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TC Boyle's "Politics of Nature"

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Abstract: This paper offers a Latourian reading of T.C. Boyle's novel *When the Killing's Done*. It shows that the novel satirizes contemporary ecological debates and stages the cultural wars of our current ecological culture. It also demonstrates, however, that the novel does not merely point out the impasse of our current ecologies: its fiction intuitively diagnoses the contemporary "crisis of purity" in modern environmental politics and points us towards the kind of entangled ecologies sketched by Latour and other recent thinkers. Like Latour's reinvention of a more hybrid and entangled "politics of nature," Boyle's novel allows us to reimagine a complex and contaminated new ecology, away from the purifications of our contemporary "*NaturPolitiks*".

Keywords: politics of nature; T.C. Boyle; Bruno Latour; contaminated ecologies

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1. Introduction

T. C. Boyle's 2011 novel *When the Killing's Done* is an eco-satire dealing with contemporary issues of ecological preservation. At the heart of the novel is a confrontation between scientists working for the California Park Services and local animal activists. Both camps have differing views about ecological management and bicker about the fate of invasive animal species on two of the Northern Channel Islands (Anacapa and Santa Cruz)[1]. Biologists for the Park Services vie for a thorough cleansing of opportunistic species to make way for the dwindling population of native species while animal rights activists call for the right of all creatures to live side by side on the islands. The contest, unsurprisingly, devolves into a full-on war between the claims of science and those of animal ethics, between transcendent natural laws and the superior diktats of morality. And the novel ends with a familiar stalemate: how do we know how to protect and manage nature? Must we leave it to itself or submit it to a higher—more human(e)—order?

When the Killing's Done masterfully stages the cultural wars and contradictions of our eco-cultures. It shows how the two dominant approaches of Western nature management—the calculating approach of "population biologists" and the lofty idealism of animal rights activists—are responsible for the hopeless muddle of our current ecological politics. But the novel's satire is also larger in scope. It does not simply make light of two visions of nature but points out a fundamental—and ironical—impasse behind their warfare. T. C. Boyle's novel shows that the aporia of our modern ecological polemics are not due—as we might think—to an insufficiently rigorous defense of nature but to its "purification". Like Bruno Latour in his recent *Politics of Nature*, Boyle shows that our ecological approaches are ineffective not because we fail to protect nature from human encroachment but because we separate it too successfully from human culture and politics. Nature's purification—its transformation into a scientific or ethical transcendence—is what makes it incompatible with human economies and management. This makes it inaccessible to politics. And there is no way out of this impasse except through a thorough redistribution of both the contours of nature and the polis.

[1] The Santa Cruz archipelago, or Northern Channel Islands, is situated off the coast of Santa Barbara in California. Boyle has written two novels about these Channel Islands. Boyle (2011) focuses on both Anacapa's and Santa Cruz's contaminated ecosystems. *San Miguel* (NY, Penguin books, 2012) written a year later, deals more specifically with the eponymous island and its human settlements.

My contention, in this paper, is that Boyle's fiction clearly illustrates the aporia of our modern purifying ecologies. Although Boyle is neither a "Latourian" nor an explicit theoretician of the crisis of modern natural politics, he diagnoses, unerringly, the contemporary "crisis of purity" in modern environmental politics. He also points us towards a more entangled alternative and his fiction sketches the kind of hybrid and contaminated ecologies Latour and other recent thinkers have offered as alternatives to the dead end of modern dualism. His fiction is exactly the kind of resource Latour has in mind when he claims that "Novels, plays and films from classical tragedy to comics provide a vast playground to rehearse accounts of what makes us act"[2]. Novels such as Boyle's allow us to think through the impasse of today's ecological thought and to reimagine the hybrid solutions needed to face our entangled natures-cultures.

2. Boyle's Aporetic Nature Wars

Boyle's exuberant narrative offers us a conundrum familiar to our times: given an environment that has been disaffected by centuries-old human cultures and economies, how do you best manage and care for it? What kind of ecological approach will be the most ethically responsible as well as respectful of its "equilibrium"? In the novel, these particular queries take the form of a protracted fight between two camps: that of the scientists and their exclusive concern with population biology and that of animal activists who harbor an entirely different but no less limited notion of "life". Alma Boyd Takesue and Dave Lajoy are the warriors in the service of these two purifying visions. Alma is a biologist who works for the National Park Services and Dave Lajoy, a Santa Barbara businessman, is the leader of an Animal Rights group modeled after PETA. The bone of contention for these two characters is the ecological restoration of a couple of the Channel Islands, a small archipelago off the coast of Santa Barbara. The California Park Service, Alma's employer, has set its sight on two islands—Anacapa and Santa Cruz. It intends to rid both of their invasive species (rats, pigs, sheep) and to restore native populations of golden eagles and dwarf foxes. Given the usual procedures attendant to native habitat restoration—control and killing of nonnative animal populations—the stakes of the fight are obvious. Dave Lajoy and his animal rights comrades are (rightfully!) indignant about an ecological project that cold-bloodedly plots the killing of thousands of rats, feral pigs and sheep, while biologists are (justifiably!) incensed about the ignorance and hubris of lay-activists unable to understand rudimentary population biology. Both camps are fighting for their own purified vision of nature. The scientists fight for a biologically orthodox version of an original nature: free of the parasitic species introduced by man. The animal rights activists fight for their utopian—Judeo-Christian and romantic—version: one in which all species co-exist within the deep harmony of a brotherly realm.

