COMMENTARY

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Antipodean more-than-human geographies: From the edges

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Abstract

To be more-than-human is to be relational, to no longer see the human as a discrete individual and to recognise the multivalent agency and import of the non-human in bio-physical, socio-economic and cultural worlds. This Special Issue galvanises an interest by Aotearoa New Zealand geographers in non-human–human relations and delivers more-than-human research from the edges: of the discipline, from our geographic position antipodal to 'the west' and 'the north', from early career researchers and from cognate literatures at the periphery of geographic thought. The contributions here question understandings of ethics, politics, conservation and economy through papers that explore affect, care, agency, discourses and practices with a range of more-than-human subject-objects: blackberries, wine yeasts, insects, PFAS and urban streams.

KEYWORDS

Antipodean geography, Aotearoa New Zealand, more-than-human, non-human affect, the Antipodes

1 | INTRODUCTION

Recent research into topics like rewilding, the role of the microbiome in human ecosystems and the agency of 'the natural world' reveals interesting theoretical questions about the role and politics of more-than-human (MTH) relations in geographic thought. What does this mean in times of crisis? What does it mean for the relations we hold, and who are 'we' in these relations? Does this framing actually challenge notions of anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism? This Special Issue presents insights into a suite of *Antipodean more-than-human geographies* from the vantage point of MTH scholars 'on the edges' of the discipline: from our geographic position antipodal to 'the west' and 'the north', from early career researchers and from cognate literatures at the periphery of geographic thought. Work like that of Thomas (2015), Parsons et al. (2017), Yates (2021), Stevens et al. (2022)

and Sharp et al. (2022) indicates that there is a keen interest from Aotearoa New Zealand geographers to spark greater conversations around the ethical relations between human and non-human others. This Special Issue is a convening point for these interests, bringing them together in space and place.

This Special Issue evolved from a session on MTH geographies at the 2022 New Zealand Geographical Society conference in Ōtautahi Christchurch (22–25 November) convened by the four guest editors. We build from the momentum of that conference, featuring the work of four session participants. As guest editors, we are united by a shared empirical interest in the MTH of food and agriculture and an ethos of knowledge co-production with a lively Earth, as galvanised through the Critical Food Studies Group in Te Kura Mātai Taiao|School of Environment at Waipapa Taumata Rau|University of Auckland.

2 | THE MORE-THAN-HUMAN

The 'more-than-human' blurs the boundaries of the animate and inanimate, the 'natural' and 'cultural,' complex socio-ecological systems and individuals, non-human and human. The MTH approach is a political project of disrupting ontological norms to highlight oft-neglected, typically animate earth others (Braun & Castree, 1998; Greenhough, 2014). A MTH approach denies human exceptionalism and refuses to 'presume that socio-material change is an exclusively human achievement' (Whatmore, 2006, p. 604). By bringing together diverse strands of post-humanist thought to disturb dominant Cartesian-based boundaries around humans as autonomous and separate from nature, it argues that there are no clear binaries between human–nature relations (Ives, 2019; Rose & van Dooren, 2017; Whatmore, 2004). In this way, we understand that humans are entangled in a mosaic of interconnected networks with other non-human entities, recognising that diversity, co-constitution and interdependency are foundational to planetary flourishing (Kimmerer, 2013; Sharp et al., 2022). Many of these networks are banal. In fact, as Whatmore (2004, p. 1360) argues, 'What gives the post-human moment bite is the fact that mapping its emergence ⋯ is a diffuse activity. It is practised as much in everyday negotiations with, say, foodstuffs and healthcare as in the generative spatial metaphors of the humanities or the biocomputational models of the life sciences'. Much work in MTH geography has emphasised the mundane, the everyday doings of human and non-humans that are often unacknowledged.

One such underacknowledged and emergent arena of MTH scholarship that is gaining interest is *probiotic governmentalities* (Lorimer, 2020), a commitment to working with nature particularly seen in conservation and human health. While much of the theoretical interest in post-Pasteurian (Paxson, 2008) or rewilding (Lorimer, 2020) politics is driven from the social sciences, this theorisation has emerged concurrently with changing western conceptualisations of natural science (particularly in human microbiome research which shows the importance of microscopic others for human health, and in ecological research which highlights keystones species as essential to conservation). This requires an engagement across academic boundaries that geographers have been well placed to lead.

