

Experimenting with Nomadic Posthumanism: Conceptualising Education and Rural Learning Ecologies Differently

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Abstract

This exploratory article is a thought experiment in thinking differently about education and rural learning ecologies. The wording of the concept rural learning ecologies suggests culture-nature interplay. Underlying this interplay is a logic of thought that posits the human opposite of that which it is not – nature. In this relationship the power to direct and dissect is always skewed towards (human) culture because of the humanist position from which learning ecologies are conceptualised, observed, made sense of and enacted. Drawing on the works of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari I experiment with an alternative understanding of the culture-nature relationship in order to explore the ‘lines of escape’ this offers to conceptualise education differently. I do this through engaging with nomadic posthumanism which treats subjectivity as a continuous process of becoming that is produced in ‘assemblages’ (agencement). Reclaiming the materiality of relations through such an understanding of the subject makes possible the creation of different forms of education and collective (educational) practices.

Keywords: assemblages, becoming, difference, nomadic subjectivity, posthumanism, rural learning ecologies.

Introduction

This exploratory paper is a thought experiment to consider alternative approaches to conceptualising education and rural learning ecologies.

Following Colebrook's (2002: 21) understanding that problems are 'a way [of] creating a future', one should perhaps not ask what education should be, but rather how education might become. I do this by problematising humanism and exploring nomadic posthumanism and the implications it holds for conceptualising education and rural learning environments.

To read education and rural learning ecologies through the lens of posthumanism, I need to make some underlying assumptions clear. The first is that I understand this article to be an experiment with what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) call minoritarianism. The minoritarian has nothing to do with quantity but are 'masses of escape' (Conley 2010: 167) inherent in normative forms of enunciation. It offers a way for the normative to be exposed to 'lines of fluctuation that open up a gap and separate it from the axiom constituting a redundant majority' (Conley 2010: 167). Put differently, the minoritarian is 'movements of flow that subvert the dominant' and which 'implies a subversion of the domination of the majority by a creation that explodes it from within' (May 2003: 149). In understanding this article as a minoritarian philosophy of education, I attempt to side-step what Deleuze called an *image of thought* (in Deleuze & Parnet 1987:13). According to an *image of thought*, thinking is an unproblematic and natural activity, and truth can be discovered through rational means. However, for Deleuze (1994), thinking should not be considered as unproblematic. Instead, thinking must entail a violent confrontation with the real¹ that aims to rupture accepted categories and ways of making sense of our experiences. Thinking then is not about establishing truth but about attaining a *thought without image*. That is, thinking should be about recognising problems and not discovering truths. Spangenberg (2009: 93) explains that Deleuzian thinking 'is the activity that takes place when the mind is provoked by an encounter with the unexpected, the unfamiliar or the unknown'. In drawing on Nietzsche, Deleuze (1983: 101) argues for philosophical thinking not to be concerned with that which is true or false but rather with the interesting, remarkable or important; only then would thinking 'mean discovering, inventing, new possibilities of life'. This is the first assumption that underlies this paper and which I use as a point of departure.

¹ I employ the concept 'real' not in a Lacanian sense. Rather, I draw on Deleuze's distinction between virtuality and actuality to associate 'the real' with 'processes that constitute the givenness of objects rather than with the constituted, identifiable objects and categories themselves' (Bell 2011: 4).

The second point of departure flows indirectly from attempting to engage with a minoritarian philosophy of education. Through problematising a foundational Sameness of pre-determined categories and essences, avenues are opened to explore the Deleuzean concept of difference and how it may be taken up in conceptualising education and rural learning ecologies.

Secular Humanism and Education

Humanism is not homogeneous and as such, it is important to make clear which form of humanism I refer to in relation to nomadic posthumanism. Taking my lead from Braidotti (2013), I refer to Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man as the starting point to define secular humanism. Braidotti (2013: 13) notes that the Vitruvian Man upholds what is 'human about humanity' and that it 'combines the biological, discursive and moral expansion of human capabilities into an idea of teleologically ordained, rational progress'. The Vitruvian Man (the fact that it is a man being referred to, is no coincidence), represents the idea that humans have the ability to pursue, through deliberative reasoning, not only individual but also collective perfectibility. This human subject stands at the centre of his world which *he* is able to manipulate to 'accord with his own wishes; and (who) is a historically independent agent whose thought and action produce history' (Seaman 2007: 246). But we should not understand the human of humanism to be an ideal type or statistical average; rather, we should recognise that it makes possible a 'systemized standard of recognisability – of Sameness – by which all others can be assessed, regulated and allotted to a designated social location' (Braidotti 2013: 26). This Sameness is not inherently negative but because it is highly regulatory it is 'instrumental to practices of exclusion and discrimination' (Braidotti 2013: 26).

