

From Nouns and Things: Changing Their Climate

...

We nouns—
both royal and composite
as far as we're separate—
adapt to the surroundings
of our assumptive selves,
non-selves, and connections.
Twisting syntax to make sense and invoke
other sense, non-sense, living nouns twist social
relations to secure their future,
to empower, to inform.
To say that people don't change
as their habitats change,
to say our surroundings don't change
from industry actions doesn't follow the facts.
Yet sequences embrace more than facts:
desire and survival, perceived and real,
all classes alter their habitats to improve
their chances—viruses, ants, elephants, people.
Changes from climate may be sticky
or passing when applied
to organisms, reform when applied to society,
and volatile when applied to an ecosystem.
As climate changes, we will be transformed
if we don't adapt.

*Since there are more nouns than any other part of speech,²
conditionality are us. Wouldn't it be helpful to our species if we
transformed ourselves rather than be forced to change in
unpredictable ways? Our preference for freedom of speech and
action so suggests. Our preference for strong leadership, for
passivity in certain realms, also suggests our penchant to be
socialized. The interacting borderlands of freedom and security
are complex compared to either condition. People want both.
Conflicts arise.*

Our bodies, themselves things with outlines, and our minds, where outlines are less distinct, tend to organize the world by things. Even conceptual nouns with constantly shifting outlines like thoughts, feelings, states, events, and processes have a thing-like character in language as we identify and use them. *Non-humans also tend to organize their world around things. In speaking about the octopus, Peter Godfrey-Smith finds similarities and differences in “...the ways that smart animals handle the stuff of their world. They carve it up into objects that can be re-identified despite ongoing changes in how those objects present themselves.”*³

The environmental model identifies things from multiple perspectives operating simultaneously and sequentially:

- Physics defines particles by position and velocity.
- Metaphysics discusses things as having outlines and substance.
- Environmentally, organisms are readily perceived as unitary and as parts of ecosystems.
- Linnaeus’ taxonomy of species organizes species by morphology, dragging into each category many divergences.

Yet things don’t exist by themselves in any persistent or, to use the environmental term, sustainable identity as Immanuel Kant’s notion of “things in themselves” points out:

*“Though we cannot know these objects as things in themselves, we must yet be in a position at least to think them as things in themselves; otherwise, we should be landed in the absurd conclusion that there can be appearance without anything that appears.”*⁴

Not only do thing-presentations not occur alone, they are linked in complex ways to word-presentations. The organization of the [topography](#) of human mental apparatus proposed by Michael S.

A. Graziano in *Consciousness and the Social Brain*⁵ accounts for the emergence of linguistic structures as things that humans use in speaking and writing. More on this later.

Words and things are able to be identified as each other even though a word's contents are not the thing but from different perspectives an idea of it in the mind, a method used to communicate or present a thing, and its interactions that do not necessarily include something physical to point to. Similar and different; at many levels we see the related and divergent characteristics of things presented as themselves and words.

In order to accurately identify the complex properties of things and, by extension, people, words, and concepts, all these different nouns make more sense from the environmental point of view as composite and multidimensional. They are perceived as units in order to be manipulated, but are assembled from other things using specific connectors. Even things with obvious outlines are composite and constructed by their own and observer processes. Here are some examples why things don't exist in themselves but rather are compounds and parts of larger and smaller apparent wholes:

1. Subatomic particles seem like basic things, and they all have different names. They also have common properties. Yet, in order to be said to exist in a strict physical sense, an observer must know both their distinct position and their velocity. In order to know position, the observer must use a fixed measuring device, and in order to know velocity, the observer must use a moving measuring device. According to Karen Barad's description of the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics (Niels Bohr's indeterminacy principle, as contrasted with Werner Heisenberg's uncertainty), since these two observations cannot be made simultaneously, the existence of the particle by itself is indeterminate. The particle itself is thereby contingent and composite. The particle's existence needs the two measuring devices

to be considered in combination with the particle. Then, the researchers who operate the measuring devices attach themselves to the thing. The particle's environmental proof of existence depends on the observer, multiple other components, and their entire set of connections.⁶ (Indeterminacy does not mean that the thing (the particle, in this case) doesn't exist as in simplifications of Buddhist scripture, for the greatest trick of the ruling class has been convincing people that the world does not exist.)