It is easy to identify in these two conflicting approaches the two main nature paradigms of the modern West. Both appear with similar polemical roles in countless of our post-Enlightenment cultural products from Rousseau's *Second Discourse* to Herzog's *Grizzly man*. The latter film, for example, stages a similar tension between the eponymous hero's sentimental approach to animals and the Darwinian nature of scientists. Herzog's Timothy Treadwell is pictured as an unwitting warrior and victim: an animal lover who pays dearly for his ignorance of nature's cruel laws. Boyle's Lajoy, a far less sympathetic character, is also described as passionate and obtuse: defending the rights of all animals to live regardless of biology's most elementary logic. Both authors describe thus what has become a truism of our eco-culture: the opposition of environmental logic and sentiment, science and morality. It may also look like their depictions embrace the bias usually associated with this modern conflict and turn their tales into a defense of science. To a superficial reader, Boyle's novel can be read—as *Grizzly Man* can also be—as another predictable sneer at naïve animal lovers and other old ladies of the SPCA. It may seem, for example, that Dave Lajoy, the privileged and angry animal lover, is far more caricatural than his hard-working counterpart (Dr. Alma Boyd

[2] Bruno Latour (2005, pp. 54–55).

Takesue, Ph.D.) and that his hubris is punished in the same way that Timothy Treadwell is (Lajoy is killed both by a wreck and by the very snakes he is bringing to Santa Cruz's newly purified ecosystem). But Boyle is a talented satirist, and his tale is far less simplistic than Herzog's manipulative portrait. The former excels at embracing the truisms of our culture but only to illuminate their blind spot. And the true purpose of his satire is not to help us reinforce our modern bias for science but to help us recognize the problematic nature and aporia of both eco-ideologies.[3] The hard-fought ecowars of the novel may ultimately bring death to animals and their activists, yet it is impossible to decide who truly wins in the end. The author satirizes the logical as well as ethical incoherence of both sides—Alma the biologist fights animal overpopulation but contributes to the human population by becoming herself a mother, while one of the animal lovers (Anise) becomes an activist in reaction to nature's (not man's) cruelty, and the novel ends quite clearly with a draw. The last chapter may indeed show Alma and her Park Service friends celebrating Santa Cruz' successful ecological restoration but the last words are not hers. They belong to Rita, the mother of Anise, and to a couple of invasive animals brought in by her colleagues: "a single inconvenient specimen of *Procyon Lotor* [. . .] observed feeding at the compost bin at the main ranch three and a half months back . . . " and some rattlesnakes (Boyle 2011, p. 362).

3. The Purification of Nature (Latour)

When the Killing's Done ends, then, with a stalemate ("the killing," as it turns out, is never quite "done"). And it is this aporia that brings Boyle's satire's closer to Latour's own view on the shortcomings of contemporary visions of nature and ecology. For both Boyle and Latour, the failure of scientific ecology or its animal right counterpart are not due to their theoretical or practical limitations but to their relentless purification of nature. These visions of nature management tend to make nature into a separate realm, free from the everyday entanglements of human and nonhuman realities. This is, of course, a fundamental trait of our Western "naturalist" cosmology. According to Bruno Latour's recent *Politics of Nature*, nature is for us Westerners "the harmonious and hierarchical totality of a world (. . .) whose power lies in its separateness and permanence, filled with objects that are as stable as they are stratified from the cosmos to microbes, by way of mother earth" (Latour 2004, p. 25). Regardless of how it may be linked to human industry, politics or morality, we believe it to be ruled by immutable laws foreign to human life and accessible only to specialized knowledge (science or ontology). This division between nature and our culture—*the world as it is* and *the world as humans interpret it*—is both an ontological and epistemological tool. It creates, beyond our complex realities and practices, a realm of incontrovertible facts that can be mobilized against the unstable knowledge and politics of human culture.

Latour traces the roots of this purifying divide to Enlightenment modernity with its Kantian model of knowledge and its dual preoccupation with Science and Politics. Premodern periods also toy with such dualisms as body and mind, real and ideal, but modernity places its great ("Copernician") chasm between an immutable—largely unknowable—objective world and subjective human constructs[4]. Nature becomes both autonomous and inaccessible: impossible to grasp through human history and politics. This invention of nature as a pure "outside" to human knowledge and values has, of course, momentous

[3] I have used both *Grizzly man* and T.C. Boyle's satirical novel in my Animal Studies classes to bring students awareness on dominant Western conceptions of nature and ecology—scientific ecology and animal rights. Both are quite useful to make students cognizant of the grip these narratives have on our consciousness; and both, albeit in very different ways, illustrate the need to go beyond the impasses of the opposition between science and animal rights.

[4] Latour retraces this genealogy of the nature–culture dualism in Latour (1999). The argument of this latter work is slightly different from *Politics of Nature* and builds a more variegated picture about the hold of this dualism in the Western philosophical psyche. *We Have Never Been Modern* shows that it "constitutes" in the political sense of the term the ideological framework of modernity and that the mutual exclusion of science and politics is at the basis of all modern humanist myths—progress, revolution, colonization. *Politics of nature*, as the title indicates is more focused on the political power play behind the dualism and traces its "coup de force" to a more ancient philosophical source (Plato's cave myth). It shows that the epistemological power play of the moderns (the use of natural science to shortcircuit democratic politics and all questioning of the complex bond between nature and society) can be traced back to the Greek's division of the world into two separate houses (the social human one and the nonhuman one).

consequences. It creates a binary world where nature becomes an exteriority that can be either exploited or used as a transcendence to keep human pretentions in check. The nature we exploit and the one we save—and use in order to neutralize the human order—are the same. They are both on the same side of this exclusionary cosmology and serve the same a-political agenda. Both exploiters and defenders of this "fetishized" nature use it to tear apart the web of human and nonhuman connections, to purify their dialog and interrupt their politics. Partisans of progress use it to justify massive human exploitation of a supposedly inert matter while ecologists use their "greener nature" to wrest it away from humans and use their pristine fiction against human politics.

