

and angrily at the food that remains: this is her helmet, which Branch has fashioned from bread. Branch has not evened out the distinction between herself and the gulls: she is the artist, this is her work, and her gift to them is also a cultural practice for herself; she has not returned the world to a presumptive 'balance': after all, the gulls fight with one another, and bread is the paradigmatic food of settled agriculture and its inequities; and to shoot the film, she had first to accustom the gulls to her presence: this is therefore a practice of mutual domestication, which requires taking a body from one home and training it for another. This practice is one of negotiation, dependency, shared exposure and danger.

Food is the substance par excellence of nostalgic attachment to the maternal or even grand-maternal, the homeland, the 'pure', 'authentic' and 'hand-crafted'. In these forms, food functions as a materialized form of fantasies of innocence and belonging and the irresponsibility of being taken care of. Posthuman materialisms, in their frequent dedication to disrupting notions of ontological fixedness, sometimes forget that anything that exists, whatever its entanglements with others, still has or is had by that one thing that cannot be shared, its own end, whether we call this end a disruption, a dispersal or a death. A posthuman awareness of eating recognizes it as a practice of bodily and hence ontological porosity; it knows that eating is never innocent, always a death practice, always an unequal exchange between mortal bodies, always a negotiation between bodies more or less fitted for each other, and that being a companion – as with Branch and the gulls – can sometimes require offering up what one believes to be one's own body to another.

See also Animal; Art; Ecomaterialism; Ethereal Scent; Feminist Posthumanities;

Multispecies; Postmedieval; Transcorporeality; Urbanibalism.

Karl Steel

FORESTS

Forests occupy a singular role in the history of Western thought, figuring as the territory – material and imagined; concrete, symbolic and metaphysical – that lies outside the borders of the social contract, the space of the civic and the realms of reason. Forests demarcate a threshold – as much environmental as political and legal, epistemic and ontological – against which civilization is defined, being considered both its primeval precondition and its antithesis or negation. In the Western imagination, the space of the social par excellence – and by extension of culture, politics, law and history – is the city, and the city stands to the forest in a relation of fundamental opposition.¹

The myth of the foundation of Rome tells that the city was erected in a clearing carved in a dense forest. The burning and cutting of trees was the first and decisive inscription of history in the landscape, the inaugural act in the construction of human institutions. At the margins of the city and its rural states, the undomesticated forest drew the borders of the *res publica*, setting the limits of Rome's jurisdiction beyond which land was *res nullius* or *terra nullius*, 'belonging to no one', 'nobody's land'. At the edges of empire, where the forest loomed beyond the horizon, there existed the stateless, lawless, unruly territory of barbarian tribes.

Within the social and spatial order of medieval feudalism and Christianity in Europe, with its networks of dispersed, walled city-enclaves, forests were considered



Anthropogenic sculpted landscapes of raised fields punctuate the flooded tropical savannas of the northern Amazon basin. Nearly invisible from the ground, these large clusters of cultivation (c. 1,000 years BP) were uncovered through the infra-red ‘photographic-archaeologies’ produced by archaeologist Stéphane Rostain in the 1980s.

as the ‘outside.’ Wooded lands configured a dark, wild zone beyond the city’s enclosure that was inhabited by all sorts of outcasts and outlaws: fugitives and persecuted, mad and lepers, the fallen and the beasts. In theological terms, forests were the realm of anarchy, shadows and the inhuman, the frontier space of the ordained social-religious world of the city. Modernity, whether in the humanist tradition of the Renaissance or in the Enlightened post-Cartesian manifestation, perpetuated this lineage of thought but at the same time introduced a radically different paradigm. As the human species took centre stage in the Western imagination and the place of mythology and theist philosophy was occupied

by reason, forests were seen as landscapes opposed to the human and the social by virtue of the scientific objectification of nature. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, at a moment when deforestation reached vast extensions of the European continent, forests started to be considered under utilitarian perspectives, framed as a natural resource to be rationally domesticated and subjected by human knowledge and power. Whereas the geometric urban designs of planned towns represented the exemplary spatial manifestation of the exercise of reason – ‘those well-ordered towns that an engineer lays out on a vacant plane as it suits his fancy’, as Descartes wrote (*Discourse on Method*, Part I, 1637)

– forests represented the space of randomness, arbitrariness and irrationality.

