

Is John Dewey’s Thought “Humanist”?

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THIS PAPER ASKS A RELATIVELY STRAIGHTFORWARD QUESTION—Is John Dewey’s thought “humanist”?¹ But neither the answer (Yes, but...) nor the importance of the question are straightforward. In asking this question, I wish to put Dewey’s texts into conversation with the substantial body of research literature—mostly in the humanities and social sciences, but increasingly within educational thought as well—of nonhumanist theory, broadly understood (Murriss, 2016; Siddiqui, 2016; Snaza, et al., 2014; Snaza & Weaver, 2014).² Before outlining the scope of this paper, it may be useful to be direct: To the extent that the answer to my question is “Yes,” Dewey’s texts seem increasingly irrelevant to the problems—ecological, political, ontological—facing us in the present moment. But I will argue that Dewey’s texts are not univocally or easily humanist, and that this mixed quality enables a dehumanist reconstruction of his ideas. This allows two related but distinct avenues for future engagements between Dewey and nonhumanist thought. On the one hand, it would enable those of us working in curriculum studies and educational philosophy to find a familiar point of reference for engaging the sometimes-daunting work on nonhumanism, even a way of thinking about curriculum studies as always already open to thinking beyond the merely human and in ways that are not restricted by “humanism.” That is, this reading might open a way of reading Dewey differently than he has customarily been read. On the other hand, a dehumanist reconstruction of Dewey might give nonhumanist thought a set of basic concepts—experience, habit, education, democracy—that enable it to translate its considerable ontological and political insights into more “practical” avenues, making good on its implicitly pragmatic politics, and directing those politics to explicitly decolonial projects.³ The concept of dehumanism, proposed by Julietta Singh (2017), refers to methodologies that “bring the posthuman into critical conversation with the decolonial” (p. 4). For Singh,

Dehumanism requires not an easy repudiation and renunciation of dehumanization but a form of radical dwelling in and with dehumanization through the narrative excesses and insufficiencies of the ‘good’ human—a cohabitation that acts on and through us in order to imagine other forms of political allegiance. (p. 4)

Dehumanism, then, combines critiques of the human from nonhumanist thought with decolonial attention to dehumanization, and a desire for what Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick (2015) would call new genres of performing the human.

It will be useful to begin by explaining how I will use the terms "humanist" and "nonhumanist," for I take both to be less restrictive (and restricted) than they are sometimes used. Then, I will turn to how Dewey's concept of the "public" has been put to use by new materialist political philosopher Jane Bennett (2010), providing a way of thinking about what she calls Dewey's "flirting" (p. 102) with nonhumanist ideas in *Art as Experience*, a flirtation that opens up the possibility of a dehumanist reconstruction. Following that, I turn to a somewhat schematic account of Dewey's philosophy, focusing on the key terms of habit, experience, growth, and democracy. Throughout this account, I put particular emphasis on the ways that humanism appears or adheres in Dewey's texts, but I also begin to point toward ways that his thought outstrips humanism. I end with a set of axioms for pursuing a dehumanist reconstruction of Dewey's ideas. Throughout, I am aware of the immensity of this task and the ways that an essay can only give the barest hint of the work to come. My hope is that this essay may serve as a spur for an ongoing, collective grappling with reconfiguring Dewey's thought as we experiment with pedagogies calibrated to attuning differently, more openly, to the more-than-human world in which we are (re)learning to dwell, while simultaneously working against colonialisms, including the settler colonialism that structures life in the Americas.⁴

Humanism and Nonhumanism

As I use it here, "humanism" is considerably wider in scope than how it is used in historical overviews of curriculum discourse in the United States. Herbert Kliebard's (1995) *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893-1958*, is a good example, where the humanists are one of four quasi-distinct factions engaged in a Gramscian war of position around what gets taught in (public) schools in the US. For Kliebard, the humanists were a sort of late 19th-, early 20th-century update of the Renaissance *umanisiti*, believing that education is a humanizing practice geared toward making nascent humans "fully" human through the study of a classical curriculum anchored in Greek and Latin. As I have argued elsewhere (Snaza, 2014), this conception puts us on the right track toward a wider definition, at least as soon as we recognize how this "humanism" and its pursuit of what Matthew Arnold called "sweetness and light" is inseparable from the Western European imperialist politics that took all the earth's nonhuman entities and most of the human ones as "resources" to be extracted and put to productive use. That is, humanism in even the restricted sense of belief in a classical (or classicist) curriculum is a matter of *political commitments* that are entirely anthropocentric.

Edward Said's (2004) *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* gives a broader definition of humanism. For Said, humanism means first a search, as open-minded as possible, for the qualities or capacities that distinguish the human from other entities and earth; secondly, it means a partisan commitment to defend and support the flourishing of these capacities. It would be foolhardy to reject out of hand the enormous import of this sense of humanism in reconfiguring global political relations and enlarging the scope of what can be considered scholarly inquiry. That is, the historico-political projects of the Renaissance, the enlightenment, and even modernity are indissociably linked to his sense of humanism and, to the extent that those projects remain a crucial touchstone in progressive thought, we owe a debt to humanism.