Rather than entirely rejecting or uncritically reifying science, MTH geographers have demonstrated their ability for 'redistributing expertise' (Whatmore, 2004, p. 1362) and contesting as well as collaborating with the natural sciences. On the matter of acknowledging diverse expertise, MTH geographies also provide fertile grounds

within which decolonial scholarship advocating the voices and agency of non-human actors (as ancestors, as kin, as spiritual beings) within Indigenous Lifeworlds (e.g., Williams, 2012) can flourish. The MTH knowledge infrastructure—the thinking, doing and its assemblage—thus holds promise for Indigenous researchers seeking to 'radically rethink how we understand the world, what we privilege within it, how we relate to place and time, and how we *do* geography' (Barker & Pickerill, 2020, p. 655). This is explored further in McSherry and McLellan's (2023) commentary included in this issue.

Another prevalent theme in current MTH discourse that arises in this Special Issue is an MTH ethics of care, where new value appears to manifest in spaces of affect and care for MTH others. We see this explicitly in papers by Yee and Sharp (2023) and by Goburdhone and Dombroski (2023), both of which reflect a care-full attention to the minutiae of actors' movements and/or relations through close affectively oriented engagement. This prompts us to ask whether it is possible to study the MTH at speed or from a distance. What are the place-based contexts under which care/affect might mesh with the political project(s) of the MTH? Prompted by the contributors in this Special Issue, the papers tease out Anna Tsing's proposition that 'edges [can be] found in the middle of [dominant] formations as well as out-of-the-way places' (Tsing, 2015, np). We propose that these edges have the greatest potential for transformability for ways that we as humans intend to be and are in the world. These are sites where we cannot help but see the diversity of MTH engagement.

3 | CONTRIBUTIONS FROM THE ANTIPODES

The term 'Antipodes' is itself MTH. Directly translated to mean 'wrong footed', there is an immediate suggestion of subversion in being located in the Antipodes. From a global perspective, the Antipodes are constructed as places 'on the edge', seemingly distanced from an imagined 'centre' (of knowledge production, of economic relevance, of power) and thus often sidelined from dominant, western scholarly discourse.

Yet as 'edge dwellers' in Antipodal places, our contributors hold promise for experimentation and expansion in terms of MTH praxis. Turning to the global geopolitical stage, Aotearoa New Zealand is uniquely placed. While we are institutionally recognised as a bicultural nation with the necessary legal and political frameworks in place for ongoing engagement in ethical decolonial relations, the current reality of Māori-Pākehā relations in Aotearoa are far from equitable. In this sense,

we are very much still a settler-colonial state, and colonialism persists despite having the politico-legal grounds for change. In fact, anything short of genuine political pushes for constitutional reform that restore and affirm *tino rangatiratanga* for iwi and hāpū would be politically disingenuous.

Having said this, MTH geographies do provide fruitful opportunities for scholars to engage with decolonisation at multiple scales, as both Indigenous and Indigenous-allied researchers (McSherry & McLellan, 2023; Sundberg, 2014; Thomas, 2015). We therefore see MTH geographies as *potential* spaces for the decolonial project, *if* careful attention is paid to the structural realities implicit within the academy. We say this because while the burgeoning popularity of MTH geographies does indeed do good work in terms of challenging eurocentric nature–culture dualisms, the current landscape of MTH geographies in the Antipodes (and beyond) nevertheless tends to perpetuate implicit colonialism by virtue of its 'long, problematic relationship with colonial power' (Barker & Pickerill, 2020, p. 640). Indigeneity thus continues to remain marginal, with Indigenous cosmologies (epistemologies) often being denied academic legitimacy within the discipline. With ongoing and renewed commitments to *doing geography differently*—that is, by taking seriously Indigenous 'knowings', 'beings' and 'doings'—there is hope and great potential for reform and movement towards more just MTH worlds.

We therefore contend that the idea of the 'Antipodes' is in need of problematising. Rather than being relegated to the margins and edges of scholarly praxis, we see the inclusion of the fertile Antipodal terrain as essential to the project of emergent MTH research. In this sense, to echo the Ancient Greek philosopher Timaeus (Stewart et al., 2017), we seek to replace the Antipodes, not situating it as 'other', or even 'wrong-footed', but delinking the notion of 'otherness' from 'violation' and proposing that the Antipodes are, in fact, a lively site of actually existing ontological difference. Perhaps the Aotearoa New Zealand experience of geographical scholarship is an adaptation to both the western communities of the discipline whilst being attentive and sensitive to settler-colonial contexts and important Indigenising and anti-colonising forces of the country. In this sense, to be Antipodal is not to be wrong footed—where both feet are elsewhere—but to be here *and* there. This framing sees the Antipodes as a relation rather than a place and does not argue for national exceptionalism (Beilharz, 2002). As Morgan and Lewis (2020, p. 161) argue, 'in Aotearoa/ New Zealand we can no longer assume that there are easy answers to the questions of "who we are" and "what is here"'. Rather, we see the Antipodes and Aotearoa New Zealand as MTH actors in their own right, ones

deeply entangled with the knowledge-making practices of their relations.