Arguably, it is what Husserl (1970) refers to as the European universal powers of reason, which led to the great tragedies of imperialism and colonialism. Braidotti (2013: 15) argues that underlying these universal powers of reason is 'the dialectics of self and other, and the binary logic of identity and otherness as respectively the motor for and cultural logic of universal Humanism' and that central to this idea of humanism is the 'notion of difference as pejoration'. The consequence of this is that 'subjectivity is equated with consciousness, universal rationality, and self-regulating

behaviour, whereas Otherness is defined as its negative and specular counterpart' (Braidotti 2013: 15). A related aspect of secular humanism - the imperial gaze - has been critiqued by post-colonial theorists such as Said (2004) and Davies (1997). What is of concern is that most formal education models are founded on the humanist ideals of Enlightenment philosophies. Education projects are concerned with 'cultivating certain cognitive, social and moral abilities' (Pederson 2010: 237) in order for people to become-more-human towards what McKay (2005) refers to as compulsory humanity. In the humanist formal education setting, the human subject is 'both the instrument and the end product of education' (Pederson 2010: 241). This needs to be taken very seriously in the light of the claim that:

All Humanisms, until now, have been imperial. They speak of the human in the accents and the interest of a class, a sex, a race, a genome. Their embrace suffocates those whom it does not ignore. ... It is almost impossible to think of a crime that has not been committed in the name of humanity (Davies 1997: 141).

Although secular humanism has been problematised for over a hundred years (see Nietzsche 1982), the problematising of the ontological and epistemological foundations of an essentialised human nature has become more sustained in recent years. Furthermore, it has been shown that not everyone who is human has been or is counted as such within the humanist tradition (Agamben 1998; Seaman 2007). The very boundary between what it means to be human and nonhuman has become permeable and elastic (Pederson 2010). It is these aspects of secular humanism that necessitates one to consider different theoretical positions when thinking about education and rural learning ecologies.

Nomadic Posthumanism

Posthumanism does not reflect a 'chronological progression or historical moment' that signifies the end of humanism, but should rather be understood as problematising the ontological and epistemological positions that make possible the conception of a human in essentialist terms (Pedersen 2010: 242). A posthumanist position argues that the stability of humanism is

supplanted by ‘mutation, variation, and becoming’ (Seaman 2007: 247). Instead of the stable subject (individual) of secular humanism, a subject that is relational, complex and ruptures categories is proposed (Braidotti 2013). Posthumanism takes on various forms. In this article I draw on critical posthumanism that develops from philosophical antihumanism². Specifically, it is a posthumanism that pursues alternative visions of education through a call for an ‘affirmative politics [that] combines critique with creativity’ (Braidotti, 2013: 54). It is the concepts of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) that inform this understanding of posthumanism and to which I now turn my attention. In exploring how we became posthuman, I draw specifically on the concepts of difference, becoming³ and assemblage (*agencement*) which were proposed by Deleuze (1994) and Deleuze and Guattari (1987). For Deleuze and Guattari (1994: 23) concepts are ‘centres of vibrations, each in itself and everyone in relation to all the others’. If concepts are understood in this manner, Irwin and Springgay (2008: 107) aver that ‘meaning and understanding are no longer revealed or thought to emanate from one point of origin rather they are *complicated* as relational, rhizomatic, and singular’. Concepts are ‘intensive: they do not gather together an already existing set of things (extension); they allow for movements and connection.’ (Colebrook 2010: 1). The aforementioned understanding guides the employment of the concepts difference, becoming and assemblage to explore new possibilities through which to conceptualise education and rural learning ecologies. I

² I do not draw on the posthumanism developed by Nussbaum (2010) that emerges from liberal individualism and moral philosophy and which seeks a neo-humanist ethics to cope with the interconnectedness brought about by globalisation and the global market economy. I also do not refer to the cybernetic orientation of analytical posthumanism prevalent in science and technology studies that interrogate the intimate relationship between humans and technology (Hayles 1999; Verbeek 2011).