But the simple fact, which Said dwells upon at length, is that these projects were *also* inextricable from imperialist and colonialist conquest, the emergence of capitalist economies, and the humanist dominion over the earth's nonhuman entities that has led to the planetary crisis we can call "the anthropocene" in shorthand (Morton, 2013), or sharper still "the capitalocene" (Moore, 2016). Of course, Said himself does not push his humanism this far, and while he enables us to conceptualize the full scope of humanism, he is, from a nonhumanist standpoint, trapped within it. As I put it elsewhere:

We might say that what we need is to push Said's political commitments to contrapuntal relations beyond his anthropocentrism. Our present moment is beset by problems—biotechnology, bioethics, biopolitics, computer programming and hacking, surveillance, factory farming and agribusiness, GMOs, extinction, pollution, climate change—that evade and elude our present (humanist) forms of politics and community. Delinking education from the structures of *humanizing* education, detaching it from the anthropological machine, requires radical educators to connect the dehumanizations enabled by State administered compulsory educational institutions (segregated in so many, many ways) to the ways in which "we" humans pass over in silence the extraordinary violence "humans" do to animals, to ecosystems, to whole species, and, of course, to each other. These violences are inextricably linked. (Snaza, 2014, p. 21)

I would say, following this, that what unites a variety of different approaches in contemporary thought that seek to move beyond humanism—new materialisms, posthumanism, biopolitics, object-oriented ontology, animal studies, black feminist theories of the human, queer inhumanisms,⁵ affect theory—is a rejection of the idea that the "human" is an entity that can be understood apart from other entities on earth. Or, as I put it elsewhere (Snaza & Weaver, 2014, p. 3), nonhumanist thought is about trying to understand and engage with the world in ways that do not take (Western) "Man" as the measure. Dehumanism, as the decolonial articulation of nonhumanism, follows Wynter (2003) in seeing Man not as the human in general, but a particular (imperialist, capitalist, heterosexist) *version* of the human that violently "overrepresents" the human in the wake of the colonialism, slavery, capitalism nexus that is often called "modernity." The dehumanist project is, therefore, twofold: it deconstructs Western humanism and its orientations around Man, and it affirms and experiments with non-Man ways of performing the human.

New Materialist Publics:

Toward a Reconstruction of Dewey's Thought Through Jane Bennett's Work

Nonhumanism, as I have just defined it, is a sprawling, somewhat amorphous problematic. In order to move toward both an extended engagement with Dewey's philosophy and a specifically dehumanist articulation of politics, it may help to narrow down my focus and track one thinker's engagement with Dewey's thought—that is, Jane Bennett, who has worked within the wider field of nonhumanism, or, more specifically, new materialisms. New materialist thought, which grew out of materialist feminisms (Grosz, 1994; Alaimo & Hekman, 2008), is perhaps most easily approached as a corrective to the "linguistic" or "cultural" turns in social

theory during the 1980s and 1990s.⁶ Under the pressure of a (somewhat restricted) understanding of deconstruction and poststructuralist thought more generally, many scholars in the humanities and social sciences sought to demonstrate how discourses and languages functioned as a "prison house" (to use Fredric Jameson's play on Heideggerian philosophy), shutting the human off from the rest of the world. Such thought enabled important insights into the complexity of the social construction of knowledge—insights no new materialist wants to reject. Nonetheless, new materialisms begin by noting what was often lost: the corporeality of bodies, the active materiality of the world.

In their enormously influential collection, *New Materialisms*, Coole and Frost (2010) write that "the dominant constructivist orientation to social analysis is inadequate for thinking about matter, materiality, and politics in ways that do justice to the contemporary context of biopolitics and global political economy" (p. 6). They proposed "an ontological reorientation that is resonant with, and to some extent informed by, developments in natural science: an orientation that is posthumanist in the sense that it conceives of matter itself as lively or as exhibiting agency" (pp. 6–7). One can already sense here how this "reorientation" opens a re-appraisal of Dewey, for one of the most important aspects of Dewey's thought was always its insistence that understanding social processes and phenomena required thinking seriously and rigorously about the natural sciences (I return to this below).

Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010) is a kind of landmark study in the discourse of new materialisms. In the introduction, Bennett writes that "the political project of the book is, to put it most ambitiously, to encourage more intelligent and sustainable engagements with vibrant matter and lively things" (p. viii). This political project requires, as part of its formulation, a critique of prevailing ways of seeing—or, more precisely, *not* seeing—matter. What she calls "the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter," one that is part and parcel of humanism as I defined it above, is about "preventing us from detecting (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling) a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies" (p. ix). Without going into the full complexity of new materialist ontology here,⁷ suffice it to say that this discourse takes *things* as active, agential, productive, and—especially in the allied field of "object-oriented ontology"—*independent* of human knowledge and action. Bennett's claim that these nonhuman powers circulate "around and within" the human is crucial: the human is not a bounded, isolatable entity. It is, in part, an "animal" apparatus (made of cells and their chemical-vital operations), but it is also an assemblage including trillions of microorganisms (without which it could not live) and inorganic entities like water, minerals, and oxygen. This insight leads Bennett to ask, "What difference would it make to public health if eating was understood as an encounter between various and variegated bodies, some of them mine, most of them not, and none of which always gets the upper hand?" (p. viii). Here, the things humans eat—vegetables, fruits, grains, other animals—are reconceived not as inert stuff wholly subordinate to the more important "human" agency of the eater, but as *active* participants in the production of "human" bodies that can act in ways that are always already entangled with the nonhuman world. The human is not the only entity that has agency: *all matter is agential*.

This general approach to "vibrant matter" leads Bennett to take up Dewey's *The Public and Its Problems* (1927). For Bennett, "Dewey presents a public as a confederation of bodies, bodies pulled together not so much by choice . . . as by a shared experience of harm that, over time, coalesces into a 'problem'" (p. 100). After "bracketing" Dewey's claim that publics

involve "persons" (for the moment), Bennett extends her earlier formulation to give a richer account of a public, one that is as much Deweyan as it is nonhumanist:

A public is a cluster of bodies harmed by the actions of others or even by actions born from their own actions as these trans-act; harmed bodies draw near each other and seek to engage in new acts that will restore their power, protect against future harm, or compensate for damage done – in *that* consists their political action, which, fortunately or unfortunately, will also become conjoint action with a chain of indirect, unpredictable consequences. (p. 101)

