# Shady Figures and Shifting Grounds for Re/Truthing
## Channeling McLuhan's Posthuman

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**Medium**

ATUMULTUOUS RELATIONSHIP is taking place between the American presidency and its nation's media and is on display in front of the entire world no less. Its technologically mediated discourse is demonstrably rancorous, making for fraught terrain that antagonizes divisions exacerbated by frequent allegations of lying and misrepresentation lobbed between the establishment media and President Trump and his administration.

Donald Trump has proven to be a ubiquitous force in "technospace" owing to an unprecedented approach to his professional role as U.S. president that has been amplified by his particular brand of relationship with the American media. Experiencing a strong sense of his *mediated social presence*, these conditions indicate acclimatization to a rapidly changing environment during which humans have been slow to recognize the extent to which they coexist with nonhuman machines. Meanwhile, Trump and his administration hold a particular affinity for Twitter, presumably attracted to the tweet's brief, impactful nature and the immediate conveyance of its messaging directly from @realDonaldTrump to Americans and world citizens alike. These are among visible effects of the electric age permitting an instantaneity of information's release (McLuhan, 1964).

In conditions such as these, Twitter's global reach and sense of immediacy create a space of consequence rivaling network news' coverage of American presidential communications, while displacing traditional power relations. During technologically mediated coverage of roiling debates and divisive policies, American media are oft times preoccupied with reporting Trump's lack of presidential etiquette and various faux pas, among other manufactured dramas and exaggerated upheavals that distract our attention and fail to safeguard us from attending to far more consequential concerns. Political events of global import—among them America's withdrawal from various treaties and accords, thus, reneging on obligations to address climate change and

nuclear arms proliferation—call for multiple rationales: not only epistemological, but ontological, philosophical, and pedagogical.

Our interest in the educational implications of these circumstances has us delving into approaches conditioned by the posthuman, during which relationships between human and nonhuman actants are being more fully imagined. Herein, we do so by consulting a rare document co-written by Marshall McLuhan, a work that propels a consideration on media, technology, and education in the present day as riff. *City as Classroom: Understanding Language and Media* is a 40 year old high school media curriculum that McLuhan (McLuhan, Hutchon, and McLuhan, 1977a, 1977b) co-developed to sharpen the perceptions of Canadian teenagers when engaging their surroundings. McLuhan (1964) early recognized the effects of media and technologies when he posited that "all technologies are extensions of our physical and nervous systems," thereby challenging a basic humanist premise (still largely assumed today) that humans exist independently of their "tools" (p. 137).

We are intrigued by the profundity of McLuhan's often pithy pronouncements, his highly original approach to information, and his curricular strategies. In this present "Post-Truth Era," we suggest that failing to scrutinize media's effects leaves us vulnerable to imbibing polarizing binaries and being constantly distracted by frivolous narratives instead of grasping larger, far more consequential threats: a situation amounting to us leaning in closely to read mediated messages that are actually, in the words of McLuhan, "the stenciling on the casing of an atomic bomb" (McLuhan, 1969/1995, p. 238).

## AI

Interactions with networked technologies and public platforms like Twitter, keep bumping up against Trump, who troubles widely held conceptions of what a world leader looks, sounds, and acts like. Holding a presumption regarding what an American president says or does, we compare Trump to this image of thought and the chaos and disorientation with which he is associated, particularly in regard to media. For example, he frequently alleges that the American media trades in "fake news." Is he merely identifying reportage that is "yellow journalism"? Or is he correctly identifying a territorialization of news corporations by "liberals" and corporate interests? Conjecturing posthuman veins, are relationships between humans and machines sufficiently developed to a degree permitting networked technologies to independently generate news items *outside* of human authorship? We are suggesting a world of the machines that is, to humans, still enigmatic.

