Post-human Attunements: Aesthetics, Authority and the Arts of Creative Listening

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Abstract

This introduction to the themed section on Attunement explores the varied practices, politics, and aesthetics of attuning to more-than-human voices, temporalities, and material processes. What happens when we attempt to attune ourselves to forms of agency that do not possess a conventionally recognized 'voice' to be amplified? What new intersections between research, invention, and political agency might emerge when 'voices' have to be assembled rather than merely amplified, and when new methods of 'listening' need to be invented? The concept of 'attunement' speaks to subtle, affective, modulations in the relations between different bodies. We describe four broad traditions of scholarship that render differently the concept of attunement. Firstly, the Kantian sense of attunement as a harmonious and playful mediation between the human faculties of imagination and understanding. Secondly, attunement as a pre-conscious way in which we find ourselves disposed, or 'tuned', to our environment. Thirdly, attunement as a form of embodied relationality and interconnectedness that capacitates individual empathy and grounds the possibility of co-production. Finally, attunement to vastly different spatio-temporal scales as strange, uncanny and uncertain - transient achievements that brings us into contact with lost futures, haunted presents and even different versions of ourselves. The contributions we have drawn together explore the concept of attunement in relation to themes that include technology, aesthetics, human-animal relations, class, landscape, feminist, political and post-colonial theory.

Key words: attunement; more-than-human; aesthetics; listening; voice; ecology; authority; otherness.

As the alarming consequences of the dominance of anthropocentric forms of thinking and politics on environmental, social and mental ecologies (Guattari, 1986) become ever more apparent, there has been a surge of interest in inventing new ways of collaborating with, listening to, and granting authority to new kinds of voices, including more-than-human life and forms of material agency. This themed section of *GeoHumanities* explores the varied practices, politics, and aesthetics of attunements to more-than-human voices, temporalities, and material processes. In doing so, these essays explore the politics and practices of forms of 'creative listening' to more-than-human life and material agency, and question how non-human actors can make authoritative demands for human ethical and political response.

Critical and politically engaged research has often been described in terms of 'giving voice' to marginalized subjects. But what happens when we attempt to attune ourselves to forms of

agency that do not possess a conventionally recognized 'voice' to be amplified? What new intersections between research, invention, and political agency might emerge when 'voices' have to be assembled rather than merely amplified, and when new methods of 'listening' need to be invented? The geohumanities have become increasingly preoccupied with the ways in which aesthetics and sensory experience can play a role in challenging established modes of voice, authority and authenticity, by foregrounding the active role of non-human agencies, processes and ecologies in the construction of publics and politics. At the same time, there has been close attention to the role of affect, atmosphere, and ambience in producing and reproducing spatial relations of power and authority. These currents of thought highlight the ways in which many forms of power work through subtle shifts in how bodies become attuned to other bodies, time-spaces and sensory registers. Our modes of attunement produce ways of encountering diversity and 'otherness'. As an analytic device, then, the concept of attunement speaks to subtle, affective, modulations in the relations between different bodies.

This themed section invites readers to explore "attunement to the world in all its particularity, strangeness, enchantment and horror" (Anderson *et al.*, 2012: 213). The concept of attunement is associated with various traditions of thought, including: phenomenological ideas of dwelling and worlding; post-phenomenological and neo-vitalist theories of encounters, affect, and hybridity (Bennett, 2009; Haraway, 2008; Anderson, 2014; Ash & Simpson, 2014); sensory methodologies (Evans & Miele, 2012); spiritual practices (Oosterbaan, 2008); feminist materialisms (Braidotti, 2002); speculative modes of theory and politics (Whitehead, 1967[1933]; Stengers, 2011); and indigenous traditions of responsibility to the natural world (Todd, 2014; Tallbear, 2015). Here it may be useful to distinguish some key meanings and resonances of the concept.

As Jackson (2016) discusses in his critique of the Eurocentric, subject-oriented implications of attunement, the concept is rooted in northern-European Enlightenment philosophy. The theory of attunement has its origins in German aesthetic theory, most notably the philosophies of Kant and Herder (as well as later writers such as Schiller, Hegel, and Heidegger). In Kant's *Critique of Judgment,* the musical term *Stimmung* (usually translated as either 'attunement' or 'harmony') plays a central mediating role. The experience of beauty, according to Kant, arises from an attunement of the two representational powers, Understanding and Imagination. Attunement is a kind of playful mediation between different faculties: the freedom of the Imagination and the lawfulness of Understanding. In this sense of the word, attunement refers to a harmonious, free, playful traversal across difference. It is for this reason that it is here, rather than his explicitly political work, that Hannah Arendt (among others) locates Kant's true political philosophy.