For Bennett, Dewey's thought is open-ended, attentive to contingency, and driven by a desire to see (human) action as fundamentally nonteleological. The political, for Dewey, *is* a matter of becomings in an unfinished world. Crucially, much in Dewey's text attempts to restrict this to a matter of *human* action and politics: "Dewey generally assumes that the acts in conjoint action are *human* endeavors" (p. 102). Bennett acknowledges Dewey's "anthropocentrism," the way he takes *for granted* an ontological separation between humans and other entities, but she does not throw the baby out with the bathwater, as it were. Instead, Bennett works to demonstrate that Dewey's humanist restriction on his own insights can be undone, enabling her to reconstruct Dewey's politics of "the public" in ways that open onto the nonhuman. Indeed, she takes her point of departure here from *Art as Experience*, when Dewey (1934) notes that organisms do not have clearly defined borders (p. 59). This means, for Bennett, that, "Dewey comes close to saying that even human initiatives are not *exclusively* human" (2010, p. 102). Dewey comes close but *does not say*. Therefore, we need a manner of reading Dewey that is attentive to his implicit, undeveloped nonhumanist potential that can be extracted from his explicitly humanist formulations, especially when these appear as *dogmatic* assertions of human exceptionalism that betray the vicissitudes of his own "naturalist" thought.

Experience, Growth, and Habit: Toward a Nonhumanist Reading of Dewey

John Dewey's educational philosophy is, in a certain obvious way, organized around a conception of what it means to be a human being. Indeed, at the start of *Experience and Nature* (1925), Dewey describes his position as "naturalistic humanism" (p. 1). This conception takes the human as an embodied subject in the world undergoing the continuous reconstruction of experience, reconstruction that leads to what might be the greatest good in Dewey's writings: growth. Summarizing Dewey's philosophy, Raymond Boisvert (1998) writes that, for Dewey, "humans are not primarily disembodied sorts of cogitators. They are embodied individuals, participants in multifarious sorts of interactions within the world that encompass them" (p. 20).

Dewey's Idea of Experience

This "ecological stance" in Dewey (p. 21), relies on a specific idea of "experience." Boisvert (1998) writes, "The human condition, in its fullness, must be taken into account by the philosopher. Experience is what can open the fullness of that condition to us" (p. 16). Here, the fullness of the human condition is both the end of education (experience "opens" that condition

to us) as well as its starting point: it "must be taken into account." According to Boisvert (1998), "'Experience,' in Dewey's writings is meant to articulate the inclusive, multi-faceted—that is to say, fully human—modes of prehending, reacting to, and interacting with our surroundings. Because, for him, 'experience' identifies the mode of human being-in-the-world" (p. 14). At least in Boisvert's reading, Dewey's philosophy is a philosophy of *human* being organized around a notion of experience as *human*.⁸ Be that as it may, it also occludes just how much Dewey's conception of experience is formulated in ways that extend far beyond "human" experience.

A Nonhumanist View of Dewey's Notion of Experience

In *Experience and Education*, Dewey's most concise formulation of the notion of experience as it relates to education, Dewey writes, "As an individual passes from one situation to another, his world, his environment, expands or contracts" (1938, p. 44). The environment, writes Dewey, "is whatever conditions interact with personal needs, desires, purposes, and capacities to create the experience which is had" (p. 44). The environment is not simply *there*: it is always already shaped by the individual's "needs, desires, purposes, and capacities." This emergence of every experience out of previous experience is what Dewey calls "continuity." The relation of the individual with its *internal* desires, purposes, etc., to the *external* environment is what he calls "interaction." For Dewey, "the two principles of continuity and interaction are not separate from each other. They intercept and unite. They are, so to speak, the longitudinal and lateral aspects of experience" (p. 44). We can already note, provisionally, that while Dewey stresses this situation rather differently than a new materialist would, this conceptualization does not preclude recognizing that the human's "needs, desires, purposes, and capacities" are *also* shaped by the environment, understood as a cluster of *active* or agential forces. Indeed, the neat separation between a "human" and an "environment" cannot be sustained, even for Dewey. As Jamila R. Siddiqui (2016) has argued in what is to date the best attempt to think about Dewey's philosophy in relation to nonhumanist thought, "To Dewey, the experienced object and the experiencing subject cannot be separated – they are bound together in a relation that precedes their existence" (p. 70).

On Habits: No Clear Demarcation Between Nature and Culture

The reconstruction of experience in learning or growth, for Dewey, is most apparent in the formation of "habits." In *Human Nature and Conduct*, Dewey explicitly defines habit as something constitutive of life and not merely human life: "Habits are like functions in many respects, and especially in requiring the cooperation of organism and environment" (1922, p. 14). In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey writes, "In the first place, a habit is a form of executive skill, of efficiency in doing" (1916, p. 46). Rather than a mere "habituation," which is a relatively passive adaptation of a living being to an environment, a habit is primarily active because it involves observation, reflection, skill, and desire (p. 48). That is, habit refers to a kind of action always already caught up in the ever-widening growth of experience. In contrast, "routine habits" are habits that are removed from this reconstruction and growth; they become "closed in" (or, hardened):

Routine habits are unthinking habits; 'bad' habits are habits so severed from reason that they are opposed to the conclusions of conscious deliberation and decision. . . . The short-sighted method which falls back on mechanical routine and repetition to secure external efficiency of habit, motor skill without accompanying thought, marks a deliberate closing in of surroundings upon growth. (p. 49)

This closing in or hardening refers to a limitation of growth, a contraction of the environment. In other words, education fails when it either allows—or even forces—a limitation to growth by producing hardened habits which “close in” the surroundings. Experience, Dewey reminds us again and again, can lead either toward growth or hardening, and the task of progressive education is to organize the environment to be conducive to growth. Although here Dewey occasionally marks “habit” as a particularly human problem—distinct from the “habituation” that nonhuman animals also exhibit—a nonhumanist reconstruction would have to foreground Dewey's claims by stating that “habits” are *not* restrictable to humans alone.⁹ As Brian Massumi understands it, “Habit is an acquired automatic self-regulation. It resides in the flesh. Some say in the matter. As acquired, it can be said to be ‘cultural.’ As automatic and material, it can pass for ‘natural’ (2014, p. 11). That is, habit turns out to be a limit concept that upsets *any* clear demarcation between nature and culture. In fact, we could usefully consider experience a “natureculture” phenomenon (Haraway, 2008).