³ Deleuze develops the concept of becoming in his earlier works, *Difference and Repetition* (1994) and *The Logic of Sense* (1990). Although the manner in which the concept is employed in these works cannot be separated from how it is used in his collaborations with Guattari, I will mainly draw on the latter use thereof. For an exposition on the development of the concept of becoming by Deleuze see May (2003).

attempt to decentre an essentialised human in order to reconsider the human-nature relationship and the implications for education.

At the heart of Deleuze's (1994) and Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) theoretical project is the ontology of difference. When considering difference it is usually thought of 'either as 'difference from the same' or difference of the same over time' (Stagoll 2010: 75). The consequence of such reasoning is that 'difference becomes merely a relative measure of sameness' (Stagoll 2010: 75). Such an understanding of difference forms the basis of grouping like with like and then drawing distinctions between these groups. Thus, difference is understood to emerge from identity. But Deleuze (1990, 1994) problematises the notion of identity as foundational through inverting the relationship between difference and identity. Instead Deleuze argues that identity is something that is produced by a prior relationship between differentials (Smith & Protevi 2013). Furthermore, the reasoning that underlies the emergence of difference from identity distracts from the specificity of each experience. Instead he calls for the 'particularity or 'singularity' of each individual thing, moment, perception or conception' (Stagoll 2010: 75). On a phenomenological level we label things as belonging to the same kind because we conceive of things in terms of shared attributes. A phenomenological description of something yields this by systematically dispensing with superfluities via the *epoché* and the different reductions; this is how, for Husserl, the eidetic structure of the 'phenomenon' emerges, which is what makes other things recognizable as having the 'same' phenomenological 'essence'. Yet, by privileging the differences between them we fail to 'realise the uniqueness of each moment or thing' (Stagoll 2010: 76) and the interconnectedness between each instance of singularity. Ignoring the dimension of uniqueness in difference led May (2005: 21) to argue that:

What can be identified is only a single manifestation, a single actualization, of what there is. What there is, is difference: a difference that is not simply the distinction between two identities (which would subordinate difference to identity) or the negation of one of them (which would think of difference only negatively). What there is, is a difference in itself; a pure difference that forms the soil for all identities, all distinctions, and all negations.

But if we remove the foundational grounding of identity and sameness, how can we conceive of things? To answer this, I briefly explore the concepts of becoming and assemblage as developed by Deleuze (1994) and Deleuze and Guattari (1987).

For Deleuze (1983: 23) ‘there is no being beyond becoming’. There is no transcendent reality, only immanent becomings. But what is becoming? Becoming is how difference unfolds in time (May 2003: 147). This is because difference produces movement and transformations. These transformations are not predetermined or modelled on things that already exist but are ‘a state of the movement of pure difference’ (Roy 2003:77). Becoming is thus not the transformation of $A \rightarrow B$, but could rather be understood through the equation $\dots+y+z+a\dots$ (Massumi 1987). This view of becoming posits it as the perpetual movement of the in-between along lines of escape. The movements that produce becomings are described by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) as de/re/territorialisation. The concept of assemblage coined by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) is another important idea to consider in relation to posthumanism and education. Assemblages are complex arrangements ‘of objects, bodies, expressions, qualities, and territories that come together for varying periods of time to ideally create new ways of functioning’ (Livesy 2010: 18). They are a multiplicity formed through the organisation ‘of heterogeneous elements into a productive (or machinic) entity...’ (Livesy 2010: 18) that produces both affect and effect. In explaining the concept of productive or machinic assemblage, Colebrook (2002) refers to a bicycle. A bicycle in itself does not have a particular function nor does it work if it is not placed in relation to other machines. Yet, when it is placed in relation to a human body it becomes a mode of transport and in a gallery it becomes an artwork. Klein (in Malins 2004: 85) uses the image of a cigarette to explain machinic assemblages: ‘When smoked it becomes a drug, when held seductively at the end of ones fingertips it becomes an object of beauty; when shown in a film it becomes a plot device’. Assemblages then are always in flux, being formed and reformed through the movements of transformation. It is these movements of de/re/territorialisation that produce becoming.