The papers in this Special Issue, as intentionally assembled, are Antipodean in production, in origin, in place and space and in their politics. They are all disruptive in their own way, seeking to decentre anthropocentric thinking and doing. As a disruption to what is performed as conventional knowledge 'expertise', each paper has been first authored by early career researchers—postgraduate geographers in the main— based on their primary research. Furthermore, the case studies in the Special Issue are drawn from the geographic peripheries; Aotearoa New Zealand is often a location left out in global cartography and scholars from this part of the world are sometimes under-recognised. From these margins, the unique angles of regard in this issue demonstrate a mode of theorising that is geographically distinctive and generative in pushing forward ways of thinking about the MTH—to bring them out of the margins with respect to their agency, materiality and relationality. Not only does this Special Issue decentre dominant geography, but it performs Antipodean practice.

4 | SPECIAL ISSUE PAPERS

Our suite of five research papers and three commentaries introduce a range of non-human actors as subject-objects, place them in their geographical relations and consider them as thinking points for diverse theory as well as advancing MTH literatures. Typically, there is a dominance of animal geographies in MTH scholarship, with a prevalence of research on non-humans that are 'big like us' and 'animal like us' (Krzywoszynska, 2012; Lorimer, 2014) where human-centredness still creeps into MTH thinking. In this Special Issue, none of the papers take charismatic animals as their subject-object. Instead we offer an antipodal antidote through the neglected ontologies of weeds, yeasts, insects, chemicals and urban streams. This brings us onto methodological considerations, as papers in this issue offer a diversity of ways in which we might speak for the MTH. Just one example is Goburdhone and Dombroski's (2023) description of tactile, embodied encounters of soil that speak to what have been undervalued and underused multi-sensory renderings of the world.

The Special Issue begins with three papers that contribute to understandings of affect theory and affective MTH relationships. The first paper starts the issue on a vegetal note. Virens (2023) composts the perceptions, place and philosophy of weeds as settlers and as the unsettled. The paper develops critical observations of

weeds-as-settlers, and notes the colonial networks that support their spatial travels. Using the example of the blackberry, Virens dives into questions of belonging and inclusion, as well as the emotive responses that humans can have towards non-humans. Throughout, her work attends to the slippage of seemingly stable categories with a particular emphasis on the discursive construction of weeds.

In thinking about different ways of living-with(in) a MTH world, the next two papers help to draw out and acquaint readers with other beings who are ostensibly less 'charismatic' (Lorimer, 2007) than the ubiquitous plants or megafauna of Aotearoa. Siimes (2023) goes microscopic, building off a recent interest in STS approaches and the social study of microbes. His paper ferments on a particularly challenging wine and beer yeast—*Brettanomyces*—that calls for reconceptualising our understanding of taste and qualification. Through a cultural approach to biological economies (Lewis & Rosin, 2013), Siimes explores Brett as an agential cultural and economic actant, offering a playful anthropomorphism of Brett. Brett is an iconic *Awkward* (Lorimer, 2014) and thinking-with it reshapes what it means for something to taste *good*. Siimes's paper contributes to literature on MTH entanglements with microbes, as well as the relational-social construction of taste.

Yee and Sharp's (2023) paper then challenges dominant understandings of insect agency by paying care-full attention to the ways in which insects care for and with humans. In taking up the task of caring more critically, their paper reveals tensions and complexities that arise between insect needs and demands in the production of insect bioeconomies. The juxtaposition in this paper of insects that are bred to be eaten and those that are bred to eat is especially interesting. Given the growing buzz around insects as human food, animal feed and bio-control, Yee and Sharp's contributions to understandings of insects as affective agents and as capable of reciprocal care themselves are timely and provocative.

The final two papers shift from the living to the world of 'objects', joining the rich thread of research (e.g. by Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, & Jane Bennett) that takes new materialist definitions of the MTH to recognise the vitality and ability to animate of seemingly inanimate objects/material/things. By questioning conventional understandings of nature and highlighting the relationalities of the MTH world, these papers contribute to a broader reimagining of our ties with non-human others and advocate for more inclusive and ecologically attuned perspectives. Buttle et al. (2023) explore the agency, materiality and relationality of the global contaminants of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) or 'forever chemicals'. They ask what PFAS' ubiquity means for

Aotearoa New Zealand's regulatory and management processes, considering both the chemical and receiving environments when framed as MTH. Their shift in framing means that regulation, policy and practice do not just see land, water (and everything in between) as productive spaces in need of 'saving' for the furtherance of human progress and prosperity, enabling a recognition of MTH intrinsic rights to health.