The Non-Human Agencies in Human Experience

The power of the invisible. Importantly, experience is never entirely *conscious*, even if humanist habits of thought tend to disavow this by overestimating the importance of conscious thought, and significantly underestimating the role of nonhuman agencies in human life.¹⁰ In his 1925 lectures published as *Experience and Nature*, Dewey writes that “man finds himself living in an aleatory world; his existence involves, to put it baldly, a gamble. The world is a scene of risk; it is uncertain, unstable, uncannily unstable” (p. 38). In this “antifoundational metaphysics of nature,” the natural world is “a mixture of the relatively stable and the precarious” (Garrison, 1994, p. 8). The task of human experience, for Dewey, is to interact with nature in order to secure what Dewey calls “a true wisdom”:

A true wisdom, devoted to [opening and enlarging the ways of the human in/as nature], discovers in thoughtful observation and experiment the method of administering the unfinished process of existence so that frail goods shall be substantiated, secure goods be extended, and the precarious promises of good that haunt experienced things be more liberally fulfilled. (Dewey, 1925, p. 66)

This wisdom—which might be another name for what Dewey calls “growth”—operates by fulfilling “the precarious promises of good that haunt experienced things.” While Dewey's account here is fairly humanist (privileging conscious reconstruction after the fact), it also acknowledges that any experience is shaped by forces that are not available to consciousness *in media res*. The verb that signals these forces which participate but cannot be directly “seen,”

although they are obviously felt, is "haunt." Yet, to what does this "haunting" refer? Earlier in the same lecture, Dewey says, "It is equally important to note that dark and twilight abound. For in any object of primary experience there are always potentialities which are not explicit; any object that is overt is charged with possible consequences that are hidden; the most overt act has factors which are not explicit" (1925, p. 21).

Thus, although Dewey calls his philosophy "empirical" to demand that all philosophizing refer back to real problems of being-in-the-world, his notion of experience is resolutely non-empirical: what abides in experience that matters cannot usually—or at least predictably—be *seen* or measured. This runs counter to the humanist notion of habits of (in)attention. Dewey underscores the epistemological politics of attention when he discusses "the indestructible features of any and every experience":

The visible is set in the invisible; and in the end what is unseen decides what happens in the seen; the tangible rests precariously upon the untouched and ungrasped. The contrast and potential maladjustment of the immediate, the conspicuous and focal phase of things, with those indirect and hidden factors which determine the origin and career of what is present, are indestructible features of any and every experience. (1925, p. 40)

Against an overwhelming majority of contemporary research and thinking about education, Dewey reminds us that what is most important is that *experience* cannot usually or predictably be seen.

The environment as a teacher, non-human agencies, and affect as an environmental force. Returning to *Experience and Education*, we find Dewey remarking that:

Perhaps the greatest of all pedagogical fallacies is the notion that a person learns only the particular thing he is studying at the time. Collateral learning in the way of formation of enduring attitudes, of likes and dislikes, may be and often is much more important than the spelling lesson or lesson in geography or history that is learned. For these attitudes are fundamentally what count in the future. (1938, p. 48)

What Dewey calls "collateral learning" refers to all aspects of a given experience that find possible reconstruction in the thought of a student.

The environment, more than any focus on subject matter or official curricula, is what counts in pedagogy: "We never educate directly, but indirectly by means of the environment" (Dewey, 1916, p. 19). The environment here does not refer primarily to such things as arrangement of desks in schools or the absence of distractions coming from outside the classroom. Such considerations, while no doubt necessary in the operation of schools, radically reduce the import of Dewey's insight. The environment names the field where the visible and invisible mingle, a world of "twilight," to borrow Dewey's word mentioned earlier.

This can be pushed one step further, though, to suggest that humans *cannot* educate each other, only "environments" can educate (see also Brennan, 2004). That is, education comes to be a radically *inhuman* process of accumulating and reconfiguring habits, where "the human" is a possible result of an encounter that is *made up of non-human agencies* (inter)acting. Or, to put this in slightly different terms, pedagogy is always a question of affects and their accumulation

(Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Sedgwick, 2004). As Megan Watkins argues, "The techniques teachers utilize in classrooms can act as a force promoting interest, which over time may accumulate as cognitive capacity providing its own stimulus for learning" (2010, p. 278). This is entirely consonant with what Dewey calls growth and it opens up a way of thinking about "growth" (outside the logic of capitalist expansion and settler colonialism that are, sadly, apparent in his thought). Crucial in this reconstruction of the concept of growth, then, is noting the non-humanist and non-human agency of affect: "Affect here does not so much *precede* will and consciousness, it simply evades or bypasses them" (Watkins, 2010, p. 279). Learning is not, primarily, a matter of human consciousness; it is, rather, about habits and growth, which—as shown above—are not restricted to human beings.

An illustration from semiotics. In his fascinating articulation of an "anthropology beyond the human," Eduardo Kohn (2013) draws on the semiotics of pragmatist Charles Peirce to argue that humans and all other forms of life—animal and vegetal—practice semiotics: "Life is constitutively semiotic" (p. 9). Without getting into the details of Kohn's rich and provocative account, it is helpful to note how he uses this to conceptualize all living beings both as semiotic and as creatures constituted by habits and growth (on Kohn's reading, "signs are habits about habits") (p. 59). Analyzing the actions of the hook-billed kite (a bird of prey), the epiphytic cactus, and the actions of (human) Runa hunters in Ecuador, Kohn argues:

We don't usually notice the habits we in-habit. It is only when the world's habits clash with our expectations that the world in its otherness, and its existent actuality as something other than what we currently are, is revealed. The challenge that follows this disruption is to grow." (p. 63)

That is, growth is the response of any living thing to the ways that a world of other entities disrupts its habits.