## Figure

A dramatic shift in *ground* across the American political and social landscape is taking place, the kind that happens when a *figure* such as Trump conducts himself in the media, including through Twitter. In describing approaches to navigating a changing world through media, McLuhan employed the concept of figure/ground to evaluate media and their effects: a pursuit in sharpening perceptions. When an object of interest becomes figure (the content), the ground is often overlooked. We have ourselves employed figure/ground analysis to better recognize that a traditionally accepted humanist lens as figure has largely precluded recognition of a posthuman

grounding that increasingly structures the conditions of the developed world's existence (Sharon, 2014). Western society may be presently disrupted by political events internationally; however, holding one's attention on both the figure *and* its (back)ground helps to better understand both the relationships between, and the properties of, mediated situations and meanings conveyed. A "Post-Truth Era" warrants educators' recognition that the ground, as "underlying structure," supplies the "conditions for experiencing any part that presents itself as figure" (McLuhan et al., 1977a, p. 14). When compelling figures "advance into the foreground," it is important to recognize their effect on perception and to balance relationships between the figure and their ground (McLuhan et al., 1977a, p. 9).

While figure and ground are constantly reconfigured amongst consumers of media preoccupied by their immediate environments, rapid developments such as technological change, the looming threat of environmental disaster, and militarization remind us that we are arguably on the brink. While Trump's political priorities are largely shared by supporters, even some of his opponents may hold quiet sympathy for particular issues: including protectionist and isolationist stances. The situation is further complicated by an accelerated concentration of American media ownership since telecommunications' deregulation in 1996, the corporate nature of which bears global importance. Alongside advertising, mainstream media's approaches are still often determined by the demographics of a generally aging television audience, homogenizing content to accommodate the news coverage preferences of its viewership, including talking points and panel discussions. There has been much upheaval throughout broadcasting as "alternative" news sources stream video content on platforms such as YouTube and Facebook, each requiring independent channels to enter contractual agreement and remunerative relationship before being reminded that, despite their "independence," they must uphold the corporation's terms of agreement lest they risk being disciplined for disrupting their platform hosts' advertising revenue streams.

## McLuhan

McLuhan's work established humanist theories in a radically new way by "explor[ing] the contours of our own extended beings in our technologies," while creating space for understanding more and differently (McLuhan, 1964, p.7). Although situated in a humanist tradition of the mid-20th century and having never witnessed either the personal computer or the Internet, McLuhan's prescience ensures that posthumanists recognize him as having cleared space for academia to theorize technologies. Malabou (2017) suggests that, by corresponding technological development with an "extension of the nervous system to the very limits of the world" (p. 48), McLuhan (1964) recognized the Anthropocene when he wrote:

> After three thousand years of explosion, by means of fragmentary and mechanical technologies, the Western world is imploding. During the mechanical ages we had extended our bodies in space. Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned. (p. 5)

McLuhan held serious concerns about "the disaster civilization faced if mankind could not learn to use new media wisely" (Gordon, 2010, p. 102). We can only guess the nature of his sense

of foreboding; however, what most troubles us now are the ecological ill effects wrought by rampant capitalism, material consumption, and technological conditions that permit facilitation of our exacting, destructive whims. Haraway (2016) asserts that, as proposed geological epoch, the Anthropocene too anthropocentrically bespeaks an innate speciesism of "human exceptionalism," disproportionately focusing on threats posed to humans and particularly the human concerns of those inhabiting developed regions and monetarily wealth**y** classes (p. 49). In addition to the Anthropocene, Haraway (2016) introduces her conceptualization of additional "timescapes." The Capitalocene is a timescape during which capital is recognized as the force driving relentless resourcing of the earth by means of *exterminationist extraction* (Haraway in O'Neill-Butler, 2016), like the Anthropocene, a boundary event, for its projected short duration. The Chthulucene is conceptualized as a timescape—past, present, future—comprising mutually reciprocal relationships as entwined, *tentacular* existences of all species in a reconfigured world (Haraway, 2016).