This last point is crucial as it speaks to the main argument of Latour's *Politics of Nature*, namely that purified notions of nature have been used in modernity to paralyze politics and the democratic process. It is also an essential feature of Boyle's fiction, which shows how nature's transcendence is used by all sides of the ecological debate to "short-circuit the questioning of the complex bond between the sciences and society" (Latour 2004, p. 19). The two ecological approaches in play in the novel are clearly based on such a purified, transcendent view of nature. Both are set on opposite sides of the modern nature/culture divide, and one may seem more archaic than the other since the animal rights side is based on the syncretic (biblical and romantic) view of nature characteristic of the movement. Dave Lajoy borrows his convictions and vegetarianism from the biblical command "thou shalt not kill" and a Schopenhauerian call to universal compassion found on a PETA pamphlet (Boyle 2011, p. 127)[5]. But both are nonetheless "modern" in that they defend the idea of a purified and transcendent nature, untouched by man's corruption. The PETA side envisions a prelapsarian state of universal intra-species equality in an unlocatable world without human or animal strife. The other projects a vision no less incoherent for being scientific: that of a perfect a-historical and a-human state of natural equilibrium, one in which, according to Alma Boyd Takesue, nature is allowed to "take its course," give or take a few animal holocausts. Both sides ignore the singular and historical composition of the geo-political problems that they deal with. They use a transcendent view of nature to stop debate about the complexities of our hybrid ecological histories and to claim the ideological upper hand.

Boyle is quite good at underscoring the artificiality of these fictions of naturalness: showing, for example, how the scientific dream of a "pure ecosystem" has to collaborate with cultural artefacts such as the park system and other products of American history and policies[6]. He also shows how each side uses their purified and transcendent nature to interrupt negotiations and paralyze politics. When Alma, the Park biologist, organizes a townhall to inform the public about rat eradication on Anacapa, she has no intention of discussing the goals, phases and means, of the conservation project with her opponents. Her entire strategy is to shore up her position and to make its model impregnable. To this end, she starts her communication by calling Anacapa "the Galapagos of America," knowing full well the effect this evocation is supposed to have on her audience. The phrase, as she herself mentions, is a "tired [one, but one she] conscientiously works into all her press releases and talks [. . .] because it never fails to have its effect, people drifting off on a fugue of *National Geographic* specials, of blue-footed boobies, frigate birds, vampire finches and marine iguanas presented in loving close-up while azure waves beat at the crinkled shore" (Boyle 2011, p. 57). Alma uses this familiar Darwinian trope as an argumentative shortcut

[5] Dave Lajoy finds the following Schopenhauer quote in a pamphlet handed to him by a PETA activist in his high-end stereo component store: "The assumption that animals are without rights and the illusion that our treatment of them has no moral significance is a positively outrageous example of Western crudity and barbarity. Universal compassion is the only guarantee to morality" (pp. 129–30).

[6] He shows, for example, how the scientific vision of a pure and restored Santa Cruz ecosystem is associated with the cultural model of nature as "preserve": a historical product of American history and ideology. Alma's Santa Cruz is a strictly new-world invention whose purity is designed to 1. obfuscate the reality of its hybrid natural–cultural history (Santa Cruz Island has been cultivated by humans for centuries) and 2. keep control in the hand of scientists and 3. use this purifying fiction as a lure to both placate environmental activists and focus their attention on the wrong objects. (As John Berger said about animals, the overabundance of animal images in our culture is not only a witness of their disappearance but also an obfuscating strategy. The same could be said about these utopian ecological preserves: focusing on their purification is politically expedient: it keeps us away from the real crisis which is not a "crisis of nature," but a political and practical one).

and to imbue her position with uncontestable authority. This commanding move allows her to bury all cultural and historical complications associated with the island's hybrid landscapes and to focus everyone's attention on the wrong objects. Indeed, presenting Anacapa's contaminated landscape as a "Galapagos in crisis" allows Alma to replace all complex questions of natural–cultural cohabitation with a literal "science fiction": that of a reconstituted and pure eco-system, free from all contamination and human attachments. As we know from *Jurassic Park* and other such tales, reconstituting original eco-systems is neither simple nor safe[7]. Alma's own experience with the eradication of the brown snake on the island of Guam (in chap. 5) has shown her how impossible it can be to control invasive species. And the question that still remains at the outset of such project, successful or not, is that of man's continued presence in the purified eco-systems. Assuming, for example, that Anacapa or Santa Cruz Island can be rid of their invasive species and returned to their "original" state of nature, who will be witness and party to such purity? And if humans are still present on the islands—as their Natural Park designation implies—will they not continue to contaminate and transform their ecologies? Can we, in other terms, continue to define the island's ecological crisis as a "crisis of nature" if the crisis is always one of unclear separation between objects and people? Should we not define this crisis instead as a "crisis of naturalness" (or "objectivity")[8]? And should we not start thinking about the islands' ecologies as hybrid: defined by their relations with human concerns and artefacts?