Humanism as Habitual Narration: Is "Man" a Bad Habit?

"Learning" does not happen in any fixed way because it involves what Dewey calls "reconstruction of experience": "every experience should do something to prepare a person for later experiences of a deeper and more expansive quality. That is the very meaning of growth, continuity, reconstruction of experience" (1938, p. 47). Learning only happens after the fact, when one becomes aware that a past experience has enabled a new experience. Learning is, first, an experience of communication: "To be a recipient of a communication is to have an enlarged and changed experience" (1916, p. 5). To receive a communication is, for Dewey, a spur to thinking, where "thinking is . . . a postponement of immediate action, while it effects internal control of impulse through a union of observation and memory, this union being the heart of reflection" (1938, p. 64). Observation is always already shaped—that is, given form—by memory. The past enables the present to present itself as holding a possibility of a future yet to arrive. Through this combination of observation—a kind of openness toward being-in-the-world in a concrete situation—and memory, an animal (including a human animal) can remake the world toward such a future. For Dewey, "There is no intellectual growth without some reconstruction, some remaking, of impulses and desires in the form in which they show themselves" (1938, p. 64). As James Kincaid puts it, in a manner strongly reminiscent of Dewey:

What if we said memory was itself a storytelling agency, a collection of narratives we can call on for various purposes. Everything in our past, everything lodged in memory, is available to us as a story (an almost infinitely rearrangeable story). (Kincaid, 1998, p. 22)

Learning is, for Dewey, a process of telling stories about past events in a way that allows us to deal more effectively with the precarious present. This means that "learning" is a phenomenon caught up in language (and human language is merely a subset of language as such as Kohn [2013] insists), but it is not wholly linguistic. Reconstruction is an exercise in (re)making meaning.

This (re)making of meaning is the central tenet of pragmatism. As Jim Garrison (1994) puts it, "Dewey believed that all meanings originated in language, and that language originated in cooperative behavior" (p. 8). Without going into Dewey's story of language's origin, we can see that meaning and action are inseparable, and human language is simply one version of a process of "cooperative behavior" (which is in no way exclusively human).¹¹ The point we must make here is that meaning is not primarily a matter of denotative or even connotative signification; meaning for Dewey is always already performative. Meaning produces specific possibilities for action and these actions emerge as possibilities from the interaction of a given environment with meanings. Language is thus more than performative, it is *aesthetic* in the sense that it involves *touching* and *feeling*.¹²

This brings us to the role narrative plays in Dewey's thought. If learning is thought of as a catalyst of present action because of past experience, and only reconstruction can reveal past experience as a cause of present possibility, this is because "causality is another name for the sequential order itself" (1925, p. 84). "The sequential order," at least for the man of Western humanism, is narrative form: beginning, middle, end. This form allows the human to regulate the mixture of the precarious and the stable that she finds in the aleatory, unfinished world. For Dewey:

To insist that nature is an affair of beginnings is to assert that there is no one single and all-at-once beginning of everything. It is but another way of saying that nature is an affair *of* affairs, wherein each one, no matter how linked up it may be with others, has its *own* quality. (1925, pp. 82–83)

This is to assert that "nature" is not *a* narrative (for example, that it was not created by God in seven days) but is always already made up of beginnings of narratives. To make the "natural" world of beginnings into a world of narratives with *ends* is the task of *human* thought (or, at least, one version of human thought). Once reconstructed as narratives with beginnings and ends, humans secure these precarious narrativizations through judgments: "when a fulfillment comes and is pronounced good, it is *judged* good, distinguished and asserted, simply because it is in jeopardy, because it occurs amid indifferent and divergent things" (1925, p. 54). If "learning" is reconstruction of experience that reveals a fulfillment in response to a promise animating that experience, then "learning" for humans also names the ability to narrate the past as continuous with the present moment and the future.

While Dewey recognizes that growth is not restricted to the human alone (indeed, the opening chapter of *Democracy and Education* precludes this possibility), "humanist" education

finally means reactivating the past in *narratives* that authorize possible futures. The human, we might say, is in no way separate or separable from the wilder, more-than-human world, but it has a particular tendency, or habit, to narration that can lead to a mis-recognition of this "fact." While these narratives can, of course, be re-written in the service of a nonhumanist, new materialist engagement with the world, we might say that humanist education suffers from "narration sickness" (Freire, 1968/2000).¹³ The work of Sylvia Wynter (2001; 2003) is helpful for fleshing this out. Drawing on both Frantz Fanon's (1952/1967) concept of "sociogeny" and a decolonial critique of Foucault's genealogies of a modern biopolitical subject, Wynter proposes that the human of Western humanism, what she calls "Man," is a particular "genre" of being human that "overrepresents" itself as the human as such. Since, following Fanon, the human is not only biological but also constituted by narratives and discourses (this is "sociogeny"), we learn to recognize ourselves as human in relation to dominant conceptions, conceptions that are enforced, in part, through education. While imperialist, capitalist, heterosexist humanism has produced "Man" as the dominant (and violently enforced!) conception of the human in modernity, Wynter's project continually reminds us that other ways of being human always exist. Putting Dewey and Wynter together, we can say that being human is an open, complex, and shifting set of habits, understood as "ways of using and incorporating the environment," where the environment determines as much as the subject (Dewey, 1922, p. 15). Some of these habits are narrative, and narratives of what it means to be human come to structure the human's bio-social system (Wynter calls the human a hybrid biological and cultural being). Dewey's thought manages to approach theorizing how being human *is* a habit without being able to remove itself from a particular, habituated way of thinking about being human.¹⁴ That is, in Dewey's conception of the human, we see a profound tension between a "pre-posthumanist" (Siddiqui, 2016, p. 72) conception of the human and the habitual rehearsal of Man's humanism. For most of modernity, Western capitalist, heterosexist imperialism has proposed Man as the only way of being human. I want to propose that traditional humanism's Man is a bad habit that gets in the way of experimenting with other ways of being human.