To illustrate the concepts of becoming and assemblage and how things are not only always in-between but also always bounded up with one another in multiplicities, I refer to the image of the orchid and the wasp as described in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Deleuze and Guattari base their

description on an occurrence in which *Drakaea* orchids are pollinated by Thynnid wasps. The *Drakaea* orchids imitate the flightless female wasps and produce pheromones similar to that which the female wasps produce in order to attract the male wasps. In utilising this phenomenon to illustrate becoming through the processes of de/re/territorialisation, the abovementioned authors write:

The orchid deterritorializes by forming an image, a tracing of a wasp; but the wasp reterritorializes on that image. The wasp is nevertheless deterritorialized, becoming a piece in the orchid's reproductive apparatus. But it reterritorializes the orchid by transporting its pollen. Wasp and orchid, as heterogeneous elements, form a rhizome. (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 10)

In this illustration, the orchid and the wasp are never only an orchid or a wasp; they are always in-between, in the process of becoming. But their becoming does not follow separate trajectories. In this productive assemblage their becoming is inextricably linked with each other; they are a multiplicity. In an earlier book, *Nietzsche and philosophy*, Deleuze (1983: 24) expresses this interconnectedness succinctly by stating that 'Multiplicity is the affirmation of unity; becoming is the affirmation of being'. Nancy's (2000) concept of 'being-singular-plural' finds resonance in the Deleuzoguattarian concept of becoming. According to Nancy's 'being-singular-plural', anybody is brought into being through encounters with other bodies. It is in this encounter that a shared existence is created. Relationality is thus dependent on singularity (Irwin & Springgay 2008). An important implication of the concept of singularity as it emerges from the works of Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 1994) in thinking about posthumanism and education is that binary logic does not hold. The posthuman self and the nonhuman other cannot exist without the presence of the other just like the orchid becomes-wasp and the wasp becomes-orchid. It is in relationality that becoming is produced. The importance of the concepts difference, becoming, and assemblage for education is that it seeks to destabilise stable identities and fixed ideas in order to consider alternative possibilities. This notion is further developed by Braidotti (2006, 2013). In drawing on Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 1994), she

develops the concept of a nomadic subjectivity⁴ as a subject of multiple belongings. The nomadic subject is ‘constituted in and by multiplicity’ but is still grounded and accountable because it is ‘based on a strong sense of collectivity, relationality and hence community building’ (Braidotti 2013: 49). But this interconnectedness and multiple belongings are not only confined to the human subject. Instead, by removing the centrality of individualism, the non-unitary subject of nomadic posthumanism extends this interconnection between the self and others to also include the nonhuman. This interconnectedness ‘suspends the boundaries between that portion of life – both organic and discursive – that has traditionally been reserved for *anthropos*, that is to say *bios*, and the wider scope of animal and non-human life, also known as *zoe*’ (Braidotti 2013: 60). It is towards such an understanding that education must turn to remain relevant. Especially in a time when the foundations of liberal individualism and its economic expression of advanced capitalism is increasingly being challenged due to a growing recognition of the havoc it has and is still causing, in terms of inter-human relations and human relations with the nonhuman. Ethically, we (as humans) have no choice but to experiment with different forms of becoming in the world.

In this section I introduce how I take up posthumanism in this article. I do this with particular reference to Deleuze (1994) and Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987; 1994) concepts of difference, becoming and assemblage, and Braidotti’s (2013) nomadic subjectivity. What I hope to illustrate is that in contrast to certain forms of humanisms (such as philosophical or secular humanism) which are informed by teleological rationality and self-centred individualism, the new materialism that informs my understanding of nomadic posthumanism posits a non-unitary subject that is based on collectivity and relationality. Furthermore, this position ‘abandons the idea of matter as inert and subject to predictable forces, instead positing matter as indeterminate, constantly forming and reforming in unexpected ways’ (Springgay & Rotas 2014: 1). The embodied, affective and relational are

⁴ The concept of the nomad is developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) in *A Thousand Plateaus*. The nomad is characterised by movement and change. It exists and operates outside of any form of organisational state. The nomad is always in the middle of things because the ‘life of the nomad is the intermezzo’ (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:380).

central in an ontology that ‘recognizes the interconnections of all phenomena’ (Springgay & Rotas 2014: 1), both the human and the nonhuman. The dualism inherent in secular humanism is dismantled to be replaced by difference, affective intensities and becoming (Van der Tuin & Dolphijn 2011). Having sketched what nomadic posthumanism entails, I wish to reflect on what this may mean, not only for education in general, but also for how we conceive of rural learning ecologies.