If Kant associates attunement with active, free play, much post-Kantian thought has conceptualized attunement in terms of receptivity, awareness, and passivity. To attune is to tune in or to tune out; it is to calibrate our bodies as instruments. In Heidegger's phenomenology, attunements are the fundamental ways in which we find ourselves disposed in such and such a way. Attunements are a tuning of being. They are a capacity to be affected by or calibrated by our environment, especially by those forces of which we are unaware. Attunements in this sense are not conscious, and are destroyed by the attempt to make them conscious. Thus attunement is something like a pre-conscious affect, mood, feeling or atmosphere: a form of joy, contentedness, bliss, sadness, melancholy or anger that orients us in particular ways but does not

raise itself into awareness. Heidegger writes: "Attunements - are they not like the utterly fleeting and ungraspable shadows of clouds flitting across the landscape?" (Heidegger & Figal, 2009: 85).

A third body of work on attunement approaches it in subject-oriented, psychological terms as a form of embodied relationality, akin to something like empathy: attunements are embodied ways of tracking emotions or affects. Daniel Stern (1985, 2010) characterizes attunement in terms of 'vitality affects' that enable one person to 'be with' another through sharing likely inner experiences. This humanist psychology has been applied by other writers to the domain of human–animal relations, with some going as far as to argue that attunement is "one of the primary ways that humans and their animal companions communicate. Animals and humans sense each other's bodily and subjective states through all of the perceptual systems working together" (refs). Other writers have analyzed shamanism, magic, and spiritual activism in similar ways, moving towards a metaphysics of radical interconnectedness that more fully acknowledges the role of materials and technologies in generating empathetic attunement (see Blue, this issue; Miele, this issue). Acknowledging and fostering the role of spirits, animals, objects and other actors in the co-production of the world, in this line of enquiry, requires attentiveness to contact zones, to modes of encounter and translation (refs). Similar ontologies of radical interconnectedness have motivated a number of ecological movements in recent decades.

Although *Stimmung* is sometimes translated as harmony, this is potentially misleading since the German word can be used to capture dissonance and tension as well as harmoniousness and resolution. 'Attunement', then, is not tied to a Romantic orientation to holistic connectivity or subjectivism, and all of the papers in this themed issue take a distance from such Romanticism. Attunement also involves orientations to difference, dissonance, and suspension (see Blencowe, this issue; Brigstocke, this issue). In this sense, it is at home with modernist and post-modernist geo-aesthetics, and it is from this perspective that recent writers on speculative realism and object-oriented ontology have mobilized the concept (e.g. Morton, 2014). When objects, forces and spirits that exceed the spaces and times of human experience press themselves upon us with increasing force, this creates heightened challenges for attuning to our environments. For example, entities that inhabit unimaginably vast temporal frames, such as the climate, nuclear waste, fossils, and plastics, can only phase in and out of human perceptibility. These disorienting temporalities do not generate an experience of a Kantian sublime, an uplifting experience of the power of Reason to master the infinite; rather, they defy cognition. In these contexts, attunement becomes deeply strange, uncanny, uncertain. Attunements speak not only to relations, but also to the absence of relation, the demands placed upon us by the wholly other. They bring us into contact with lost futures and haunted presents (Fisher, 2014; see Brigstocke, this issue). Attuning to these temporalities perhaps even demands not so much harmonious and organic inter-relatedness, as a letting go of the organic body, actively distancing our enquiries from this intimate sphere in order to generate connections with *dis*embodied, post-human senses (Colebrook, 2014).

The papers in this themed section explore the concept of attunement in relation to diverse themes including technology, aesthetics, human-animal relations, class, landscape, feminism and post-colonial theory. To begin, Mark Jackson offers a critical perspective on the notion of attunement and its role in the aesthetic theory of the European Enlightenment, in particular the

Kantian framework within which discussion of aesthetics so often operate. Jackson argues for the need to *decolonize* the register of the aesthetic through a radical attention to ontologies of difference. The very concept of the aesthetic is colonizing because "it posits a separate and separating subject as a critical, self-reflexive unit necessary for politicization" (this issue: page). Jackson argues for the need to let go of the category of the aesthetic, including a celebration of a 'politics of aesthetics', and instead to pay attention to diverse creative and spiritual practices that are not couched within a Eurocentric approach to subjective self-awareness. Doing so requires a willingness to "accept alternative ontological and cosmological accounts as parallel and plural" (*ibid.*: page).

Claire Blencowe (this issue) considers the attempts of three ecological attunements that invoke forms of radical interconnectedness to inspire new pro-poor egalitarian politics. She asks whether such attunements can speak effectively to the industrial and post-industrial working class, who are increasingly targeted by nationalisms of the populist political right. Blencowe critically engages each ecological attunement's emblematic figure - the enchantress, the witch, and Gaia (or 'Mother Earth'). As with Jackson, Blencowe writes at the intersection of aesthetics and ecology, foregrounding the question of who the 'we' is that is doing the engaging, critiquing and associating. However, in contrast to Jackson's strong anti-humanism, Blencowe takes inspiration from the counter-humanism of prominent decolonization movements. She sketches a form of counter-modernism that emphasizes the mixedness and technical composition of the human, and appropriates modernism's attunement to disconnection, alienation and shock effects through practices that can speak effectively to a popular, pro-poor politics.