Democracy: A Politics of Dehumanist Growth

One of the sickest narratives governing education today is the one that calls for "growth" in test scores, accountability, time on task, profitability. We cannot but reckon, then, with Sandy Grande's critique: "Like other whitestream thinkers, however, Dewey's vision for an educational system presumed the colonization of indigenous peoples" (2004, p. 33). It does this by using metaphors like "frontier" to think about democracy and growth, ones that render his conception of democracy resolutely "Eurocentric" (Katharyne Mitchell as cited in Grande, 2004, p. 33). I would argue that this is true, as long as Dewey's thought is not reconstructed in a dehumanist manner. For the dehumanist, there is no "frontier," there is no task of ongoing expansion, settlement of spaces, or colonization peoples. Instead, there is a crucial need for a fractal, diffracted widening of attunement to the relations that always already exist in the "now" but which humanism teaches us to disavow. It is about a growth in our attunement to the "fragility of things" (Connolly, 2013), to the "muddle" (Haraway, 2016). Growth then is not about producing more Western, capitalist, neoliberal knowledge that would bring everyone and everything into its enclosure: growth is precisely the moving way, proliferating affinities and solidarities with people and things that the horrific bubble of Western humanism has marginalized as nonpersons,

“resources,” externalities that must be swept under rugs. Growth is about feeling connected, entangled, affected by a world that is infinite in its multiplicities and complexities, and attempting—and sometimes failing—to act in ways that seek the flourishing of *everything* (which will, of course, not be without violence).

Jim Garrison (1994) reminds us that, “for Dewey social experience was a social *interaction* and, therefore, simply a continuation of natural experience and existence” (p. 8). This holds true too for Dewey’s conception of a mode of social interaction that seeks ever-widening networks of connection, without knowing in advance where this will go: democracy. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey writes:

A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity. (1916, p. 87)

I read Dewey’s “more than a form of government” not to be merely a question of addition, but as something like “more and other,” something that exceeds government: something *ontogenic*, constitutive, world-forming. And yet, it must be noted that until the specific barriers were listed, the definition could apply *widely* outside of the human. Dewey’s humanism here takes on a double importance. It is *both* humanism as the desire to overcome “barriers of class, race, and national territory,” *and* as the inability to see that there are other barriers (between humans and animals, machines, things, nonvital matter) which are no less political and no less in need of breaking down. Thus, democracy too requires a dehumanist reconstruction.

While some would seek to incorporate nonhumans—animals, ecosystems, etc.—into existing humanist politics, this expansion of “rights” strikes me as difficult in at least two ways. First, it tends to prop up the very state apparatuses that function through colonial capture and forms of “primitive accumulation,” including the ongoing theft of land that is constitutive of settler colonialism (Coulthard, 2014). Second, at a more philosophical and political level it leaves in place a formal organization of politics around Man. A much more pragmatic way of thinking a democratic politics that includes the nonhuman is to insist on forms of governance articulated around land. That is, like Grande (2004) and Tuck & Yang (2012), I think an insistence on decolonial land politics is the most pragmatic way of pursuing a shift away from anthropocentric political forms.

Taking Dewey’s humanism here as, what I want to call, a politics of breaking barriers toward inclusion within Man, a dehumanist reconstruction of democracy would push toward a dismantling of institutions that form the material and social condition of possibility for Man. At a minimum, this would involve three pragmatic goals in the context of the United States specifically, and within the Americas more broadly (but in different ways). First, we should demand a restoration of full ecological sovereignty to Indigenous tribes in the Americas. That is, all decision-making that involves the land must be shifted from settler colonial states to Indigenous governments.¹⁵ Second, we must demand the immediate dismantling of the prison industrial complex and the abolition of institutions of incarceration and policing as they presently exist (Davis, 2016). Third, within the United States of *North* America, we have to commit to full

reparations for slavery which redistribute political power and wealth away from those closes to Man toward those whose humanity was stripped by law and economic machinations. Without these three goals—which I am tempted to say we have to demand immediately as a precondition for any serious political discussion—it is not clear that democracy as a form of “associated living” can have any concrete value in even intra-human terms, to say nothing yet about relations among humans and other entities.

In terms of education, Dewey asks himself why democratic education is preferable to traditional education. In *Experience and Education*, he writes:

Can we find any reason that does not ultimately come down to the belief that democratic social arrangements promote a better quality of human experience, one which is more widely accessible and enjoyed, than do non-democratic and anti-democratic forms of social life? (1938, p. 34)

