Leland Russell

Kristin Scheible

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Anthropocentrism & Harraway: Assessing Anthropocentric Discourses

In her book *Staying with the Trouble*, Donna Haraway argues that the cause of our current climate crisis is our economic system and a sense of human exceptionalism, rather than any individual person. Extending this argument, Haraway claims that anthropocentric discussions must be a root cause of our climate crisis. Religious storytelling is both reflective of past human thought and informative of the way humans think. It can thus be used as a medium with which we may examine Harraway's claims. Many of these texts enable environmentally destructive thinking by proposing that humans are more important than nonhuman beings. In addition, many texts postulate some sort of anthropocentric salvation, removing the responsibility of devout individuals to take steps towards helping the environment. Although, these claims about anthropocentrism are not universal. The anthropocentric views of the world portrayed in these texts simultaneously promote systems of thought and ethics which force practitioners to reconcile their actions with their effect on nonhuman worlds. Through this reconciliation, these systems are productive for discussions about how nonhumans fit into such cosmologies, and thus help discussion about the climate crisis. Modern texts informing the relationship between humans and nonhumans similarly tend to present an anthropocentric standpoint. However, these texts reinterpret, and in some cases completely redefine the role and importance of humans, providing what Haraway might consider to be a more balanced perspective of humans' place in the world.

Section 1: How did we get here? Anthropocentrism, Commodification, & Haraway

> "There is a Zen story about a man on a horse galloping very quickly. At the crossroads a friend of his shouted, 'Where are you going?' And the man replied, 'I don't know. Ask the horse!' And that is the situation of humanity right now: in our times that horse is technology. It is carrying us off and it's out of control."
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> *- Thich Nhat Hanh, Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet (170-172)*

Donna Haraway does not believe that the Anthropocene is a useful way of describing the state of our world. She instead claims that such arguments proposing the Anthropocene are detrimental to our ability to care for nonhuman subjects, and that it is larger institutions—namely our economic systems—which drive changes to the world. Rather than discuss the Anthropocene, she introduces the Capitalocene, arguing that capitalism and such systems of managing humans better explain changes in the world. In her construction of this epoch though, she claims that "the Capitalocene was relationally made, and not by a secular godlike anthropos, a law of history, the machine itself, or a demon called Modernity" (Haraway, 50). She is careful not to credit humans solely for the creation of the epoch, or to dismiss it as somehow predetermined. Doing so would either center humans, removing the rest of the world, or remove any responsibility from humans. The latter option is problematic as humans' collective action has clearly resulted in our climate crisis. Although for the former, it is not entirely clear as to why humans should not get the sole credit for larger changes or our climate crisis. Haraway discusses this just before, arguing that "[human-centric] discourse is not simply wrong-headed and wrong-hearted in itself; it also saps our capacity for imagining and caring for other worlds" (Haraway, 50). Only considering human subjects in discussions leads to an outsized perception of the human role. Furthermore, isolating ourselves from the world creates the sense that we are

distinct and can operate without it—such distinctions are sure to lead to the commodification of the environment. Robin Wall Kimmerer comments on language stating: "[s]aying *it* makes a living land into 'natural resources.' If a maple is an *it*, we can take up the chain saw. If a maple is a *her*, we think twice." (Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 57). Objectifying the world permits the speaker a loss of care for it, doing so allows speakers to believe that they are the only meaningful beings present. Conversely, allowing nonhumans the privilege of animacy or a self, naturally extends human caring for those subjects. To this end, perhaps a few sentences ago, instead of calling the world an *it*, I should have called the world a *her*, and taken after the modern Gaia movement. Regardless, isolating humans from the world—even as a way to describe our harm to the world—provides a sense of exceptionalism which is ultimately harmful for the earth.