The final paper in the issue animates the Waimapihi stream as a case study, and documents the human–environment relations of those involved in its restoration. Samuelson et al. (2023) demonstrate how their participants (re)negotiate understandings of MTH agency alongside their own identity and place-based politics. The paper flows amongst growing efforts to reorient ourselves towards building more ethical relationships in our everyday encounters with urban streams. The authors assert that at Waimapihi, human–stream relations are constantly shifting and evolving, and cannot be reduced to stable and universal abstractions. The paper similarly moves conceptions of restoration past stale imaginations of an untouched nature *out there* through an emphasis on how plural ontologies of the stream are formed and themselves form social processes.

Following these research papers, we then have three commentaries. The first explores the intersection of MTH geographies and decolonial research. McSherry and McLellan (2023) draw on Indigenous kinship to suggest that doing MTH geographical research—as emergent Indigenous researchers (Alice, Naxi-Indigenous Chinese/Pākehā and Georgia, Māori-Te Whakatōhea) is akin to attending a family reunion with long-lost kin. In doing so, they posit that re-engaging in Indigenous and decolonial MTH geographies is to explicitly frame MTH scholarship as a mutual process of recovery and remembrance (as opposed to the 'discovery' of new onto-epistemologies). Together, they re-envision the project of coming back to a relational praxis in research as living and breathing their ancestral ecological wisdom in an unbroken spiral of time alongside their non-human kin. They use the metaphor of attending a family reunion to invite other researchers to join them at the table, to collectively unsettle and challenge the core ontological foundations of the discipline.

Goburdhone and Dombroski (2023) then explore the possibilities that urban farms offer to reconnect people with their food systems. Both authors conducted fieldwork at the same urban youth farm in Ōtautahi Christchurch, and they reflect on the healing effects of MTH ecologies on the young people who took part. They contribute to a growing MTH interest in soil (e.g., Krzywoszynska & Marchesi, 2020; Wing & Sharp, 2023), and one that lends credence to accounts of attunement and thinking-with. Through their research into the practices of compositing

food waste into soils, they question concepts of care, where caring for or about soils become caring *with* soils. In short, their commentary offers a hopeful path towards healing social and nutrient metabolic rifts.

The final commentary offers an afterword to our collection, reflecting on two key terms from MTH dialogues: 'community' and 'local'. This case study from Norway is antipodal to examples and thinking from Aotearoa New Zealand, to step the contributions outside our own emplaced reflections. As Weber and Barron (2023) point out, while Aotearoa New Zealand and Norway are similarly small and 'edgy', their colonial and Indigenous histories differ vastly. Inspired by Indigenous ways of knowing, the authors extend the notion of community to include non-humans, with clear implications for sustainability, place-making and politics. From Norway, they offer an integration of localness, community and relations as they pertain to place, proposing 'learning to be emplaced in community' as a *re-turning* of Latourian learning to be affected.

5 | CLOSING: OPENING A CONVERSATION

Given the eight contributions to this Special Issue, what can we say of an Antipodean MTH Geography? Does such a discipline exist? Is Aotearoa New Zealand part of the Global South, the Global North, east or west, or are our feet 'here and there'? What the papers in this collection speak to is the value of research from this part of the world as a basis from which to advance theory. We are not presenting the Antipodes as an 'essential place' however, or as one with a single culture or historical experience. Indeed, the label 'Antipodean'—with its geographic specificity—avoids the generalisations that terms like the 'Global South' or 'Postcolonial' often accompany.

Despite the large ground covered by the above contributions, what is not highlighted in this Special Issue is MTH aspects of technology, digital lives and virtual worlds. While elements of these are seen in some of the papers, there is room for more explicit work that takes digital technology as a central MTH actor. And yet the range of non-humans that are reckoned-with in the Special Issue papers offer fresh and generative understandings of MTH geography. As well as providing a range of provocations to the 'core' of MTH theory, the articles taken together offer a way forward for MTH thinking, one that attends to conceptions of place, Indigeneity and relational ontologies that may not be as visible from 'the north' and 'the west'. What these papers achieve is the possibility for change. Perhaps our Antipodean stance allows the onto-epistemological freedom to put our best foot forward.

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