Democracy is finally preferable because it “promotes” “a better quality of human life,” and this better human life is one that is constantly growing. The “human” thus plays a complex role in Dewey’s thought. The “human” is the presupposition of and justification for a certain philosophical/educational praxis: a certain “belief” about what it means to be human governs our choices about what kind of education is preferable (translated back into aesthetic terms: it is not being human but the “idea” of being human that is at issue). To be “fully” human is to be educated, which suggests that there is a kind of formal *telos* to education. Education produces the human as a certain form of life: an embodied life form in the world reconstructing experience in a complex interplay of memory, language, and desire. And yet, for Dewey, this *end* of education—the “fully human” being—is merely another beginning in a world made of beginnings. The human is an end, but not the end. Even the “fully human” being is always reconstructing the world and herself, always becoming other. As Jim Garrison puts it, “If there are no fixed and final essences, then there is no fixed and final essence of Truth, Rationality, or *Man*. That, in fact, is Dewey’s disturbing position” (2000, p. 3). Thus, we return full circle to Bennett: At the moment of linking “growth”—one which cannot be considered merely human—to politics, Dewey’s anthropocentrism appears in its most direct form (see Bennett, 2010, p. 102). The task then, is to take what Garrison calls Dewey’s “disturbing position” as the basis of reconstructing “democracy,” one not limited to *humans*, and most certainly not to Man. What we need is, to quote Eben Kirksey, “a radical openness to unruly possibilities involving multiple species” (2014, p. 152). This is precisely why decolonization matters: instead of a politics of inclusion that would expand the reach of Man’s control, we need what Indigenous thinkers would call a politics of land (Byrd, 2011; Simpson, 2014; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Glen Sean Coulthard (2014) defines land as “a mode of reciprocal *relationship*” (p. 60), and goes on to insist that “we are as much a part of the land as any other element” (p. 61). In their book, *Place in Research*, Eve Tuck and Marcia McKenzie (2015) offer what strikes me as a perfect axiom for dehumanist thought and politics: “Decolonization is not just something that humans (man) do; it is (primarily) something that the land does on its own behalf” (p. 71). Thus, Coulthard and Tuck and McKenzie offer what I think is the best way of conceptualizing what democracy might mean as a form of “associated living.” Democracy, then, must be dehumanist.

Toward a Dehumanist Reconstruction of Deweyan Thought

It might be useful to approach a conclusion by starting with the obvious. No reader of *Democracy and Education* can ignore the fact that it begins by thinking about matter in general, before narrowing its focus to living beings and only then to human animals. Indeed, Dewey locates the institution of the school in particularly complex social formulations among humans (his quasi-racist language here concerns "civilization" in contradistinction to "savages"), not even in human life more broadly (1916, pp. 7–8). Thus, the human's difference from other animals is not to be understood as a rupture: the human is fundamentally continuous with the rest of the world. Nonhumanism does not require rejecting the idea of human specificity (see Wolfe, 2010; Protevi, 2009), but it does require rejecting the humanist partisan commitment to anthropocentrism. The human is *one life form* on earth, but not necessarily the most important one. In a way, Dewey recognizes this: "The human being is born with a greater number of instinctive tendencies than other animals" (1916, p. 44). Dewey here sees the human as one among "other animals," a Darwinian insight that is, perhaps, the source of much that escapes humanism in Dewey's thought. As Elizabeth Grosz has put it:

Darwin's develops an account of the real that is an open and generative force of self-organization and growing complexity, a dynamic real that has features of its own which, rather than simply exhibit stasis, a fixed essence or unchanging characteristics, are more readily understood in terms of active vectors of change. Darwin managed to make this dynamism, this imperative to change, the center of his understanding of life itself and the very debt that life owes to the enabling obstacle that is organized matter. This dynamism of life is the condition of not only cultural existence but also cultural resistance. While presenting an ontology of life, Darwin also provokes a concern with the possibilities of becoming, and becoming-other, inherent in culture, which are also the basic concerns of feminist and other political and social activists. (2004, pp. 19–20)

That is, Dewey's Darwinism appears in his insistence upon an ontological continuity among humans, other animals, and even nonliving forms of matter, and this is *precisely* the aspect of his thought that is generative for an engagement between Dewey and nonhumanist thought. Dewey's humanism, then, has the appearance of something *vestigial*, owing in part to his historical moment's relative proximity to the trauma that goes by the name of "Darwin," a trauma that he could not work through.

In *Democracy and Education*, rather than drawing a hard line between human intelligence and animal instinct (which was sadly common in the early 20th century), Dewey affirms that what makes the human "human" is a particular arrangement of (animal) tendencies. This leads Dewey into a re-valuation of childhood, one that does not measure it according to a teleological narrative about becoming adult, but instead sees it as plenitude of pure potentiality. This, again, leads us back to Bennett, who writes, of seeing matter as lively, that "a version of this idea already found expression in childhood experiences of a world populated by animate things rather than passive objects" (2010, p. vii). For Bennett and for Dewey, learning to come to terms with a more-than-human democracy requires re-thinking and re-valuing the "experience" of children *before* they are educated into humanist anthropocentrism.¹⁶

As human existence is quite literally in the balance on the planet in the wake of modernity's techno-imperialism, we must reckon with new forms of politics that would enable

the participation of all parties.¹⁷ Some (such as Latour, 2004) propose anthropocentric ways of "bringing" nonhumans *into* existing humanist frameworks for decision-making; but Dewey's concept of democracy, once reconstructed away from its humanist enclosure, offers a far more promising path. If we can take as axiomatic that "growth," "experience," and "habits" are not uniquely human capacities, then "democracy" as a project born from these can also be more-than-human. Crucially, Dewey rejects the idea that democracy is primarily about state politics (and representation, law, etc.). Instead:

it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity. (1916, p. 87)

This understanding of democracy, which "breaks down" barriers, can go further than even Dewey allows. For the barriers of "species," between the human and other animals, between living and nonliving entities, between "subjects" and "objects," are *also* political (and not primarily ontological) boundaries in need of breaking. In fact, as Haraway (1991) reminds us, they are *already* breaking down in advanced capitalist technolife.

Nonhumanist thought gives us a way of re-reading Dewey that privileges his "naturalism" over his "humanism," a reading that puts his Darwinian impulses at the fore while letting go of his anthropocentric counter-moves. This dehumanist reconstruction allows us to think about how Dewey's philosophy could provide something that nonhumanist thought, so far, has lacked: a properly pragmatic theory of political, democratic action tied to decolonial politics. While nonhumanist thinkers such as Cary Wolfe (2012) and Timothy Morton (2013) do privilege a certain open-ended, experimental ethics that rejects a priori maxims in favor of *real engagement*, Dewey's notion of democracy as a form of associated living enables the crucial political work of *judging* the impact of these engagements. That is, if "growth" is not something human and if it can be removed from its associations with Western colonialist expansion (see Grande, 2004), then what matters is precisely a form of being-in-common that enables common growth in how connections and entanglements are registered. This is not about the growth of humans *at the expense* of nonhumans (and those humans dehumanized by [neo]imperialist states and their politics) but about what Donna Haraway (2008) calls "becoming with" and "flourishing." If we can learn to think Deweyan democracy, once-removed from anthropocentrism and colonialist commitments to Man, we might yet come to see democracy transform away from its limited, humanist beginnings. And pursuing this transformation of democracy could be the driving (dehumanist) force of curriculum studies.