During colonial modernity the image of the forest as a natural, pre-civilizational space was recast anew by the concept of ‘state of nature’ in political and moral philosophy. The battlefield of Hobbes’ war of all against all was a densely forested landscape, more precisely the tropical forests of the New World as they were imagined by early colonial accounts, where ‘savages ... have no government at all and live at this day in that brutish manner’ (*Leviathan* – Chapter XIII: ‘Of the Natural Condition of Mankind as Concerning Their Felicity and Misery’). Rousseau’s noble savage also dwelled in a primeval landscape covered by ‘immense woods’, but idyllic and peaceful, ‘laying himself down to sleep at the foot of the same tree that afforded him his meal’ (*Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men*). By the nineteenth century, this imaginary was entangled with the orientalist/occidental geographies of colonialism and modern scientific theories of social evolution and racial inferiority. Through the hands of white explorers, colonial administrators, naturalists and ethnographers, forests – especially *tropical* forests – became the quintessential representation of the natural realm, the Earth’s remaining pristine environments where society was in its infancy and humans remained in a primitive, animal-like condition.

Amazonia, the world’s greatest tropical forest, became one of the most important symbolic and epistemic spaces through which the reasoning behind this image of nature and society, and the power structures it sustained, were forged and legitimized. In the tradition of Western imagination, the nature of Amazonia is as much luxurious as inhospitable, refractory to civilization and nearly unmodified by social designs. One of the central arguments supporting this view was the apparent inexistence of indigenous

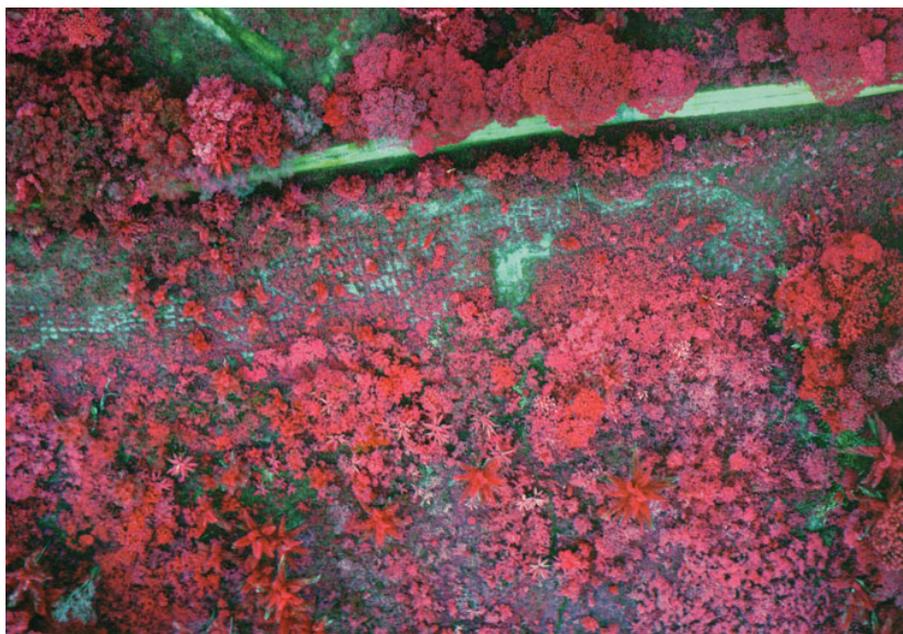
urban complexes in the forest landscape, both in the ancient past, as archaeological evidence, and in the modern present, as long-lasting architectural structures. Constrained by the insurmountable forces of the tropical forest environment, so the theory went, ‘primitive’ societies did not develop the technological means to alter the land in any meaningful way.

Recent archaeological findings are radically transforming this image of Amazonia and completely reconfiguring the ways by which both the nature and the history of the forest are interpreted. Archaeologists and ethnobotanists are revealing the existence of large and complex pre-Colombian civilizations spread throughout the Amazon basin which employed advanced landscape management techniques. The evidence tells us that not only the modes of inhabitation of native peoples leave a clear ‘architectural trace’ in the landscape, but also that they play a remarkable function in shaping the vegetative associations and species contents of the forest. The past and the present of the most biodiverse territory on Earth is as rich in nature as in culture: the forests of Amazonia are to a great extent an ‘urban heritage’ of indigenous societies.