What Boyle's fiction illustrates, then, is that we manufacture these "crisis of nature" to distract us from the difficulty of thinking ecologies as hybrid and tangled affairs. The purified natures invoked by both sides of the novel's nature wars are directly responsible for their entrenchment and stalemate. And the only way to shift from this stalemate—what Latour sees as the impasse of "*NaturPolitiks*"—to a better political ecology—or "*Politic of Nature*"—is to shift from a focus on totalizing conceptions of nature and their objects, to a tangled approach. "The risk-free objects, the smooth objects we had been accustomed up to now, [must] give way to risky attachments, tangled objects" that dissolve nature's contours and agents (Latour 2004, p. 22). In Latour's work, such shift takes the form of a turn from theoretical ecologies to the practices of green movements and their activism. The practical ecology of green movement is, for him, crucial precisely because it is able to turn our attention "away from the procrustean bed of two-house politics" towards the "fuzzy" or "tangled" objects that are the stuff of everyday environmental militancy (Latour 2004, p. 20). "Political ecology," he writes, "does not speak about nature and has never thought to do so. It has to do with associations of beings that take complicated forms—rules, apparatuses, consumers, institutions, mores, calves, pigs—and that it is completely superfluous to include in an inhuman and ahistorical nature. Nature is not in question in ecology, on the contrary, ecology dissolves Nature's contours and redistributes its agents" (Latour 2004, p. 21). It no longer deals solely with the hard facts and smooth objects of traditional ecology (whether of the scientific or the animal rights kind), but with the entangled natural–cultural realities that Latour describes as hybrid "matters of concern" (Latour 2004, p. 22). Unlike the discrete and stratified objects of modernist nature or culture, these "objects in crisis have no clear boundaries, no well-defined essence, no sharp separation between the hard kernel and the environments. They are tangled beings forming rhizomes and networks." (Latour 2004, p. 24) And we can grasp their meanings only if we replace them in the networks of relations and entities (social factors, political will, law and natural risk) that define them as always hybrid and risky.

[7] Alma's activist opponents are the ones who use the *Jurassic Park* comparison during the townhall, reminding her of the chronological arbitrariness as well as the general artificiality of her restoration model (Boyle 2011, p. 63).

[8] Latour says that we should replace our "crisis of nature" with "crisis of objectivity": instead of thinking of natural objects (such as the islands) as facts that have discret boundaries, well-defined essence and well-recognized properties ("matters of facts"), we should think of them as objects that are defined by their human and cultural connections ("state of affairs" or "concerns") (Latour 2004, p. 14).

4. Boyle's Contaminated Ecology: "Wrecking the Separation Zone"

Both Latour and Boyle critique the transcendent *Naturpolitiks* of traditional ecologies and their inability to think ecology in a pragmatic and political way. Latour turns towards the politics of green movements to come up with a different model of ecology and politics. But how does Boyle bring about a better ecological thinking and politics? How does he go beyond the impasse of his nature wars? My contention here is that Boyle—very much like Latour, although in a more intuitive way—shifts our attention from "*certainty* about the production of risk-free objects (with their clear separation between things and people) to *uncertainty* about the relations [between these objects] and the possibility of collecting the hierarchy of actors and values, according to an order fixed once and for all" (Latour 2004, p. 25). His fiction does not simply point out that nature has been adulterated by the encroachment of human civilization—a modern truism if any. What his novel fictionalizes is a shift from the pure objectivity of transcendent ecologies to contaminated practices that deal with "objects in crisis". Like Latour, he portrays the "end of nature" as a permanent factual order and asks us to start thinking instead about new hybrid worlds made of local networks of human and nonhuman connections.

T.C. Boyle helps us find our way to this new way of thinking with a central trope: that of the wreck which carries along the novel's chaotic plotline. Nautical wrecks and all forms of disastrous accidents at sea or on land are everywhere in the novel. From the initial "wreck of the Beverly" to the ultimate smash up of Dave Lajoy's boat, they are behind the birth and death of the main characters, drive the plot from one disaster to the next and create the complicated entanglements of human and nonhuman lives on the Santa Cruz Archipelago. The second wreck of the novel (that of the "Winfield Scott"), for example, explains how rats colonized the islet of Anacapa and brought about the demise of its local bird population. The final accident—which kills Dave Lajoy and his group of activists—wins the nature wars for the island conversationists but contaminates anew its newly restored eco-system by introducing the very snakes the activists were planning to release on the island[9]. Wrecks and accidents shape the island history of ecological contamination since the 19th century. Their chaotic and inescapable cross-species encounter remind us that chaos and entanglement are the main driver of the island's "disturbance history"[10].

Wrecks are, however, an ambiguous figure. And it is important to understand how Boyle works this trope—and pairs it with other narrative devices—in order to lead it away from traditional modern or anti-modern connotations towards "hybrid"—"nonmodern"—associations[11]. It is clear at first that Boyle uses the trope as a counterpoint to the typically modern story of ecological demise that he tells in chapter 16. In that particular chapter, Boyle recounts the human political and economic settlement of the Santa Cruz archipelago in the 19th century. He describes how the island was sold and developed as part of a political agreement between Mexico and the US and explains how agricultural growth (from sheep- and cattle-rearing to wine making) led to a deeply disturbed ecosystem wrecked by overgrazing and climate alterations. This tale of overbearing human exploitation leading to ecological catastrophe is a familiar one. It follows the template for our modern narratives of progress—and occasional failures. It does indeed acknowledge that human control has led to environmental degradation. But it also leaves open the possibility and promise of a better—more scientific—management of populations and resources. While acknowledging the abusive encroachment of nature by culture, it understands its failures as botches in understanding and management, and it reserves the right to a better suited form of control. Wrecks counter this optimistic and all-too rational version of ecological demise with nature's chaotic talk back. Their accidents remind us that nature is an irrational

[9] The conclusion of the novel plays upon both a Darwinian and a biblical intertext to present the ultimate picture of an "originally contaminated nature" (see p. 369).