## City as Classroom

In the mid 1970s, McLuhan co-wrote a media textbook for Canadian high school students: *City as Classroom: Understanding Media and Language* (McLuhan et al., 1977a). Recognizing that, in a technologically mediated society, knowledge increasingly resides outside the schools that had once been physical hubs of information, McLuhan et al. (1977a) sought to pose questions within school walls that then could be explored outside them. Committed to honing media informed perceptions about the city as a "changing environment," McLuhan et al. operationalised the early twentieth-century psychological work on figure/ground analysis by Edgar Rubin as a study in structural relations.[1]The authors contended that balancing relationships between figures and their ground will expand understandings of the situations with which one is confronted (McLuhan et al., 1977a, p. 9). Let us demonstrate figure/ground using a familiar urban scene: that of congested traffic in which vehicles will idle, crawl, briefly accelerate, frequently brake. The motor car, a quintessential symbol of modernity and human ingenuity, typically dominates one's attention and, therefore, acts as *figure*. Backdrop to the motorized vehicle, however, are the countless entities that support the automobile's existence and function: gas stations, highways, traffic lights, parking lots, toll booths, and signage, etc. (Marchand, 1989). Moreover, the automobile's *ground* includes the extent to which modern society is arranged and habituated around its use, including motorists' acceptance that to travel by the motorcar is to be subjected to traffic jams. Figures are altered by their ground, which is never static.

We suggest that the *ground* of the United States' once familiar domains is experiencing seismic shifts, a situation exacerbated by mercurial relationships between the Trump administration and the nation's establishment media, locked in disputation about what is purported to be "truth" and "fake." McLuhan, Hutchon, and McLuhan (1977b) asserted that by "concentrat[ing] on the structure of a situation, we can assess problems more realistically and change the situation or our response to it" (p. 10), surely an advisable course of action in seemingly chaotic times.

## Twitter

How far are post-truth narratives being advanced through a U.S. president's Twitter activity, his repeated allegations of "fake news," and the scrutiny these accusations bring upon the journalistic practices of American establishment media? In Trump's tweets, how might he be interchangeably positioned as figure, ground, or medium? These questions reflect features of a new era in media, its reporting, and milieu, all demonstrating the observation by McLuhan that "the clearest way to see through a culture is to attend to its tools for conversation" (Postman, 1985/2006, p. 8).

Tweeting, retweeting, and hashtagging engage Twitter users in co-authorship that reconfigures traditionally regarded roles of writer, audience, content, subject, and object. Readers are themselves co-opted into writing Trump's messaging as Twitter mines information about who views each tweet, where the cursor is placed and clicked, for what duration it rests, to whose account it is retweeted, which hashtags are added, what commentary is made, etc.

The use of analogies between information networks and vehicular traffic seems apt. Automobility, so intimately tied to a North American sense of freedom, is situated on networks of roads and freeways that, when gridlocked, may cause a level of human frustration, even rage, that is demonstrated in the kind of violent scenes at times reported in the media.

When Trump tweets late at night, he is riffing with technology, with available information, with his Twitter followers, with his thinking, *and* with the Twitter publishing mechanism itself. His declarative statements are setting conditions that are in turn riffed in media reports and retweets, online discussions, news programming, late night television monologues, and comedy skits. Some of his tweets, which presumably (although not necessarily) feature his own, uncensored words, bear the immediacy and environmental impact of some kind of detonation within and well beyond Twittersphere. Any resulting consternation, excitement, upheaval, and validation experienced by members of the U.S. electorate, even global citizens, fully demonstrates the prescience of McLuhan's iconic phrase, coined over a half century ago: "the medium is the message."

Trump's early penchant for retweeting the opinions of others, including nefarious individuals and groups such as David Duke and *Britain First*, provides the President opportunity to present (even seemingly endorse) controversial positions without personally stating them—acts of collaborative activity, engaged however briefly. The "ground" (be it human personalities, corporations, demographics, or algorithms) constantly shifts beneath "shifty" figures (*again* human personalities, corporations, demographics, and algorithms) constantly altered by their conditions. *Hidden ground* exists as the entire political, economic, and AI apparatus that is required to establish conditions on which Twitter activity is conducted, becoming so familiar that it tends to be overlooked—users having "stopped paying it any conscious attention" (McLuhan et al., 1977a, p. 19).

## Algorithms

On city streets, a triangulation of cell phone data, Wi-Fi signals, and GPS provides a great deal of information to data providers, while Google and Apple services have been able to harness this data to determine traffic speed, areas of congestion, and make recommendations about how to navigate adverse conditions. Vehicles now routinely have sensors to automatically parallel park,

move the car out of harm's way, protect pedestrians, avoid lane drift, etc. Roadways increasingly have sensors that monitor traffic flow and adjust the regulation of stoplights and automated sensors regulating variable speed zones according to weather conditions. Some emerging networked technologies use Bluetooth/Wi-Fi and microwave technologies to aggregate more specific information about who is travelling where, while collecting information from roadside and overhead monitors that feed back into big data systems. The smooth flow of traffic is figure, while the backdrop is a massive collection of data that is being catalogued for all types of current and future purposes, many of which were unthinkable a relatively short time ago.