Texts informative to thought at any time are very useful for analyzing Haraway's claim as they often make claims implicitly or explicitly about the role of humans in relation to nonhumans. Perhaps among the most prevalent of such texts are major religious texts—many of these religions have texts dating back millenia, introducing ideas still present in our culture today. It is common for these widespread religions to feature humans centrally and place them in the most important positions. In both creation stories of Genesis for example, God places humans centrally—in one instructing to "subdue [the earth,] and have dominion over… every living thing that moves upon the earth." (Genesis, 1:28). In the other, He defines nonhuman subjects by the human—by creating them to be Adam's companion, and having him name them—and encourages humans to take from the surrounding environment (Genesis 2:15, 19). These two passages clearly encourage the readers to view themselves as more important than their nonhuman environments. Not only this, but this language draws a clear line to separate humans from nonhumans—these themes continue throughout Genesis. Similarly, Buddhist cosmology

postulates that human births uniquely situate a soul to help themselves and the world: “[f]or all beings, a human birth is difficult to obtain” (Śaṅkara, 6); this text continues on to talk about rarer and rarer human births. Implicit in this discussion is the idea that humans are more capable in some capacity than nonhumans. Indeed, other texts frame humans as better able to understand dharma or more capable of ‘acting well’. This is not as direct in framing humans as unique compared to Genesis. However both passages perpetuate the idea that human beings are more able to change the world than nonhuman beings, and are in some way more significant than nonhumans. The ideas presented in these texts thus encourage the readers to view themselves as cosmologically important relative to nonhumans. As discussed earlier, this can lead to environmentally destructive thought.

In addition to postulating human exceptionalism, these texts often propose a method for ascending from this world into another wherein people’s prior actions towards the environment do not affect them. For example, Buddhism proposes Nirvana and many Abrahamic faiths have some sort of post-death soteriology. Nirvana is defined to be nothingness and the Abrahamic faiths remove people from earth after they die. In both cases, there is no mention of nonhuman subjects attaining or attending these states—Buddhist texts for example stipulate that only a human can attain enlightenment and thus pass into Nirvana. Such practices of removing religious subjects from the earth alienates them from their environment and removes the responsibility to care for such environments. As Loyal Rue remarks, “to the extent that [some older] traditions have stressed cosmological dualism and individual salvation we may say they have encouraged an attitude of indifference toward the integrity of natural and social systems” (Rue, 37). These religions propose alternative existences after life separate from earth wherein the condition of Earth’s environment does not affect them. Furthermore, these ideas of salvation to other

existences are based on an individual's actions, not those of a group or the state of the world. In this sense, Haraway is completely correct—placing such a fanatical stress on the importance of humans and the idea that we will ascend from this world must be related to the tendency of people to commodify and destroy natural environments. In this way, these religious texts create a natural justification for indifference towards nonhumans, and combined with the ideas of human exceptionalism discussed earlier, frame humans as justified in harmful acts towards nonhumans.

Haraway's argument about anthropocentric language tracks through these didactic texts: religions which introduce ideas that distinguish humans from nonhumans either implicitly or explicitly promote separation from the world of nonhumans. This at best takes a neutral stance on the commodification of the earth, and at worst encourages such practices. This must only be exemplified for individuals studying such texts: simply reading a text will make a reader passively incorporate the ideas present, but for those actively studying such texts, these ideas become much more important and the effect is magnified. Given that these texts were created in a particular period, we are able to gain a grasp on how practitioners viewed the world in such cultures.

Section 2: Plasticity and Mobility in Anthropocentrism

In the avadāna *A Pot of Shit*, a monk is resting when he sees "a hungry ghost who look[s] like a burned-out tree stump, naked and totally covered with hair, with a mouth like the eye of a needle and a stomach like a mountain" (Rotman, 89). Upon questioning the Shakyamuni Buddha about this ghost, he recounts a story of a solitary Buddha who, falling ill, requests alms from a merchant. The merchant's daughter-in-law, reasoning that the Buddha will only return if she gives him food, "filled a bowl with shit, then covered it with food and proceeded to give it to the solitary buddha" (Rotman, 91). The Buddha explains that "[s]ince she performed such a sinful deed, as a result, ever since, she is always reborn as a hell being, animal, or hungry ghost, and she always feeds on feces" (Rotman, 91).

