofoam and plutonium.<sup>24</sup>

In destroying the world and becoming aware of it in the process, we're called to care for the detritus of our being. Morton even casts hyperobjects as tabooed matters of spiritual care. Life and death today require new forms of collective intimacy. We need love for one another that is irreducible to empty gestures of 'we are the world' cosmopolitanism. We cohabitate with Styrofoam and plutonium, and it's nasty. To live with and counteract our slow self-destruction we must care for the self and for the earth (and, perhaps, for its planetary kin, too):

Psychoanalysis is terraforming. Terraforming is psychoanalysis—bringing things to consciousness, owning up to our consciousness and our choices. Sorry to say, we have lost soft, squishy, irrational, authoritarian Nature. We have really lost it, because it

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 121-2.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 130.

never existed. We have lost even the idea of it. Losing a fantasy is harder than losing a reality—just ask a therapist. Consciousness sucks.<sup>25</sup>

*ET* promises life and death beyond the imaginative horizons of the contemporary. We scientists, artists, philosophers, ethnographers, and others must be prepared to indulge and enact meshed and messy speculations, contemplations on collective worlds to come.

As an anthropologist, I bristle a bit at how Morton seems to imply that environmental activists are un-contemplative devotees of Nature. I think such points require more ethnographic substantiation than readers will find here. But even ethnographers, who encounter strange strangers as a professional duty, will enjoy *ET*'s provocations to action (and, perhaps, inaction). It's written with a broad audience in mind and inspired lively dialogue as the final reading in an undergraduate seminar that I taught on Science in Culture and Society. *ET* will also be read for some time as an important transitional book for Morton. It develops his earlier engagements with Romantic literature while presaging his more recent affinity with object-oriented ontologists such as Graham Harman and Levi Bryant. Morton's work models a humanism for the Anthropocene, a humanism that questions the human without obliterating it and positions itself in informed public dialogue with the biological sciences. The book should be read widely, passionately, and skeptically.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 133.