[10] I borrow the expression from Tsing (2016).

[11] I am using the term "nonmodern" in a Latourian sense. A nonmodern approach, for Latour, is a vision of hybridity that escapes the dualist understanding of modernity and understands entanglement as primary.

force beyond human control which will inevitably destroy and contaminate all human plans—including those aiming at preserving nature's order and purity.

Wrecks figure a type of contamination different than that implied in this kind of modern ecological narratives. Instead of representing disturbances that are the problematic but manageable result of uncontrolled natural–cultural encounters, they manifest a more essential principle of disruption. They show contamination, unruliness, impurity to be the fundamental laws of the natural game. And they spell, accordingly, a different outcome for ecological management: one that is essentially pessimistic. If nature is basically chaos—whether it be the irrational matter of Enlightenment philosophy or the haphazard mechanism of Darwinian evolution—it can only be left to its own haphazard rule. This anti-modern view—that commands that we tend to our own human gardens but let nature's irrational rule prevail—is perhaps expressed in the last thoughts of Dave Lajoy when on the brink of death. At the moment where his boat is crushed and sunk in a freak accident, the animal activist realizes indeed that he should not have imported various invasive animals to interfere with the island's environment. Seeing one of the rattlesnakes he was planning to bring to Santa Cruz out of the bag, "its mouth open in outrage, the fangs yellow and white and slick with wet, with venom," he understands for the first time [. . .] how wrong he's been, how you have to let the animals—*the animals*—decide for themselves." (Boyle 2011, p. 358).

Face to face with his maker—and an angry snake—Dave Lajoy comes to the sudden realization that nature should be left alone. This is not a final concession to the scientific creed of his opponents—Dave Lajoy does not suddenly adopt the biologist's belief that we can help animals help themselves. What he belatedly realizes is that we need not (and should not) interfere with nature's wrathful disorder. His recognition is a profoundly anti-modern one: one that spells out his Voltairian insight about man's vulnerability at the hand of irrational nature and confirms his conclusions about keeping to our own flowerbeds. This anti-modern view is further endorsed by the ending of the novel which playfully mixes scriptural and Darwinian references to describe the encounter of two survivor species in the newly purified Santa Cruz "Eden":

> Somewhere there's a fox, its eyes stealing the light. This isn't one of the foxes that's been caged or collared or even captured. He's a survivor, a fighter, the flange of his nose torn in a forgotten dispute over territory and healed and torn and healed again . . . There is movement . . . He's alert and listening. And somewhere, in the deepest shadow of the hacked yellow grass, something else moves, in a slow sure friction of scale and grasping vertebrae—a colonist, a rafter, a survivor of a different kind altogether. Picture the stripped back slink of muscle, the flick of the tongue, the cold fixed eyes that don't need to see a thing. And hush. The grass stirs, the moon sinks into the water. Night on Santa Cruz Island, night immemorial (p. 369).

There is scarcely any need for commenting on this tongue-in-cheek finale. The age-old trope of the "snake in the grass" with its matching depiction of nature as immemorially tainted are enough to confirm the anti-modern stance of the novel's ending. Yet this pessimistic conclusion is not, I believe, the novel's last word on wrecks and contamination—and it is most certainly not a reading of wrecks and accidents that leads us to a more Latourian rethinking of ecology. The anti-modern vision of nature as catastrophe is a symmetrical, if negative, version of its modern purification. It may offer a different kind of impure and irrational transcendence. But it still does not allow us to think the quasi-objects that straddle human and nonhuman dimensions. An originally contaminated Eden is no less purifying than a pure original one; and it is certainly not more susceptible to be included in the negotiations and practices of a thoroughly hybrid politics of nature. How do you indeed weigh human interests and negotiate their place in this new Darwinian theology where nature "decides for itself"? How is this disharmonious but autonomous fiction different from the purified ecotopia of the scientists?

Insofar as the motif of the wreck remains tied to this syncretic vision of a contaminated (Darwinian) Eden, it remains equivocal and tied to a modern dualistic framework incompatible to a thorough recomposing of nature politics. But I also see something more radically entangled (and therefore "nonmodern") in Boyle's final staging of the trope. The last and most catastrophic wreck of the novel—that of Dave Lajoy's boat—happens in what Boyle describes as the "separation zone". The "separation zone" or "boundary layer," is a maritime term that describes a zone or line separating the traffic lanes in which vessels are proceeding in opposite directions. As Boyle writes: "The separation zone functioned like a median on the freeway, but there was no line drawn on the water to delineate the lanes and no concrete bumpers, palms or oleanders to separate northbound and southbound circulation. Were there accidents? Of course there were" (Boyle 2011, p. 357). The wreck of "the Paladin," crushed by a Japanese freighter travelling in the South-bound traffic lane, is such an accident. It is not the result of a storm or any other natural happenstance but owes to a simple misreading of the maritime map. Dave Lajoy, the Paladin's skipper, puts too blind a faith in the fictitious protectiveness of the traffic code. He crucially forgets that the zone separating North and South in the Santa Cruz traffic channel is not an actual divide, but an abstract mapping with limited power. His error is to mistake the map for the territory, and to believe that the imaginary boundary layer can really let him know when he has breached one or the other traffic lanes. But this "separation zone" is, of course, nothing but a construct. Like the fictitious divide that allows us to separate the nature or culture lanes of ecological theories, this "boundary layer" is a fiction that belies the fundamentally mixed nature of the reality it codifies. And the wreck of the "Paladin" shows that accidents are not simply transgressions resulting either from reason's collapse or nature's revenge. Instead, they manifest a constitutive contamination prior to the mapping of any code. Before being constituted as a separation zone, the boundary layer that divides north and south, nature and culture is a "contact or entanglement zone": a space of contamination where all objects, creatures, humans and nonhumans are yet undefined and unbound by the fictitious maps of *Naturpolitiks*.