Transportation related technologies possess features that are shared with Trump's use of social media. Trump's tweets aren't simply unidirectional communications injected hypodermically into the veins of Twitter, paralleling the communications of broadcast television. Like the conceptualization of *automobility* as the AI guided aggregate of car-driver-road, here we think of Delanda's (2010) man-horse-bow assemblage. Trump's Twitter compositions end up being an amalgam of tweeter-Twitter-tweet, increasingly entwined in such a way that the boundaries of each role are no longer easily identifiable. Once Trump's tweets become further encoded with tracking data, visual framing, and comments by other users, the texts (in the broadest sense) accumulate and morph machine data in previously unimaginable ways.

Upon tweeting, Trump and his team have immediate access to reports indicating where the tweets were posted, retweeted, and what feelings readers attached to these messages. This contrasts earlier forms of opinion polling whereby reactions to a U.S. president's controversial platforms were collected after their unveiling. The results took days, even weeks, to assemble. There is now immediate access to sentiment data provoked by any message, including the broad demographics of gender and location. Trump and his administration can easily renege, shift, or pursue positions within a few hours of posting any given message on Twitter, in effect employing a "try before you buy" method of laying out policy shifts and initiatives. Creating a continuous cycle of text, this feedback informs how the tweet is further circulated in other media such as Facebook. The process continually adds or subtracts data from the transmission, the reader, the writer and the medium, all contributing to the way that Twitter exists in an almost virtually real world.

In the Twittersphere, we participate in what is an often chaotic social media version of an "information superhighway": tweets blast like car horns on digital roads, political pundits erratically careen and glance off one another, and bottlenecks form in areas of high traffic circulation that are also frequented by passersby slowing to rubberneck at any spectacle.

## Surround

Reliance on humanistic, binary claims of "truth" and "fake," or "lies" and "false," restrict perceptions by being "either/or" propositions that keep us bound within the present. Figure and ground can also amount to binary positions, so we expand our purview beyond the largely anthropocentric concerns of McLuhan's use of both by proposing a further layer of consideration for analysis, one we term *surround.* This additional perspective is conceived to recognize the parts of the situation displaced or destroyed in order to accommodate emerging properties such as technofossils and anthroturbation—countless traces of human activity now abundantly populating earth. Surround acknowledges environmental impact on the earth caused by human activity. Revisiting our example of the automobile, a configuration of figure/ground/surround helps us to recognize not only a car as figure and the roadway beneath it as ground (in two senses), but also a

surround comprising the swathes of land, plant life, and rich soil that have been excavated, paved over, tunneled under, and, thus, "lost" to roadways, back alleys, driveways, and car lots.

Surround's inclusion alongside the figure/ground paradigm permits us to better recognize the extent of ecological destruction caused by urban development—loss and ruin compounded by automobility that permits travel over further and further distances. Arable land is similarly lost to petroleum wells, oil sands, and tail ponds (not to mention the copious amounts of freshwater consumed in fracking for natural gas). The decentering of the human becomes imperative to both recognizing and mitigating the extent of humans' environmental impact while, in educational contexts, heightening students' awareness beyond immediate observations, familiar constructs, and epistemological debates. The Anthropocene continues to manifest distress, marked by a sense of growing anxiety, that Morton (2015) claims is:

> precisely the feeling of the loss of the world—the end of the world, but not as we thought, a great bang or a void, but a prolongation of things in synchrony with the disappearance of meaningful backdrop—and thus the disappearance of the foreground as such. (p. 185)