Nomadic Posthumanism, Education and Rural Learning Ecologies

I attempt to contribute to the notion of rural learning ecologies by writing materiality into the concept. Within the concept rural learning ecologies, ecology is understood to be ‘an environment that fosters and supports the creation of communities’ and as ‘an open system, dynamic and interdependent, diverse, partially self-organizing, adaptive, and fragile’ (Looi in Hlalele 2014: 103). In extending this concept to include learning, Hlalele (2013: 564) proposes that learning ecologies are ‘a collection of overlapping communities of interests; cross pollinating with each other; constantly evolving; and largely self-organizing’. Characteristically, he avers, these communities ‘come into being, evolve, die, regenerate and transform’ (Hlalele 2013: 564). In coming together in learning ecologies, these communities collectively co-create their preferred vision of present and future life, as well as which forms of learning will achieve this. Hlalele (2013: 565) also observes that we can ‘assume that learning generates and builds upon complex and diverse networks/webs of *human* existence’ (my emphasis) and in relating it to Ubuntu, points out that it entails ‘a conscious, deliberate, internalized, and pervasive focus on the self in the environment, and the self in the community...’ and in so doing creates an awareness of ‘self-as-part-of-environment’. The notion of rural learning ecologies is closely associated with social justice; a project that is becoming increasingly important in addressing the perpetuation and deepening of structural and social inequalities in the globalised commodification of the economy. The experience of these deepening injustices, also as it pertains to the availability of quality education, has been shown to be pronounced in rural contexts. When compared to urban areas, injustices in rural contexts include a lack of

provision of services and infrastructure and lower school attendance due to socio-economic vulnerabilities such as poverty and child labour (Hlalele 2014). I am not suggesting that the focus of posthumanist projects should be exclusively on education in rural contexts; it applies to urban contexts too as the social injustices that accompany neoliberal capitalism are arguably just as pronounced there.

I argue, however, that the current notion of rural learning ecologies and its aim of creating a more socially just society is still firmly rooted in secular humanism, with its promise of societal perfectibility through a commitment to human rationality. Ever present then is the danger of falling into the abyss of a world in which humans are able to manipulate and ‘whose thought and action produce history’ (Seaman 2007: 246); a history in which not everyone is considered human, or entitled to the same privileges. The failure of humanism to address the values of pluralism, tolerance and equality have been laid bare by posthumanism, just as the ‘limitations in addressing whatever may emerge from the multiple interfaces between the organic and inorganic; material and virtual, cultural and natural worlds’ (Pedersen 2010: 242) have been made evident. When thinking about ecologies (human and nonhuman), nomadic posthumanism offers us a different way to conceptualise the relationship between humans and the environment. The rejection of humanist individualism (the self-in-nature) through the introduction of a non-unitary subject and a more inclusive sense of the interconnectedness with nonhumans and ‘earth’ others carry implications for how we think about education and rural learning ecologies. In place of ‘complex and diverse networks/webs of *human* existence’ and an understanding of the ‘self in the environment, and the self in the community’ nomadic posthumanism proposes a nature-culture continuum in constant process of becoming. Subjects (human and nonhuman) within the continuum are relational entities that are connected to multiple others in assemblages. Yet, relations are only ever in process and are the sum of everything in the assemblage. If this is the case then all relations are transient, which means we need to continuously invest in them. But investment itself is not enough; we need to seek to recognise productive assemblages in educational contexts that affirm life, not with the aim of reproducing them – which can never be done if difference-in-itself is taken seriously – but in order to explore ways in which education might become. This is because productive assemblages are ‘a new means of expression, a new territorial/spatial organisation, a new

institution, a new behaviour, or a new realisation...’ that are ‘destined to produce a new reality, by making numerous, often unexpected, connections’ (Livesy 2010: 79). Thus, education should be understood in terms of experimental and experiential processes that create different, but not necessarily better, possibilities of life.

