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FORUM ON ATTUNEMENT

Posthuman Attunements: Aesthetics, Authority and the Arts of Creative Listening

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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 among 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. First is the Kantian sense of attunement as a harmonious and playful mediation between the human faculties of imagination and understanding. Second, attunement can be seen as a preconscious way in which we find ourselves disposed, or tuned, to our environment. Third, attunement can be conceived of as a form of embodied relationality and interconnectedness that capacitates individual empathy and grounds the possibility of coproduction. Finally, attunement to vastly different spatiotemporal scales can be seen as strange, uncanny, and uncertain—transient achievements that bring 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 postcolonial theory. Key Words: aesthetics, attunement, authority, ecology, listening, more-than-human, otherness, voice.

As the alarming consequences of the dominance of anthropocentric forms of thinking and politics on environmental, social, and mental ecologies (Guattari 2000) 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 articles explore the politics and practices of forms of creative listening to more-than-human life and material agency, and question how nonhuman 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. What happens, though, when we attempt to attune ourselves to forms of agency that do not possess a conventionally recognized voice to be amplified? What new intersections among 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 nonhuman 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; postphenomenological and neo-vitalist theories of encounters, affect, and hybridity (Haraway 2008; Bennett 2009; Anderson 2014; Ash and Simpson 2016); sensory methodologies (Evans and Miele 2012); spiritual practices (Oosterbaan 2008); feminist materialisms (Braidotti 2002); speculative modes of theory and politics (Whitehead [1933] 1967; Stengers 2011); and indigenous traditions of responsibility to the natural world (Todd 2014; Tallbear 2015). Here it might be useful to distinguish some key meanings and resonances of the concept.

As Jackson (this issue) 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 in 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 preconscious 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 wrote, “Attunements—are they not like the utterly fleeting and ungraspable shadows of clouds flitting across the landscape?” (Heidegger and 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. Stern (1985, 2010) characterized 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. Lasher (1998) argues that “The primary mode of communication between human and animal is attunement, the mutual picking up of, and responding to, the subjective state of another creature” (130). Other writers have analyzed shamanism, magic, and spiritual activism in similar ways (Oosterbaan 2008; Novellino 2009), moving toward 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 coproduction of the world, in this line of enquiry, requires attentiveness to contact zones, to modes of encounter and translation. 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 because the German word can be used to capture dissonance and tension as well as harmoniousness and resolution (Wallrup 2015). Attunement, then, is not tied to a Romantic orientation to holistic connectivity or subjectivism, and all of the articles in this forum take a distance from such Romanticism (see Tang 2008). 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 postmodernist 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 2013). When objects, forces, and spirits that exceed the spaces and times of human experience press themselves on 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, and uncertain. Attunements speak not only to relations, but also to the absence of relation, the demands placed on 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 interrelatedness, as a letting go of the organic body, actively distancing our enquiries from this intimate sphere to generate connections with disembodied, inorganic senses (Colebrook 2014).
The articles in this themed section explore the concept of attunement in relation to diverse themes including technology, aesthetics, human–animal relations, class, landscape, feminism, and postcolonial 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 operates. 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). 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” (this issue).

Claire Blencowe (this issue) considers the attempts of three ecological attunements that invoke forms of radical interconnectedness to inspire new propoor egalitarian politics. She asks whether such attunements can speak effectively to the industrial and postindustrial 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”). Like 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. In contrast to Jackson’s strong antihumanism, however, Blencowe takes inspiration from the counterhumanism of prominent decolonization movements. She sketches a form of countermodernism 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, propoor politics.

Gwendolyn Blue (this issue) addresses the central role of technology in generating attunements to more-than-human publics. Through a discussion of Bear 71, 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” (this issue). 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 does 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 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?” (this issue). 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 among 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 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 to “consider a practice of theory that is less concept-centric and more open to attunements that come from the world” (Ignatov this issue).

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 countermodernism 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 reattune to authentic forms of temporality or to rediscover lost forms of imagination and memory, but to make creative use of our temporal misattunements 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 could 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 section avoid using the concept of attunement 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) being 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 geoaesthetics 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 nonhuman “qualities, rhythms, forces, relations and movements” (Stewart 2011, 445). Posthuman attunements generate monstrous aesthetic forms (Dixon 2008, 2011), requiring inventive practices of listening (Hetherington 2013). As an analytical framework, attunement also requires a fundamental reorientation toward the aesthetics of authority and expertise (see Noorani, Blencowe, and Brigstocke 2013; Brigstocke 2014; Blencowe, Brigstocke, and Noorani 2015). 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 nonhuman forms of agency coauthor heterogeneous worlds. Doing so might offer pathways toward tackling the forms of colonialism, patriarchy, and class power that rely in differing ways on the hierarchical separation between the human and the nonhuman.

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