## Rideshare

The tools we use and the modes of transportation on which we anthropocentrically rely are expiring. Human work forces are becoming just another data set, increasingly consigned to fulfilling tasks informing machinic learning. Here, we look to a widely heralded player in the "sharing economy," Uber. In congested traffic, some cars are being engaged for the purposes of *ridesharing*, an arrangement secured by both patron and driver through the Uber app. An Uber hired car assumes a figure in traffic quite unique among the cars, apps, drivers, and occupants in its midst. What is the ground of the Uber car operated by the Uber driver? It is likely significantly different from the cars around it, for the Uber platform is using onboard smart technologies in its development of nonhuman automobility. Once ridesharing vehicles' activities are mapped by Uber, the humans presently conveying its technology (on company issued cell phones) are likely to be made redundant in their employ as driver. Human activity is in the midst of a tremendous existential shift; in the near future, the human will no longer drive vehicles carrying people and transporting freight. Meanwhile, *online* shopping continues to seriously disrupt human employment in retail work.

While we hold an image of thought that humans program the computer technologies that run automated devices, increasingly, it is machine learning technologies that collect information from humans and *any* other data source. Hierarchically, humans' position in matters is changing, and humans are being irreversibly delegated to machines' use. More specifically, humans aren't teaching self-driving cars their expanded role, as they are increasingly introduced to city streets, but are most likely sitting as passengers while being machine chauffeured—humans effectively riding "shotgun" from the driver's seat.

Philosophy of technology academic Tamar Sharon (2012, 2014) articulates a "cartography of the posthuman" as a typology of biotechnologies during the posthuman that careens between reactions to technological and human interactions: alternately dystopic, liberal, methodological, and radical. Identification of these types prompts similar questions about how technologies spring from human creativity yet reciprocally shape our human experience. Methodological shifts toward philosophical frameworks, such as those of Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 1994), and radical

posthumanism recognize the "political potential inherent in technologies to overcome some of the most detrimental effects of modernity" (Sharon, 2014, p. 8).

## Riff

What might educational learning during the posthuman look like and how might it be pursued? We identify our rhizomatic tendencies towards unfettered discovery (primarily, but not exclusively, by technological means) as a compulsion to riff (Stevens & Wainwright, 2016; Wainwright & Stevens, 2017). Our learning is potentiated by thought: ideally open ended and without hierarchical structure. An assemblage of figure/ground/surround is conceptualized as a tool of analysis to develop simultaneity of perception, taking into account the entire "visual" field. High school students of media were encouraged by McLuhan et al. (1977a) to summon powers of observation to assess what might be these settings during the electric age: "You are always the *figure,* as long as you are conscious, the ground is always the setting in which you exist and act" (p. 10). These considerations invite approaches developing awareness, particularly when any given ground is better understood as composing any other entity's figure (human, nonhuman, technological). "The interplay between you and this changing ground changes you" (McLuhan et al., 1977a, p. 10). We are interested in posthumanizing these important curriculum initiatives created by the authors of *City as Classroom*. McLuhan's career-long study of media was self admittedly always of its effects rather than of its content, which is what still distinguishes it as unique in its field.

Such analysis encourages observation and curiosity, a breadth of perception permitting one to "experienc[e] the sense of configuration; this is the sense that an artist brings to bear on painting, a satirist on situations" (McLuhan et al., 1977a, p. 10). Our personal sense as pedagogues is to "plug in and play"—to riff—and we have been developing an *[onto]Riffology*, which is rooted in our tendency to tap philosophy, cultural theory, and critical approaches in technology to infuse posthuman education with creativity (Stevens & Wainwright, 2016; Wainwright & Stevens, 2017).

Riff pursues freeform inquiry that has never been about "bring[ing] together a structuralist account of knowledge, nor to formulate a truth in any unifying theory, [but rather] we sample theory, seek affect in discovery, imbibe concept's rationale and engage play beyond discourse" (Stevens & Wainwright, 2016, p. 169). In research and classroom contexts, riff effectuates a posthuman leveling of hierarchical relationships between teacher and student. In our development of [onto]Riffology, we draw on the theoretical work of various educational theorists exploring Deleuzoguattarian approaches during which the human is decentered, representation is avoided, and understandings of "what it means to be human" are interrogated. In conceptualizing riff, we are inspired by Wallin's (2011, 2015) mobilization of philosophy for thinking pedagogical difference, jagodzinski and Wallin's (2013) machinic arts, Roy's (2003) case study on nomadic spaces, and St. Pierre's (2017; St. Pierre, Jackson, & Mazzei, 2016) elaboration on post-inquiry.