Notes

¹ Given the accumulated years of thinking from which this text emerged, I want to thank a number of people whose conversation has made it possible for me to write it. Harvey Sarles and Timothy Lensmire got me reading Dewey seriously. Tom Friedrich, Kyle Greenwalt, and Mark Vagle made that seriousness a joy. Later, my reading of Dewey, and my sense of the politics of the present, were enriched by: Aparna Mishra Tarc, Gabriel Huddleston, Sandy Grande, Donald Blumenfeld-Jones, Marla Morris, and Jamila Siddiqui. Here, as ever, my thought is saturated

with Julietta Singh's ideas. I also wish to thank all the students in my "Democracy and Education" and "Philosophy of Education" seminars at the University of Richmond.

² In addition to those texts that put nonhumanism to work in curriculum studies and educational philosophy, the reader may wish to consult texts in the humanities and social sciences, and increasingly in the "natural" sciences, that are dispersed around fields like posthumanism (Wolfe, 2010), animal studies (Haraway, 2008; Massumi, 2014), feminist new materialisms (Barad, 2007; Coole & Frost 2010), object-oriented ontology (Bogost, 2012; Harman, 2005), the nonhuman turn (Grusin, 2015), black studies of biopolitics (Weheliye, 2014), and queer inhumanism (Chen, 2013; Luciano & Chen, 2015).

³ The work of William James, Charles S. Peirce, and Alfred North Whitehead has enjoyed much more widespread engagement in posthumanist scholarship than has Dewey's. In one strand, which is heavily indebted to Deleuze (Debaise, 2017; Massumi, 2004; 2014; Shaviro 2009), they are put into conversation with neuroscience, affect theory, and Spinozist philosophy in order to imagine a particularly "pragmatic" politics. In another strand, they are read alongside Emerson and both poststructuralist and systems theory in order to imagine a "pragmatics of the outside" (Wolfe, 1998). Dewey's pragmatics of "democracy" would, as I argue below, make a significant contribution to the theorization of posthumanist politics, which makes the paucity of attention to Dewey troublesome. One exception, which is a signpost that is not explicitly taken up, is the way Gregg and Seigworth position Deweyan pragmatics as a variety of (posthumanist) affect theory in *The Affect Theory Reader* (2010, p. 8).

⁴ For a clear overview of decolonization, see Tuck and Yang (2012).

⁵ The concept of "queer inhumanisms" comes from the special issue of *GLQ* with that title (2015), edited by Dana Luciano and Mel Y. Chen.

⁶ Sara Ahmed (2008) reminds us that "new materialist" gestures of distancing from the linguistic or cultural turn often rely on *forgetting* important feminist scholarship that never lost interest in the material and biological dimensions of living and politics.

⁷ For sustained explorations of new materialisms in education, see Hickey-Moody & Page (2015), and Snaza, Sonu, Truman, and Zaliwska (2016).

⁸ This is not to say that experience *as such* is human. As we shall see later when we come to Dewey's theory of art, experience—and indeed the human itself—is part of nature. All "live creatures" have experience, but only the human is capable of reconstructing experience into *an* experience.

⁹ This is not the place to go into detail, but this problem requires a sustained rethinking of the difference between intelligence and instinct (to use the terms of Henri Bergson's *Creative Evolution* (1911/1998). The most important text here is Brian Massumi's (2014) *What Animals Teach Us About Politics*, where he extends Bergson's philosophy by seeing in human language and politics particularly *animal* capacities. That is, for Massumi, the human *is* an animal, so everything that matters about the human cannot be understood as a mark of difference *from* other animals. If humans form habits, then at least one animal forms habits. *Ipsa facto*, habits are "animal" or, to push this still further toward new materialism, "vital" (where the actor may not even be living in the standard sense).

¹⁰ As both Freudian psychoanalysis and cybernetic theories (such as those articulated in Hayles, 1999) remind us, most *thought* is not conscious either.

¹¹ Massumi (2014) sees the origin of language not in cooperative behavior generally but in animal play.

¹² Writing about Whitehead's philosophy, Shaviro (2009) writes that "Feeling, as such, is the primordial form of all relation and all communication" (p. 63).

¹³ Freire's thought is much more rigidly humanist than Dewey's and I have grappled with his anthropocentrism in relation to nonhumanist discourse elsewhere (Snaza, 2013).

¹⁴ This can also be true of much work done under the heading of "posthumanism," as the contributors to Luciano and Chen's (2015) issue of *GLQ* on "queer inhumanisms" make clear in their analyses of how the "human" taken as the de facto object of critique is a *particular* (white, Western, able-bodied, hetero) human passing itself off as universal. The same may also be said of some of my own earlier work (see Oliviera & Lopes, 2016).

¹⁵ For accounts of the politics of land and indigenous sovereignty, see Coulthard (2014), Simpson (2014), Tuck & Yang (2012), and Tuck & McKenzie (2015).

¹⁶ The same could also be said of Brian Massumi. In *What animals teach us about politics*, he writes: "There was never a child that did not become-animal in play. The project of animal politics: to make it so that the same could be said of adults" (2014, p. 89).

¹⁷ As Wynter makes clear in her interview with Katherine McKittrick (Wynter & McKittrick, 2015), while anthropogenic climate change *threatens* all humans, it is a colonialist mistake to see "human activity" (p. 21) as responsible: it is Man, not the human, who constructed such ecologically devastating systems.

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