In thinking about education my position intersects with Kumashiro’s (2000: 46) appeal that we should not seek to hold onto a utopian vision that ‘would simply be a different and foretold way to be, and thus a different way to be stuck in a refined sameness’ but rather seek ‘to constantly become, ... [to] want difference, change, newness’. But such a becoming can only occur if we recognise the interconnectedness of all phenomena, human and nonhuman, and not ‘close off the space-between’ (Kumashiro 2000: 46). In relating Kumashiro’s appeal to educational practices, Biesta (1998, 2006) warns against an instrumentalist pedagogy that seeks to achieve specified predetermined outcomes because inherent in educational encounters is an impossibility and unpredictability that flows from ‘ontological and epistemological insecurity’ (Pedersen 2010: 246-247). The impossibility and unpredictability inherent in education mirrors, to some extent, flux and flows of becoming, for how becoming is affected and effected can never be foreseen. If this is the case, what can we hope to achieve through education? Education should provide the conceptual and practical possibilities to develop forms of activism that are geared towards ‘re-appropriating the immediate spaces of existence by simultaneously transforming them through everyday actions’ (Papadopoulos 2010: 75). We should equip ourselves to identify productive education assemblages and seek ways to perpetuate these. It is through the reclamation of material spaces and vital relations that we will be able to develop alternative social and material realities (Papadopoulos 2010). What is in question then is how we change matter, in this case assemblages that produce and are produced by education, through collective practices, in order to create new forms thereof. I have argued that it is through destabilising and replacing stable categories with becoming that we open up lines of escape. This becoming is, however, not confined to humans, but is expanded to include not only the realm of *bios* but also the realm of *zoe*.

Lines of Escape

All becoming is minoritarian, as all becomings are a return to difference. This

is, I believe, how education should unfold. Education should become-minoritarian through spontaneous and creative acts of activism that build on political singularities. Such an experimental and experiential approach offers a way ‘to changing our collective modes of relation to the environment, social and other, our cultural norms and values, our social imagery, our bodies, (and) ourselves’ (Braidotti 2012: 269) through a confrontation with the real. By foregrounding becoming, the importance of relationality is made pervasive. Such a focus on relationality opens up alternative ways of considering how education may contribute to creating a different, and perhaps, more socially just world. This understanding of a socially just world is, however, not rooted in a teleological vision, but occurs when ‘we step without reserve to the other’ (Richardson & St. Pierre 2005: 972), whether this other be human or nonhuman. It is in stepping towards that difference unfolds as the ‘possibility of becoming other than the present self’ (Semetsky 2004: 320) and a renewed belief in the world to come (Deleuze 1995: 176). In thinking about rural learning ecologies such a position becomes of utmost importance as we grapple with increasing complex contexts in a world where the flow of both material and social resources are moving progressively along evermore rigid and hierarchical lines. Writing materialism, which informs my understanding of posthumanism, into rural learning ecologies may offer one line of escape; an escape that is grounded in ‘new forms of collective practices’ (Papadopoulus 2010: 75) through an enlarged sense of the interconnectedness between *bios* and *zoe*.

In returning to one of the underlying assumptions that has guided this article - thinking as problematic - I need to reiterate what I aimed to achieve. I did not set out to discover a truth or to get ‘the right take on things’ (May 2003: 140); instead, it was to make a contribution to how we perceive living, in particular living as it relates to the education project. I endeavoured to move beyond description and explanation in order to highlight that ‘philosophy [of education] does not consist in knowing and it is not inspired by truth. Rather, it is categories, such as Interesting, Remarkable, or Important that determine its success or failure’ (Deleuze & Guattari 1994: 82). In attempting to do this, I return to the second assumption – all there is, is difference. If the categories of Interesting, Remarkable, or Important are pervasively significant to philosophy of education, then it should seek to not only problematise the Sameness of fixed identities and categories where they occur, but also to ‘recognize and create novelty and difference’ (May 2003:

140). And in thinking differently it may lead to alternative, if not more preferable ways of living in the world.

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Experimenting with Nomadic Posthumanism

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