The above passage is very anthropocentric—it consists of humans preaching to humans about mostly human subjects, and has a clear implicit message that being a human is better than being a nonhuman. By Haraway's argument then, this text must promote human exceptionalism, implicitly or explicitly advocating for environmental harm. However it's not so clear that this is the message or interpretation. Unlike the texts referenced in the first section, this one does not tell its audience to take dominion over nature or that humans should enjoy more rights than other parts of nature. While it does claim that humans have a unique position, it seems to do so only to show how this position can end up bringing on greater misfortune. It is clear that Haraway's framework is not entirely applicable to this text, so how can we interpret this text?

In light of the above observations, we must refine our ideas: Haraway's framework must not be entirely correct, although as discussed in section one, it does hold up well for similar texts. One such way to refine Haraway's framework is through Timothy Morton's notion of a mesh. Working through Morton's notion of hyperobjects, religious institutions constitute a hyperobject and systems where religions interact with the world are interobjective systems. Continuing,

religious ideas necessarily include the intersection between religious institutions, pre-existing cultures, the 'natural world', and more, forming what Morton calls a mesh. These ideas on their face are not inherently anthropocentric, but the human interpretation of these ideas necessarily anthropomorphizes them. As Morton later states, in an interaction between a human and a cup, "[t]he human anthropomorphizes the cup and the cup cup-omorphizes the human" (Morton, 89)—such religious texts are human interpretation of the world. So Haraway, in taking issue with anthropocentric texts, is actually confronting an issue of human interpretation of the world. However these texts are also part of a web which allows for natural mobility when traversing ideas—we may be able to take anthropocentric notions in texts and view them as constructive rather than destructive. With this view, it is possible for both Haraway's reading about the harmful nature of anthropocentrism and the above observations about other texts being useful to these discourses to exist simultaneously. In the coming paragraphs, I will concretely specialize these ideas to Buddhist literature.

Key to the discussion of Buddhist literature are notions of karma. Discussions involving karma allow for anthropocentrism to introduce ideas which are helpful to the environment. In *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, a translated introduction to Tibetan Buddhism, Patrul Rinpoche introduces 10 negative actions. Among these, the actions taking life, taking what is not given, and 'covetousness' are useful when discussing environmental concerns. Rinpoche defines these as follows: "[t]aking life means doing anything intentionally to end the life of another being, whether human, animal or any other living creature", "[t]aking by force… means the forceful seizure of possessions or property by a powerful individual… having no legal right to them", and "[c]ovetousness includes all the desirous or acquisitive thoughts" (Rinpoche 102-106, 110). These can be easily translated to actions against the environment. Taking life explicitly

includes nonhumans. Expanding a notion of property to the earth or the nonhuman world, human imposition onto different worlds and explicitly claiming ownership over parts of these falls squarely into taking by force. Finally, similarly to taking life, covetousness naturally lends itself to these discourses about human-nonhuman interaction. One of the results of these negative actions is the conditioning effect: "taking life causes rebirth in grim, joyless landscapes... Taking what is not given causes rebirth in areas stricken by famine… Covetousness will bring about poor harvests" (Rinpoche, 116). In this school of Buddhist thought, negative actions have a very tangible effect on the world and a soul's subsequent rebirths. In *A Pot of Shit*, the woman acted poorly and faced extreme consequences, and while this story does not directly relate to the environment, it shows a human being faced with the direct consequences of their actions. These themes are characteristic of environmentally friendly ideas. In this way, Karma provides a system which forces practitioners to take into consideration their environments, both human and nonhuman, and their effect on these environments.