The separation zone is, first and foremost, a place of contact, entanglement, hybridity. It is a space of complication that compels us to think very differently about the quasi-objects that dwell in it. Before seeing them as bounded and belonging to one or another—natural or cultural—traffic lane, we see all objects as Latour's "objects in crisis": accidental and shifting nodes of material-semiotic entanglements, which are incessantly recombined through various practices. In keeping with the novel's own register, we can think of Santa Cruz island as the main example of these hybrid and shifting objects. Prior to being bounded into a chaotic Eden, a pure eco-system or even an accidental mixture of both, the island is to be thought of as a provisional and hybrid object, a literal "wreck" of entangled possibilities and perspectives. Animals, people, land, climate, psychology, gender, individual stories, global economies, all collaborate to compose variously bounded and contingent ecologies for the archipelago's various times and spaces. There is no single island in the novel. Instead, we have the dreamed-up wilderness of the biologists, the sheep rancher's pastoral dystopia, the islands of wine makers and prohibition. And none of these versions of Santa Cruz are simple and straightforward. They all share in similar networks of contaminated ecologies and "disturbance histories". The ecological utopia of scientific ecology, for example, is also a product of the cultural politics of the California State Park System. Its scientific vision composes, from the very start with such realities and economic interests as a nonprofit organization (Nature Conservancy), a foreign hunting concern (to exterminate the remaining sheep), green tourism and liberal economic politics, the personal destinies and belief systems of various characters, etc. And the reader would be hard pressed at the end of the novel to parse out which politics should emerge from this sea of entangled factoids and concerns. The "contact zone" only allows for multiple and "wrecked" ecological visions.

5. Relational Ecologies

Before taking a final look at how Boyle fictionalizes these wrecked ecologies, I would like to sketch briefly some general implications of their entangled model on both knowledge and politics. A short theoretical detour through Latour's relational thinking (also called "Actor-Network Theory") can supplement what Boyle's speculative fiction often leaves unsaid and help us figure out fundamental questions about this new recomposed worlding. How does entanglement indeed reshuffle our thinking and handling of the world? How does it help us think our way to better, more democratic ecological politics?

To answer these two questions, it is important to spell out once again what is truly novel in this newfangled approach to ecology and, more generally, knowledge. Hybridity, relationality and symbiosis are indeed not anything new in ecological thinking. Ecology, from Tansley's first definition of ecosystems on, is a theory of networks and relations. It defines natural worlds as symbiotic webs between species and environments, and describes its "animals," for example, not as discrete creatures but as worldly knots ("umwelts") within a general adaptive process of material co-evolutions. What is radical, however, in Latour's new entangled ecologies is its inclusion of mind and knowledge within this material web. For Latour and other contemporary thinkers of relationality, intellective practices are part and parcel of a world they co-create[12]. All worldly things—whether defined by aboriginal practices, Western cultural mores or modern scientific experiments—are mixes of material and semiotic agents on a par with animal worldings. They are co-constituted by an intra-action of mind and matter, nature and culture that defines them as primarily relational: bounded by shifting tangles of discretionary practices and worldly designs. Redefined thus as natural–cultural hybrids, animals are more than eco-systemic tangles: they are also bounded by human affects, politics, sciences and cultural practices. For Latour (and Boyle), there is no such thing as a pure "wild fox of Santa Cruz island." The wild native dwarf foxes of the scientists' separation zone are also, from the very start, creatures born of their practices. Tracked with electronic collars and behavioral maps, numerized through the metrics of population biology, and transformed into furry icons for the Park Service eco-advertising, they are neither simply natural nor culturally constructed: they are foxes in the "contact zone" of nature and culture, foxes "in relation".

This relational understanding has profound implications on traditional ecologies with their improbably pure ecosystems and invisible politics. It composes new cosmogonies in which all actors are caught in a dynamic process of relations within various "collectives" or "networks". Everything in these compositions is defined by the material-semiotic associations that connect it with other actors. All factual things are therefore "always already" "matters in relation" (or Latourian "matters of concern"). They are—in the words of Karen Barad—"partners who do not precede their relationship" but are the provisional and dynamic products of its "intra-action". ("Post-Humanist Performativity", 185). Such compositional ontology has obvious epistemological and political consequences. If no actor can ever be factual and defined within a hierarchical natural order and if, conversely, all objects are set on the same "natural–cultural plane of immanence," then everything is ontologically equal to everything else within a given "pluriverse". Animals, rocks, human affects, scientific phenomena, natural and cultural events are equally defined by their place and action in a given network. They are all equally real entities even if they are not equally consequential. This "democracy of actors" is not, as Latour also notes, an egalitarian republic. The uneven power of its actors is guaranteed, not by their position in any innate, natural or cultural order, but by the strength and complexity of the bonds they form—as well as their diplomacy. And this conditional "equality" ushers in a very different ecological politics: a "politics of due process that asks: How many are we? Can we live together? How do we arrive at a well-formed collective? (Posthumus 2017, p. 100).