We take notice of the extent of technological interactions and that humans are deeply enmeshed with the machinic. This is hidden ground that we explore by way of riff. Riff is information sharing between humans and nonhumans in relationships of (re)combinatoriality— one action bootstrapping another's function in machinic assemblage. Humans riff off the nonhuman, machines riff off machines, machines riff off humans, and humans riff off humans. Expanding our lens past the human to grasp the nature of these relationships has been akin to lifting a veil or developing an additional sense; we are continually upending figure/ground/surround,

while engaging multiple, intersecting lines of reasoning that tenderize otherwise binary debates about whether, for example, Russian interference significantly impacted the 2016 American election. Socially mediated contexts indicating hostility result in disagreements held on epistemological terms that stymie what is better achievable by way of ontological strategies of becoming.

Riff seeks to emulate methods of experimental inquiry; the research that is termed "post qualitative" or "post-inquiry" by proponents who likewise relinquish dualisms of organization and belief such as "same/Other, human/nonhuman, mind/matter, culture/nature" (St. Pierre et al., 2016, p. 99). Much as it is near impossible to unsee nonhuman and technological paradigms once they have been recognized as fully existing alongside the human, it is a difficult prospect to unlearn post qualitative research approaches once introduced to them. Post-inquiry disrupts the relationships between the traditionally privileged fields of knowledge (empiricisms) and those of being and becoming (ontology); methodological frameworks just no longer suit (St. Pierre, 2017).

## Mr. President

When a car works as expected, we don't notice the necessary tools and labour that keep it in running condition. In the case of Trump's presidency, we enter a state of "breakdown." When Trump refuses to "act presidential" in the function of his job, great discomfort results. It is like a gestalt that switches figure and ground (what Trump says and what the medium does), optical illusions holding us transfixed. As long as the American governmental machine performs to our expectations, we rarely reflect on the nature of the tools, their workings, and their operations. Trump's approach to the presidency draws attention not only to Trump, but to the entire Trump/tweet/Twitter/reader assemblage in general—and the nature of the presidential role in particular. To riff on this tension is not so much to critique Trump's singular performance as president, but the presidential role over centuries. It's not that the King is without clothing; it's that the monarchy's textiles are made using exploited labour, and the kingdom's cotton is being picked in the Plantationocene (Haraway, 2016). Citizens of other countries, likewise monitoring Twitter and the media, join in a collective state of dissonance at the unfolding of internationally mediated events. Trump's disinclination to act "presidential" makes us all intimately aware of this fact.

This becomes the terrain of double figure/ground, the creation of which is "the most potent tool for creating insight and facilitating analysis" (McLuhan et al., 1977a, p. 49). In mediated circumstances, this technique alters figures and grounds to *both* form ground by their stark incongruence—bringing divergent audiences "into sudden collision" (McLuhan et al., 1977a, p. 49). It all plays with perceptions in the ways that one may expect when a gameshow host, property developer, and political neophyte unexpectedly becomes president of the United States (not entirely an unexpected phenomenon in the country given the political careers of Ronald Reagan, Clint Eastwood, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jesse Ventura, and Al Franken). The situation of Trump's ascendancy creates an interesting figure and ground scenario of compelling dynamics all on its own; however, a *double* figure/ground comes into play when a media celebrity of this self-styling becomes a world leader yet declines to perform presidentially. What is created by these juxtapositions becomes "the basic structure of much satire and most metaphor" (McLuhan et al., 1977a, p. 49), deeply jarring but exceedingly compelling. Such assertions raise important questions

when the spectre of post-truth is fully cast. Is it the handiwork of intentional obfuscation or merely the nature of (even, unintentional) satiric work?

## Probes

Deleuze's philosophical propensity for experimentality in thought inspires our mobilization of his concepts to explore and understand news events (published, streamed, or broadcast) and what to make of alleged "fake news" (as *lies* with an *intent* to misinform its audiences). In Deleuzian thought, events are conceptualized as stemming from processes of two intertwining flows: both the real as actual and the real as virtual.