These undeniably anthropocentric formulations of karma provide a reinterpretation of the role of humans, encouraging people to be respectful to their environments. As discussed earlier, ideas of environmental respect quickly follow from principles of not taking life, not taking what is not given, and not being covetousness. Even though these notions may be anthropocentric, they also tell humans to respect their surroundings—they create moral codes which necessitate care for the earth and creates the idea that the environment is not something to take from freely. Further, considering the soteriology of Buddhism within this context provides another interpretation for nirvana. While nirvana is an anthropocentric salvation that centers the human, it forces humans to remain respectful to nonhumans in order to reach this salvation; it provides an incentive for practitioners to care about nonhuman subjects. Thus, by imposing this notion of

Karma, these texts foster the vocabulary to hold discussions about nonhumans which places them on a level closer to humans. I have discussed ways in which Buddhist didactic texts reinterpret anthropocentric ideas into principles which promote the preservation of the earth. However other beliefs call for more extreme reinterpretations of the role of humans through equalizing humans and nonhumans.

In Thich Nhat Hanh and Sister True Dedication's *Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet*, they expand on the previously mentioned notions of karma through an idea of inter-being, claiming that humans should care for nonhumans because there is no distinction between the two groups. Early on in the text, Nhat Hanh introduces interbeing through a reflection: "[w]hen you look deeply into your body, you see that your body is a stream… in that stream, you can see ancestors and everything—not only human ancestors, but animal, plant, and mineral ancestors" (Nhat Hanh, 19). On a very material level, this touches on how human bodies are strictly composed of materials from other sources, so-called "ancestors". However, developmentally and mentally, a person operates—is almost defined—strictly with respect to other subjects. Entanglement theory attempts to make sense of these complex relational webs between beings as described above. When discussing entanglement theory for such relationships, Ian Hodder claims that "[the term entanglement] seeks to recognize the ways in which a continual and exponentially increasing dynamism lies at the heart of the human experience" (Hodder, 14). Indeed, human 'beings' cannot 'be' without nonhuman subjects—they are deeply entangled and cannot be separated from each other. Interbeing then provides a way we can think through our relationships in the world. It goes past discussions of human-nonhuman relationships and proposes that humans and nonhumans are in fact one and the same.

This entangled view of humans proposed by Nhat Hanh's interbeing necessarily raises the nonhuman environment to the same level of respect as humans. In so doing, interbeing provides a framework to think about the world which primes the reader to consider the effect of their actions on their environments. Using this framework, Nhat Hanh advocates for environmental respect and action regarding climate change by offering advice to help the readers with their own lives. Haraway's view would claim that raising the nonhuman environment to the status of humans is anthropocentric, treating the level of respect of humans as a base-line, and defining nonhuman subjects with respect to humans. However, the converse of this must also be true—in this view, humans are defined with respect to nonhuman subjects and must give themselves the respect that their nonhuman environments deserve. Indeed, True dedication claims that in order to give surrounding subjects this respect, humans must first learn to give themselves the proper respect: "[i]f we're going to help our society and planet, we will need to cultivate reverence for life… and we will need to sustain ourselves with the right kind of fuel" (Nhat Hanh, 73). By its nature, this dialogue may be anthropocentric, but only because it is anthropocentric can it properly center and call attention to the rest of the world. It is, in some sense, a necessary centering of the human. Interbeing also provides another perspective of rebirth and karma: in prior notions of karma, such as those in *Words of my Perfect Teacher* from earlier, morally wrong actions result in a qualitatively worse birth. With interbeing though, when a person acts on something on another being in a way which hurts them, that person is hurting themselves because of the entangled nature of being. Therefore, if we as humans treat the environment poorly or take from it, we are in fact treating ourselves poorly and taking from ourselves, limiting our opportunities. Using discourses of karma and interbeing, Nhat Hanh is thus able to

redefine the role of humans with respect to environments. He makes explicitly anthropocentric claims which simultaneously call for readers to protect and foster respect for their environments.