This new archaeological, forensic image of Amazonia unsettles the colonial perspective of Western imagination, to whom the forest represented the antithesis of the space of civilization, a resource of radical alterity against which the city was defined. The radical other that the forest presents is not a completely natural landscape, the absolute negation to the culturally saturated civic-political space of the urban. It is an altogether different form of urbanity itself that escapes the spatial and epistemic geometries of colonial modern reason and imaginaries. Instead of seeing the forest as an environment lacking the city, it is the very concept of the city that has to be widened and transformed to



Forests 1. Copyright Stéphane Rostain



Forests 2. Copyright Stéphane Rostain

incorporate the constructed, political nature of the forest. From that perspective, the origins of the *polis* – the space of the political – is not located on the ontological cleavage between city and forest, nature and culture, but in the constitution of an expanded political arena across these borders. The city's relation figure-ground is subverted. Instead of the empty canvas upon which history was drawn, nature emerges in the foreground as the picture itself, the intentional creation of societies and not merely their support. The foundations of the city do not rest on the act of clearing the forest, but on the practice of its cultivation. Another image of the city is rendered visible, one that initially we might find hard to recognize because for too long we have been confined within the epistemic and imaginary walls of the Western city.

Many societies indigenous to Amazonia do not only recognize this urban nature of the forest, as for example by identifying areas of dense 'natural' forests as anthropogenic landscapes, or by attributing cultural values to elements such as streams and trees, and thus codifying the natural environment in an analogous form to the ways Western societies treat buildings and monuments. They also extend the boundaries of this forest-polis beyond the human. Forests and rivers are populated by what the Sarayaku people call *llaktas* – 'villages' and 'towns'. In contrast to Western cosmology, where the social is restricted to the domain of the human species, in Amerindian thought the space between humans and non-humans, peoples and nature, is from the outset a socialized space.

'What we call the environment is for them a society of societies, an interna-



Forests 3. Copyright Stéphen Rostain

tional arena, a cosmopoliteia,' philosopher Debora Danowski and anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro write (2014). This conception of the forest as a cosmopoliteia implies that every being that lives in the forest – trees, jaguars and peoples – are city-dwellers, that is, they are 'citizens' within an enlarged political space to whom rights should be attributed. The necessary reconfiguration of the social towards a more horizontal and less destructive relationality between humans and nature passes through the reconceptualization of the polis as forest, requiring a radical shift in perspective and an exercise in decolonization of thought and gaze. The nature of nature is social, and therefore political. In the context of the post-climate-change world order, this forest-polis calls for the constitution of an universalist, multi-species social contract beyond the human.

See also Geomythologies; Postglacial; General Ecology; Green/Environmental Humanities; Rewilding.

Note

1. The brief 'archaeology' of the role of forests in Western thought presented here is drawn from Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

Paulo Tavares
Images by archaeologist
Stéphen Rostain

FOUR ELEMENTS

The ancient metaphysical diagram of the four basic roots or elements, earth–air–fire–water, is closely associated with the fragments of Empedocles, as well as the explications of Aristotle. A diagram is a

dynamic and productive device that leads thought to new places and may even assist in the construction of a new reality. The diagram's creativity is filtered by constraints. It works, it forces things together; but not without some lines to guide its unfurling. The diagram in addition does not project the idea that the elements are natural; they may be artificial or a mixture of both. The diagram pilots a forward-looking trajectory in the form of an experiment with the new fundamental elements of our time.

Diagramming the four elements utilizes the principal alignments of ancient thought: Anaximenes' AIR; Aristotle's EARTH; Heraclitus' FIRE; Thales' WATER, and the basic oppositions between hot/cold and wet/dry. In terms of contemporary elemental theory, I draw upon philosopher Reza Negarestani (2008), who offers an analysis of the geo-mythic foundation of the Middle East as a 'dust plateau' in the form of dust particles and fluxes and how they mix according to a revised version of the diagram. Negarestani's original redrawing of the diagram expresses a trajectory that is influenced by the combination of three elements with various kinds of questionable wetnesses. The ancient desire of the dry for the wet, to be rehydrated and settled, is to render dusty air, earth and fire, and to connect these with moisturizing alternatives to water; for example, oil.

New cosmic dynamics are also investigated through flammable waters, perverse wetnesses that permit lakes and rivers to burst into flames. The key example is that methane makes the tap water supply flammable as a likely result of leaks or gas migration from hydraulic fracturing. Such threats to groundwater integrity, exacerbated by fracking fluids, forge a burnable, explosive wetness that bubbles in the water and flows around it. According to the rules of direct transformation discovered by