Deleuze (1993) considers the actual event not as a state of affairs but as "*actualized* in a state of affairs" (p. 152, emphasis added), while the virtual comprises "incorporeal events" (Boundas, 2010, p. 197): "'Real without being actual, ideal without being abstract'; and symbolic without being fictional" (Proust as quoted in Deleuze, 1994, p. 208). In navigating distinctions between the actual and virtual, "elements and relations" forming structure must not be overstated in the former circumstance, nor understated in the latter (Deleuze, 1994, p. 208). Moment by moment, as countless virtual events become actualized, exponentially more don't. While always real, actualized events in due course return to virtuality—events endlessly flow from states of virtuality to a moment of actualization and then return to the virtual. Massumi (1995) describes the virtual as:

> a lived paradox where what are normally opposites coexist, coalesce, and connect; where what cannot be experienced cannot but be felt—albeit reduced and contained. For out of the pressing crowd an individual action or expression *will* emerge and be registered consciously. One 'wills' it to emerge, to be qualified, to take on sociolinguistic meaning, to enter linear action-reaction circuits, to become a content of one's life—by dint of inhibition. (pp. 30-31)

This interplay between actual and the virtual fuels riff by pushing towards mobilization of theory, pressing concepts into active tenses. What is this world of our creation, and by what impulses and constraints is it alternatively propelled and structured? "Predatory capitalism," "proto-fascism," "democracy," "consumerism," we can't necessarily slow global systems and curb its preoccupations, but we may engage *thought* to not act complicitly. Identification of "fake news" is a provocation to discovery and engagement. Where does it exist, and what does it do? Riff is a tool kit of borrowed concepts, particularly those pursued as learning trajectories as *becoming*, infused with a sense of discovery and naïveté challenging us to think our way out of this mess. Humanity's ultimate destination may not be averted by such intellectual diversions, but the ride might be more interesting. Understanding figure, ground, and surround, we read the inscription *and* see the atomic bomb on which it is stenciled. We also see the material waste and poisoned water left in its construction's wake, as well as the dead beings and land that will feel its touch, if launched.

## Zombies

We recognize that what we may well be witnessing is the culmination of the Anthropocene, a scenario about which Wallin (2015) evokes chaos, eco-catastrophe, and zombies—a scenario in which humanist educational ambitions to lift humanity out of a morass of its own creation are entirely for naught. Analogies of the post-apocalyptic and zombies (equatable to Sharon's [2012, 2014] description of the posthuman as dystopic) bring a certain cult movie sensibility—something like a breath of pollution choked air—to mises-en-scène that counter all the sentiments of hope that humanist pedagogical aspiration attempts to muster, then inspire. We're dying here, alongside all life forms. There is no real escape, and we rush headlong to our own demise, hastened by our unbridled anthropocentrism, that "key assumption of modern Western rationality" (Shaviro, 2014, p. 1). Wallin (2015) invokes zombies in breaking "the humanist conceit of progress and perfection by actualizing the occulted unconscious background of horror and decay with which human life is imbricated" (p. 140). Like this apocalyptical rendering of the Anthropocene, the Chthulucene tells its own tales, of an "order [that] is reknitted: human beings are with and of the earth, and the biotic and abiotic powers of this earth are the main story" (Haraway, 2016, p. 55).

Having suggested that, in a Deleuzian sense, reality inhabits the potentialities of the virtual and the actual, we now work within its ontology to consider McLuhan's confidence in figure/ground analysis as an "approach to problems as interrelated aspects of culture…stress[ing] the fact of continuity in a world of seeming change" (McLuhan et al., 1977b, p. 1). Our motivations in resurrecting a four decade old curriculum—albeit one co-developed by a foremost public intellectual, astonishingly prescient in his anticipation of the impacts of technology on civilization and learning—include unsettling our thinking and paradigms to embrace further implications of the posthuman conditions into which we have been thrust. We explore the nature of interchangeable subjectivity between online author, reader, and text, whereby, through responses, retweets, hashtags, and algorithms, Internet content is co-written—further disrupting traditional notions of news and its production.