As Haraway argues, human centrism may be harmful, but there are also helpful texts centering the human. Such texts often create moral codes which necessarily bring humans to the forefront of discussions while simultaneously instructing readers to consider their surroundings. Buddhist notions of Karma for example readily apply to necessitate care for nonhuman beings. Through Karma, Buddhist salvation—ascending to Nirvana—is also recontextualized, now requiring care for the earth. In addition, Thich Nhat Hanh and True Dedication's writing on Zen Buddhism and interbeing encourages the readers to think about themselves and their relation to surrounding environments. However they do so while stressing that no-one exists without contexts and surroundings, and that everyone exists in concert with the rest of the world. In this way, Nhat Hanh and True Dedication make anthropocentric arguments which encourage the reader to direct energy towards social and environmental issues. In both cases, anthropocentric claims are successfully able to decouple themselves from ideas which are harmful to the environment.

Section 3: Concluding Thoughts

> "In indigenous ways of knowing, it is understood that each living being has a particular role to play. Every being is endowed with certain gifts, its own intelligence, its own spirit, its own story… Wood Thrush received the gift of song; it's his responsibility to say the evening prayer. Maple received the gift of sweet sap and the coupled responsibility to share that gift in feeding the people at a hungry time of year. This is the web of reciprocity that the elders speak of, that which connects us all"
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> - *Robin Wall Kimmerer, Gathering moss: A natural and cultural history of mosses (100)*

Thus far, religious institutions and didactic texts have permeated the conversation regarding anthropocentrism. Within these texts, anthropocentric notions of the role of humans and the environment have been mixed, partially agreeing with Haraway's claim, and partially supporting an interconnected view between humans and nonhumans. However, Haraway built her reading on many texts, and so we should as well.

Primarily regarding cultural beliefs, the environmentalist Robin Wall Kimmerer frequently writes about the relationship between humans and the environment through her perspective as someone of indigenous Potowatomi descent. Similarly to conclusions within section two, while she may have anthropocentric views about the world, she uses these to advocate for environmental respect. The quote used to introduce the section shows an example of this discussion. Initially reading this reveals its anthropocentricity: she claims that the Wood Thrush has a responsibility to "say the evening prayer" or the Maple to "[help] in feeding the people at a hungry time of year". These responsibilities are both defined with respect to humans, and benefit humans. However, Kimmerer does not claim that only nonhumans have particular roles to fill, extending this to humans. She writes at length about how humans have a role in the environment as well. Similarly, she uses the above quote to advocate for a schooling which

combines a modern education with teachings about the nonhuman environment, with the intent to improve environmental awareness. She also writes about how to be aware of behaviors which limit empathy towards the environment: in her *Braiding Sweetgrass*, she discusses how the construction of English does just this, explaining that "[i]n English, you are either a human or a thing. Our grammar boxes us in by the choice of reducing a nonhuman being to an it, or it must be gendered, inappropriately, as a he or a she. Where are our words for the simple existence of another living being" (Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 56). Indeed, an idea which often surfaces in her writing is how English, like many "modern" religions—those discussed in the above sections—separates humans from nonhumans and removes the possibility of considering nonhumans as anything but that. Kimmerer's discussion about humans and the environment thus provides insight into how human societies interact with nonhumans. Further, like the discussion about karma, she uses her anthropocentric notions to advocate for environmental respect from her readers, and to foster a space to discuss such issues critically.

Like Thich Nhat Hanh and Ian Hodder, Rachel Carson, in her *Silent Spring*, advocates for notions of entanglement between the human and nonhuman worlds. In her New Yorker publications of *Silent Spring*, Carson opens describing a fictional prosperous town "in the heart of America"; she then pivots and describes how it begins to decay: "[s]ome evil spell had settled on the community… Everywhere was the shadow of death… There had been several sudden and unexplained deaths, not only among the adults but also among the children… And there was a strange stillness. The birds, for example—where had they gone?" (Carson). The "evil spell" is synthetic pesticides, insecticides, and herbicides—what she calls "biocides". This text is famous for its impact on a policy level. It uses anthropocentricity to advocate for nature—however, I will not discuss this here considering the number of other sources I already have discussing this idea.