[12] I want to make clear here that when I speak about Latour's relational theory of knowledge, I refer also implicitly to all the co-elaborators of this contemporary epistemological trend in "post-human philosophy and science": Stengers, Haraway, Barad, Tsing, etc. The relational recomposition of thinking is a multi-authorial and multi-dimensional endeavor currently reshaping the way we do anthropology, the history of sciences and ethology.

Latour's relational ontology leads to a democratic and inclusive political ecology: one that flattens human and nonhuman differences and gives voice to as many agents as possible in the negotiations of a given collective. It is crucial to note that this new hybrid ecology is always local as well: it is a situated approach that eschews the totalizing and global approaches of traditional scientific or romantic ecologies. This last point is crucial to both Latourian theory and Boyle's narrative. It comes across most clearly, however, in the latter's novel, because the mandate of fiction is to particularize general stances and reembody them within life stories. *When the Killing's Done* owes its insight to its ability to filter and relocate its theoretical wars within local networks and individual perspectives. We noted already that the author excels at exposing the disconnect between global and personal, theory and practice—pointing out contradictions, for example, between Alma's lofty scientific theories and her personal practices or playing with the wreck motif to remind us of the power of local instances to embed and disturb general law. Boyle, however, goes a step further and invites us to reflect at length upon the need for partial vision when he juxtaposes the story of Rita and Bax (chapter seven) to a global ecological history of the island (in chapter eight). The two consecutive chapters—whose titles "Scorpion Ranch" and "Ovis Aries" foreshadow the gap between local story and academic history, offer contrapuntal narratives that highlight the need to recalibrate global ecological histories through a newer, embedded politics.

"Scorpion Ranch," the inaugural chapter of the novel's second half[13], tells the story of Rita and Bax, two disenfranchised dwellers, living in the margin of the globalizing schemes of our liberal economy. Neither are "ranchers" in the traditional sense of the word. Both came to the island as tenants, tasked with squeezing some profit from a sheeping operation currently on its last leg. The ranch on which they lived has been passed from one landowner to the next and seen some better times and industries: wineries, cattle operations, etc. When Bax takes over the operation "in 1979, things had fallen to ruin, sheep were little more than an afterthought," and, after failing to get the State's authorization "to develop the land into a "resort, replete with marina, golf courses, lodges and restaurants," the proprietor sells the ranch to the Nature Conservancy, a private charity working in tandem with the California Park Services (Boyle 2011, p. 170). It is important to note that, at the time of the story, neither Rita nor Bax are aware of the sale. They have also been spared the knowledge that Australian hunters, hired by the Nature Conservancy, have been tasked to hunt all invasive species—including their sheep at $1000 a head[14]. The story of these tenant farmers scraping a living from their flock of "sheep-in-reprieve" provides a needed counterpoint to the global narrative of the island's ecological contamination through ranching and other human economic endeavors. It exposes its personal flipside: individual lives being squeezed not only by economic growth and ecological devastation, but also by the conservationist policies designed to mitigate these impacts. This narrative of laborers' alienation is therefore a needed political counterweight to the abstract narratives of scientific or ethical ecologies—and to all "deep" schemes that subtract human interests from their naturology. It brings human wreckage to the fore and reminds us that its misery is very much a part of our mixed natural–cultural histories. But it also does more than prompting us to keep in mind the human side of nature management. By focusing on partial stories and local perspectives, Rita and Bax's story brings to the fore one of the main tenets of relational ecologies: situatedness. As Latour, Haraway, Tsing and other relational thinkers have noted, ecologies and their entanglements are always singular and local.[15] As such, they are not simply counterweights to global tales of modern progress or ruin. They are incompatible with them and call for a very different "politics of positioning": one that

[13] It should be noted that the last chapter of the novel is also titled "Scorpion Ranch" and concludes the novel with a picture of the newly restored (and yet contaminated) ecosystem of the Santa Cruz Island.

[14] The price of a dead head of sheep is higher, of course, than the retail price for a live one: such are the ironies of our economic practices.

[15] See (Haraway 1988).

recomposes mobile cross-species collectives and reconstructs their precarious (wrecked) histories outside of the "separation zone" of modern, dualist ecological histories.