In *City as Classroom,* McLuhan et al. (1977a) refer to "problems" inherent to a changing environment, betraying a decidedly dystopic approach to networked technologies and their effects on society. Both the textbook and its accompanying teacher's guide instruct students to be vigilant while identifying figure and ground when navigating "two major concerns…[both] to discover the new problems this environment poses, and to develop ways of coping with these problems" (McLuhan et al., 1977b, p. 1).

Shifting understandings of interdependence between animal, vegetable, and mineral, the metropolis becomes something like a petri dish of relationships *culturing* human and nonhuman matter. Over four decades after McLuhan et al. (1977a) introduced figure/ground analysis to Canadian youth to broaden their gaze on topics of media studies, speculative realist ontologies— such as object oriented ontology (OOO) theorized by Graham Harman (2002, 2010), Ian Bogost (2012), and Levi Bryant (2011)—further move notions of subjectivity in multiple directions. Any traditionally understood exceptionalism of human inhabitants over their nonhuman counterparts is being completely reimagined, particularly a hitherto acceptable hierarchy in which human life is considered more worthy of subjectivity than is matter.

## Ontologies

The self-driving car becomes "figure" on the city's streets, an editorial plotline and a point of both interest and consternation in the ever changing world. The autonomous vehicle, engineered to carry freight and passengers, will one day end any reliance on human drivers, and this eventuality will create massive (human) job redundancy. As we recognize the many ways that Twitter induces human users to collaborate in garnering its data, we can anticipate how much of self driving cars' learning will take place on city streets. In its experimental phase, the autonomous vehicle has already caused human fatalities when systems have failed to anticipate all situations and eventualities. Without human pilots, the cars will be in transit night and day, car ownership will be reimagined, and the considerable space presently dedicated to parked vehicles and roadways may be repurposed. Figure becomes ground becomes surround, elements of ground become figure, and human perceptions are accordingly honed as foci shift.

Proponents of autonomous vehicles note that collision avoidance features will be based on detailed vehicle placement technologies that will virtually eliminate traffic accidents. For the first time, vehicles will be able to simultaneously focus attention in all directions. No longer will vehicles' navigation be compromised by human pilots' periodic gazing into the rear view mirror to assess their ability to safely proceed.

In an era of human-built machines, the automobile ("self *movable*") has shaped modern existence while being human navigated. The car's future incarnation as autonomous will necessitate new tools and concepts that require radical transformation of existing thought images based on perishing technologies of car/driver binaries.

Fake, truth, false claims, and lies are not just about trying to figure out what is fake and what is true, but concern striving towards a new conceptualization of the possible, of a new becoming. This doesn't happen by trying to continuously decipher the meanings in any particular statement or reporting; it comes instead by shifting figure, shifting ground, enlivening new folds, and by avoiding distractions caused by epistemological debates being sponsored by corporate interests, their bought politicians, and the mainstream news agencies.

Ontologizing our surroundings and engagements better navigates our passage than constant epistemological ruminations. Ontological considerations reimagine relationships in the many ways necessary to stem the ruin we have wrought. This will take more than a shift of content or even medium. It requires an entirely new way of creating and conceptualizing what's real. McLuhan (1967) wrote that "when faced with a totally new situation, we tend always to attach ourselves to the objects, to the flavor of the most recent past. We look at the present through a rear-view mirror. We march backwards into the future" (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967, pp. 74-75). But we march, regardless. We riff to decenter the human, avoid representation, and to engage ontologies to question war economies, rampant material consumption, cult of celebrity, political malfeasance, and environmental destruction—the makings of a posthuman critical pedagogy.

[onto]Riffology is an attempt to posthumanize education and ontologize learning that is optimized by machines and networked technologies, inklings more than knowledge, discovery more than dogma. Humanist renderings of the figure, ground, and surround are perhaps analogous to the bomb, its stenciling, and catastrophic detonation. Does a posthuman version of figure, ground, and surround approximate a combination of the boundary events and timescapes, Anthropocene, Chthulucene, and Capitalocene? What do these next years look like?

Trump and the lies spun from the presidential office seem to demand action of some sort. The entire American broadcast news media arguably inspires less confidence than ever. We are,

however, attempting to shift our attention from this figure and that ground to instead scrutinize the significance found in posthuman events.

## Notes

**1.** Examples of "figure" and "ground" may be found here: https://goo.gl/tgcGGX

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