Instead, I want to discuss how Carson entangles the human and the nonhuman to make this argument. Instead of enforcing a code of ethics as many previous sources did, Carson repeatedly appeals to the readers' fear for their lives and communities, entangling these with the environment. Discussing the importance of soil, she states that "if our life depends on the soil, it is equally true that soil depends on life; its very origins and the maintenance of its true nature are intimately related to living plants and animals" (Carson). The human use of biocides kills these plants and animals, and thus much of the soil making it harder to grow crops on such soil later. This reasoning can naturally be extended to much of her argument: one of her first points describes the effect of spraying biocides on plants; she cites studies and case studies wherein the chemicals in biocides, toxic for life, find their way into the food chain, persisting for generations, and ending up in humans. Her opening to her text, the quote at the beginning of the paragraph, shows this on an extreme level: biocides meant to help with production of crops or extermination of pests works too well and begins to affect and kill humans as well as the surrounding environment, creating a silent spring. Carson thus frames the state of humans and nonhumans as intertwined, mirroring Thich Nhat Hanh's notion of interbeing. However, Nhat Hanh uses this interbeing to advocate for self help, reasoning that this extends to the environment. Carson however uses this interbeing to advocate for environmental protection, claiming that it will improve people's lives.

Anthropocentric notions in past texts undoubtedly affected and reflected past societies, but the choice to continue reading such texts is a conscious one which reflects on our current society just as much. As David Loy comments, for Buddhism, "[a]ll traditional… sutras and commentaries are premodern. Some doctrines are more compatible with what we now understand (or believe) about the nature of the world… it's not possible to avoid emphasizing

some more than others" (Loy, 45-46). These choices are not isolated to Buddhism—the original ideas in any of these texts may have been a product of their cultures at the time of their creation, but the interpretations readers reach today reflect more on the present culture than a past culture. Thus, when anthropocentric ideas circulate in popular texts now, this must be an indication that people think this is worth reading—that these ideas are valued in some way. Further, the interpretation of these ideas must be what's valued. The scholar Bryan Stock argues a similar point, claiming that "[o]ne cannot… wholly neglect the world outside the text, or reduce it to aspects of internality, since the recodification of behavior by someone consciously reliving an earlier texts constitutes a new text, which… appears as meaningful activity before it is transcribed and passed on in written form" (Stock, 16). That is, inspection of how cultures read and examine texts—indeed, which texts people even choose to read—is a fruitful way of tracking human development. This means that when anthropocentric ideas circulate from didactic texts, this is a representation of anthropocentric ideas in the present day culture. Under this reading, the valuation of certain passages in Genesis or Buddhist scripture which push anthropocentric ideas is worrisome. However, there are many hopeful pieces of literature recirculating: the large-scale adoption of Karma and beliefs from Zen practice into non-secular domains, Carson's *Silent Spring*, even Haraways argument. Through these texts, we see that human thought is certainly shifting away from strictly anthropocentric thought.

In closing, Donna Haraway's initial reaction to condemn anthropocentric thought is justified: many texts which are anthropocentric promote a worldview in which humans are elevated above nonhumans. This elevated sense of self is problematic, leading to the commodification of the environment and generally into our current climate crisis. However, there are texts which similarly center the human while maintaining a view of humans relative to

nonhumans which is productive to conversations regarding climate issues and environmental destruction. These texts generally take a wider view of the world, discussing theories adjacent to entanglement and feature what we might consider to be a modern perspective on the role of humans. That we even consider this view modern indicates that human societies are working towards a way of discussing climate issues which does not need to center humans as explicitly—a type of thinking Haraway called for in condemning the anthropocene. However, considering that the texts we collectively value as a society still prominently features anthropocentric thought, it is important to consider how we speak and think about the environments surrounding us—in particular, to recognize when these thoughts can lead to commodification and objectification of the world.

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