2. I feel like a thing, a person-thing; I am used like a thing by other persons and things. Michael Pollan points out in *Botany of Desire* that humans may also be used by plants, like apples and potatoes, that make themselves important and tasty to us so we will increase their populations.⁷ I exist and function through operations between parts of myself, the networked components of my body that allow me to function as a thing, and related constructions that I don't consider me. Connected components outside my body allow me to breathe, write, and get paid by my publisher. I had parents who did things to make me, a doctor who dragged me out, a food chain with farm workers and markets that fed me. This thing—me—acts like a network and an entity.
3. Things' indeterminacy also derives from their different uses. An oak tree is a composite of its own parts and parts shared with other plants like soil and water sources. The oak is also composed of other organisms—nitrogen fixing bacteria, fungi, and viruses—that can be more or less independent of the tree. A tree cannot be said to exist alone as it breathes, is fed by, and feeds in relation to many other entities. The shared components and processes of arboreal and rhizomic plants complicate the binary of Gilles Deleuze opposing rhizomic and arboreal. Further, the tree exists in different ways

depending on which combinations the reader views. The tree has a different identity for and shares identities with:

- a. a bird nesting in it,
- b. a fungus that supports mutualism; Weile Chen: “predictable relationships between below-ground traits and nutrient acquisition emerge only when both roots and mycorrhizal fungi are considered together, ...”⁸
- c. a poet that sits in the shade of the tree to write a poem such as Mary Robinson’s: “Oft do I seek thy shade dear with'ring tree, Sad emblem of my OWN disast'rous state.”⁹

than it does for itself as a noun/entity/subject position.

4. Living matter, “organisms taken as a whole,” expands across the globe through its components rather than as an entity. Yet the whole of the biosphere operates as an entity, an extension of life. Vladimir Vernadsky: “The diffusion of life is a sign of internal energy—of the chemical work life performs—and is analogous to the diffusion of a gas. It is caused, not by gravity, but by the separate energetic movements of its component particles.”¹⁰
5. Poems, too, are conglomerate things composed of letters, numbers, words, punctuation, and space that field poetry reads as duration among other things. Poems exist in minds, on pages, in air, and on screens. The poem-concept includes poetry writ large, poems themselves, poetry processes, and poem parts and methods. The poem on the page exists by virtue of paper and on screen through machine language. Poems have purpose, process, existence, and a taxonomy. When you read a poem, it links to many other things such as:

- a. A prior set of poems that allows the poem its form, themes, various subordinate meanings, and companionship in a book which may be different in a single author book than an anthology with a theme
- b. A set of components—reading apparatus, psychological and other mental interactions—that encourages the reader to read the poem, such as love, boredom, school assignments, anxiety, and hierarchies of value that the reader anticipates and invokes as reasons for reading the poem
- c. Correspondences: the reader and poet connect with logic, memory, immediate sensation, and mediated impression. Both paths of communication and active performance of components operate ecologically
- d. General, received theories about poetry that many readers focus on when reading popular poems by Dickinson, Li Bai, Hafiz, and others.

These components dynamically engage the noun/thing (poem, tree, particle). Noun-things are active phenomena linking to others in processes that manifest moment to moment through pixilated perception. Barad:

“‘Matter’ does not refer to an inherent, fixed property of abstract, independently existing objects; rather, ‘matter’ refers to phenomena in their ongoing materialization.”¹¹

The thing materializes from the processes of the network. Barad substitutes “phenomenon” for “thing” which makes sense in the way things’ components increase and decrease in number and scope based on how far we map the network. Supported by Kant and Ludwig Wittgenstein’s formulations around language, Barad’s idea sustains multiple views of nouns, things, and

subject positions through grammaring, mattering, and helping to perceive things with wider perspective and accuracy.

“Just as there are no words with determinate meanings lying in wait as so many candidates for an appropriate representational moment, neither are there things with determinate boundaries and properties whirling aimlessly in the void, bereft of agency, historicity, or meaning, which are only to be bestowed from the outside, as when the agency of Man pronounces the name that attaches to specific beings in the making of word-thing pairs. ‘Things’ don’t preexist; they are agentially enacted and become determinately bounded and propertied within phenomena... words and things are indeterminate.”¹²

A similar frame appears to Rae Armantrout in her poem “In Brief”:

“Let the Mona Lisa stand
for private jokes,

passing thoughts, all
you never knew

about your parents.”¹³

Isn’t the unique “Mona Lisa” then also many, such that the painting takes the pronoun “they?” They is connected to all the thoughts about Mona Lisa as a person and as a painting. Using Barad’s term “intra-action” referring to the “mutual constitution of entangled agencies,”¹⁴ I am telling an environmental way for poetry to look at noun/things, even conceptual nouns, as inter-intra-action. Armantrout is alert to this viewpoint. The private jokes in the poem become part of the Mona Lisa painting that I now cannot expunge when I see the painting.