But what exactly is this "politics of positioning"? And how is it illustrated in Rita and Bax's story? It is important to understand that this particular story offers no critical insight, no sustained inquiry into Santa Cruz's environmental problems and no grassroot solution to their dilemma. Rita and Bax are marginal actors that cannot be identified either with the "perfectly isomorphic subjects" of science and ethics or with the "fetishized perfect subject of oppositional history as it sometimes appears in feminist theory" and leftist politics ("Situated Knowledge", 586). They have only partial visions and limited connections to Santa Cruz's hybrid environment and are largely unaware of the issues that affect both their fates and that of Santa Cruz Island. They are not activists or self-aware marginals with concrete solutions, and they offer no counter programs to those of scientific and ethical ecology. (They are not, for example, proponents of utopian agrarianism nor would they know how to envision collaboration between their brand of subsistence farming and the conservationist plans of eco-scientists.)[16] My contention, however, is that it is the very partiality of Rita's and Bax's perspective which allows us a new (third) entry into ecological politics. Unlike their scientific and activist counterparts, these characters are as entangled as they are marginal. Firmly attached to their land, sheep and ranching practices, they are actors defined by a history of precarious living with other partners in their local collectives (crows, climate, Mexican farmhands, sheep ranching, erosion of the island eco-system, etc.). This particular entanglement is not, for them, generalizable—nor is the role of any of its actors. They do not think of it as a closed "eco-system" with predefined natural laws and players—nor do they wish it to be an egalitarian ethical community. Instead, they feel that they belong to its hybrid *agricultural* assemblage, as local, precarious, and composed of actors whose identity and performance are a function of their place and relation in this particular umwelt. This pragmatic and relational collective is best exemplified by the inter—as well as intra[17]—action of the sheep ranchers with the local crows. The latter do indeed enjoy a peculiar status in the novel. The only animal not to be described according to preset dualistic terms (wild or domestic, noxious or beneficial, native or invasive), they are defined, not by their origin (local), status (wild) or function (noxious) in the island's ecosystem but by their roles as actors in the ranching collective. This owes in part to the hybrid character of the species—crows are *commensals* who live halfway within the human and nonhuman worlds[18]. But it is also due to their strictly *in situ* definition as "actors" in the sheep ranching collective. The crows play an important role in the sheep operation and the general economy of the ranch because they are opportunistic predators who have identified the lambing period as an easy and rich source of food. They swarm in to pick at the newborns' eyes whenever ewes are scared away by loud noises, wild animals or, in this particular instance, the shots of Australian hunters culling wild pigs in the neighboring parcel. The interaction between the ranchers and the crows is thus largely negative—and has unintended consequences in the story as it triggers Anise's (Rita's daughter) conversion to the cause of animal welfare. Yet the crows are not fetishized nor demonized by the ranchers. They are not seen by them as "having rights" nor are they pegged as noxious and disposable. Neither theoretically equal, nor specifically objectifiable, they are partners in a relation in which they have a say—albeit a problematic one. Most crucially, they "materialize" as partners in this particular collective only through their social intercourse. Unlike other Santa Cruz animals whose identity and roles are defined through the *a priori* categories of the natural–cultural separation zone, they are products of local connections. As such, they give us a perfect example of a Latourian "quasi-object," or a

[16] They are fundamentally marginal and partial actors. But this marginality means that they are unable to reach or even search for a full and total position (see Haraway 1988).

[17] I am using here Karen Barad's distinction between "inter- and intra-action" (see Barad 2003).

[18] The word "commensal" is used in biology to designate a species that may use the food source of another species but does not feed on the host itself. It describes a long-term biological interaction in which members of one species gain benefits while those of the other species neither benefit nor are harmed.

"boundary-object" in Haraway's words: hybrid material-semiotic nodes whose boundaries are constituted in the elaboration of a common world. Together with Rita, Bax and all the other relationally defined actors of their ecological network, they are partners in the elaboration of a multi-species tale of "disturbance-based ecologies" quite different from the scientific and ethical reconstitution of pristine eco-system and prelapsarian animal Eden (*The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 5). These are tales of contaminated and diverse local assemblages: "cosmo-political" worlds in which human and animals collaborate non harmoniously for survival.

The story of Rita and the crows offers a "wrecked" counterpoint to the novel's dual master narratives. It submits no clear program, no theory of general ecological renewal. Yet it helps us imagine a different kind of ecology: one whose impurity is closer to the contingent realities of our contaminated cross-species worlds. Not unlike the stories of grassroot ecologies Latour invoked earlier as bearers of a better cosmopolitic, this story never claims to speak about nature but of the countless imbroglios that make our worlds. It is, like them, entangled and pragmatic, local and contingent. Like them, it brings to the fore the constitutive contamination of our common worlds habitually papered over by the separatist fictions of scientific and ethical nature. And like them, its reassembling of hybrid collectives "dissolves nature's contours and redistributes its agents" (Latour 2004, p. 12). Nature is no longer in question in these assemblages in which animals and humans live precariously together. Crows and ranchers are no longer defined by their natural or cultural assignations but through the biopolitical partnership that they establish. And this pragmatic reshuffling of actors and their performances is politically consequential. The beings that are constituted by these partnerships all have a say within their collectives: not because it is guaranteed by any theoretical "right to be or speak" but because it is a very function of their partnership. Crows and humans in the story are all unequal players in a common story of collaborative survival. But it is their local, co-elaborative, worlding that allow us to understand the "intrinsically political quality of the natural order" (Latour 2004, p. 28). Against the warring fictions of "total connectivity, global ecosystems or the catholicity that wants to embrace everything," they ask us to pay attention to the contingent and laborious elaborations of common worlds and their politics (Latour 2004, p. 28).

The merit of *When the Killing's Done* is thus to partially intuit this Latourian call for a different "politics of nature". Boyle's novel remains equivocal. Its conclusive scene remains a classical allegory of postlapsarian contamination: an allegory of failed Eden. As such, the novel often fails to find its way out of the impasse of Western dualist and global ecological theories. But the propaedeutic power of the novel is not a critical or programmatic one. It does not come from its ability to think its way out of its theoretical nature wars, but from the world-embedding power of its storytelling. Boyle is at his intuitive best when describing the complex fabric of local world entanglements. And it is the unlikely story of Rita and Bax, their sheep and crows that gives us a partial but clear insight into Latour's new and radical "politics of nature".

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