Gwendolyn Blue (this issue) addresses the central role of technology in generating attunements to more-than-human publics. Through a discussion of *Bear71*, an interactive documentary exploring the surveillance of grizzly bears in the Canadian Rockies, Blue develops an approach to attunement where "digital technologies and other more-than-human entities are agents in emergent political worlds and ethical possibilities" (*ibid.*: page). Blue sees new possibilities for human–animal attunement at the interface of bodies and technologies, exploring the role of 'remediation' – where immediacy, proximity and connection are, paradoxically, achieved through technological mediation – in the experimental production of new animal publics.

Mara Miele (this issue) turns to science's analysis of animals: specifically, the conditions under which scientific practices attempt to attune to animal emotions. As with Blue, Miele draws out how attunement entails technical and material mediation. Miele shows how sheep emotions, such as fear and bravery, are precarious accomplishments rather than matters of fact awaiting discovery. They are best characterized through the arrangement (*agencement*) of the ordinary materials that shape human research practice and come to produce animals as 'effects'. Miele suggests that in order to attune to animals in their complexity, we need to look beyond the mistaken holism she identifies with an older, Paracelsean, epistemology of 'signatures' that continues to haunt modern scientific inquiry. Miele asks, "What are animals then if we abandon a theory of signatures? (*ibid.*: page)? She finds three versions of the sheep in simultaneous existence: the productive sheep, the suffering, fearful sheep and the learning sheep.

Anatoli Ignatov (this issue) stages an encounter between political theory, ethnography and 'orature' - defined as "the use of utterance as an aesthetic means of expression" (Zirimu, cited in Ignatov, this issue) - among the Gurensi and Boosi people of Ghana, in order to trouble the dominant habituations of Euro-American ecophilosophies. Where communication with ancestors occurs through modes of attunement to the land's expressivity, oral traditions become forms of political thought that entail human and more-than-human voices in the polity. In forcing the land to speak, orature thereby effects a 'stutter' in current Euro-American ecophilosophies that have hitherto neglected African traditions of thought. Through such an interruptive encounter, Ignatov explores the implications of identifying sacred texts with Deleuze and Guattari's notion of 'minor literature' - focusing on percepts rather than concepts in order to "consider a practice of theory that is less concept-centric and more open to attunements that come from the world" (Ignatov, this issue: page).

Julian Brigstocke's creative essay, finally, attunes itself to forms of exhausted temporality in everyday urban landscapes. It is an experiment with 'writing the city' – evoking the kind of counter-modernism discussed by Blencowe (this issue) – that responds to a growing foreboding that the future has been occupied, colonized or destroyed. This essay is a methodological experiment with attunement and futurity. It aims, not to re-attune to authentic forms of temporality or to rediscover lost forms of imagination and memory, but to make creative use of our temporal mis-attunements and disconnections. The essay phenomenologically evokes a kind of inertia of time: a sense of lost or absent futures, of time standing still, waiting. It asks whether new temporalities may become palpable through heightened attunement to this inertia, this exhausted temporality.

A number of dangers raise themselves by using attunement as an analytical framework. As described, the contributions to this themed section avoid using the concept of attunement in order to invoke normative ideals of being 'in harmony' with each other or with nature. Such ideals risk being highly conservative and exclusionary, leading to those who appear 'out of tune' (strangers, outsiders) to be registered as dangerous, threatening or requiring intervention (Ahmed, 2014). Another danger is raised by Jackson (this issue) in his critique of the Eurocentric, colonial genealogy of the notion of attunement and geo-aesthetics more generally. We would argue, however, that despite these dangers, attunement is a concept that can speak to difference and be receptive to the diversity and heterogeneity of non-human "qualities, rhythms, forces, relations and movements" (Stewart, 2011). Post-human attunements generate monstrous aesthetic forms (Dixon, 2008; Dixon, 2011), requiring inventive practices of listening (Hetherington, 2013). An analytical framework, attunement also requires a fundamental re-orientation towards the aesthetics of authority and expertise (see Brigstocke, 2014; Noorani *et al.*, 2013). Who or what guides us through our encounters with more-than-human others? How do we find our way? How do our guides earn our trust? Attuning to more-than-human worlds requires a radical decentring of authority, acknowledging the ways in which non-human forms of agency co-author heterogeneous worlds. Doing so might offer pathways towards tackling the forms of colonialism, patriarchy and class power that rely in differing ways on the hierarchical separation between the human and the non-human.

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