



LIVING LEXICON  
FOR THE ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES

## Fecundity

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Fecundity—fertility—productivity. F-e-c-u-n-d-i-t-y. The hard *f* begins the word, to be followed by the stop of *c* and two quick dental articulations, *d*—*t*. The word itself evokes something grotesque, far from the romantic and feminine-coded sense that has been associated with its synonym *fertility* and distant too from the progressive insistence of *productivity*. No—fecundity is neither simply beautiful nor forward-moving. It is directed toward life, but equally toward excess and death.

In her essay of the same name, Annie Dillard recognizes fecundity in the observation of two moths mating: “the perfect picture of utter spirituality and utter degradation” from which she “could not turn away [her] eyes.”<sup>1</sup> Fecundity is marked by an acute ambivalence: we recoil while we are simultaneously drawn to observe. Dillard pairs fecundity with the adjective *rank*, characterizes it as “a terrible pressure,” and slaps it with a judgment: “Fecundity is an ugly word for an ugly subject. It is ugly, at least, in the eggy animal world.”<sup>2</sup> Eating, birthing, proliferating eggs in excess, and dispersing, so many to be met with almost immediate death: a mantis “dribbling out eggs in wet bubbles” or a termite “throbbing and pulsing out rivers of globular eggs.”<sup>3</sup> Of course, humans are animals too, but the excessive proliferation of eggs in the nonhuman animal world so contracts the distance between birthing and dying that we can sincerely wonder at the purpose of it all, why “with extravagance goes a crushing waste.”<sup>4</sup> Though it is the animal world that seems most to offend, Dillard is also drawn to consider the grotesque fecundity of plants: “I see squashes expanding with pressure. . . . The rye plant

1. Dillard, “Fecundity,” 161.

2. *Ibid.*, 163.

3. *Ibid.*, 169.

4. *Ibid.*, 162.

and the Bronx ailanthus are literally killing themselves to make seeds.”<sup>5</sup> In all, fecundity is almost perverse. A proliferation that can only mean innumerable deaths. The many bubbling eggs of larvae, the near-suicidal seeding of plants. To accept something of the world we inhabit, of which we are inseparably a part, means to accept an ineluctable decomposition, a death and continual dying.

And yet, fecundity is not just the hallmark of the nonhuman animal or plant world—human life is fecund as well. Our own bodies are objects of ambivalence; they are sites of teeming growth and excessive pressure: cells growing and dying, bacteria swarming, fated always for a more fecund future upon death. With fecundity, it becomes clear that human life is far from unique or exceptional, but is rather firmly embedded in this concert of death and continual dying, without which the processes of life could not continue. If a fundamental aim of the environmental humanities is to press against human exceptionalism, engendering instead a practice of interspecies relationality and “response-ability,”<sup>6</sup> then I think adding a more precise definition of fecundity to its lexicon can assist, for it accentuates not only a shared quality of all life forms but also their essential interdependence, that is, how this continual dying makes way for and makes possible new forms of life.

Fecundity marks nature not as ornate beauty or efficient machine, but as mundane and sticky, monotonous, and sometimes foul. It is the cultivating of microbes in our sourdoughs and the molding of our cheeses, complemented by the digestive process of enzymes, acids, and bacteria that break them down (fig. 1). It is the rancid stink of female ginkgo trees, their fruits smelling of “vegetal vomit”; but equally, its fecundity inscribes the ginkgo as dinosaur fodder and shade, as a sacred plant of Buddhist temples, as an enduring survivor of Hiroshima.<sup>7</sup> As a characteristic shared by all life, fecundity is one point from which to incite conversations between human, animal, vegetal, fungal, and microbial matter, celebrating the complexity of kinships that compose the present and evoke the past, which, as the example of the ginkgo shows, is full of histories both tragic and harmonious. As Dillard demonstrates, fecundity asks that we accept “nature” as neither efficient nor beautiful, but as excessive and replete with death. And yet, nature as fecund—in which life is so intimate with death and birth so commensurate with waste—does not legitimize the rampant wastefulness of many human societies, nor does it, more broadly, condemn life only to catastrophe. Rather, following Donna Haraway, an acknowledgment of fecundity only underlines the need to “stay with the trouble,” that is, to immerse ourselves in a world brimming with both joy and loss, birth and death, in order to generate multivalent, experimental practices of “living and dying well together” on a damaged Earth.<sup>8</sup> It is a fervent invitation “to make kin” across

5. *Ibid.*, 182.

6. Haraway, *When Species Meet*; Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*. See also Wright, “Becoming-With.”

7. Taft, “Female Ginkgo Tree’s Acrid Smell of Success.” Taft dates the beginnings of the ginkgo tree to the time of the dinosaurs and documents its history of cultivation in certain strains of Buddhism. On the final point, Taft writes, “The ginkgo may be one of the world’s toughest trees—in fact, six are known to have survived the atomic bomb and still grow in or near Hiroshima, Japan.”

8. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 27–29.

Figure 1. A tapestry of bubbling, fermenting sourdough. Credit: Alex Phaneuf.



disparate parts of the ecological web, reimagining and reinventing these interrelations, for we must “become-with each other or not at all.”<sup>9</sup>

Fecundity as a performance of living and dying in concert with other beings is perhaps best exemplified by the flourishing of fungi. Feeding upon what is both living and dead, fungi are not always “benign” but can be “ferocious pathogens” and “irritating parasites.”<sup>10</sup> “Fungi appetites,” Anna Tsing writes, “are always ambivalent in their benevolence, depending on your point of view. The ability of fungi to degrade cellulose and lignin of dead wood, so feared in protecting wooden houses, is also fungi’s greatest gift to forest regeneration. Otherwise, the forest would be stacked with dead wood, and other organisms would have a smaller and smaller nutrient base.”<sup>11</sup> The fecundity of fungi is particularly fecund. Fecundity as unrelenting cycle makes it nearly impossible to describe except through tautology. Fecund life as tautological riff.

Still, no wonder the persistence of biophobic attitudes—fecundity seems to explain human ambivalence toward more-than-human life. It is the bursting of springtime grasses and blossoms that set our breaths a-wheezing amid swollen, sniffing noses. It is viral overload, infection, and disease. So much birthing and feeding, growing and dying—so we wonder, how can we ever love “nature” amid all of this?

And yet, the fecundity of Earth calls not for a worshipping of nature, but a *reverence* toward the fecund mess of it all, toward life’s always uncertain proliferation and becoming-with. Reverence requires an embrace of nature as ultimately unfinalizable, resisting any inscription into a comprehensive, fixed totality. This “reverence for life”<sup>12</sup> is an affirmative call, but one that escapes mystical or divine conceptions, instead illuminating life as an ever-moving process with indefinite ends. It is akin to Darwin’s “wonder” at the interconnectedness of life forms “throughout all time and space,”<sup>13</sup> but

9. *Ibid.*, 4.

10. Tsing, “Unruly Edges,” 143.

11. *Ibid.*, 143–44.

12. Schweitzer, *Out of My Life and Thought*. Schweitzer (to whom Rachel Carson dedicated *Silent Spring*) coined “reverence for life” to orient his ethics of life affirmation. However, his term carries mystical overtones that I deviate from here.

13. Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, 128.

is both complemented and unsettled by aesthetic-scientific practices that accentuate the complexity of kinships in the present moment.<sup>14</sup> Most crucially, it is a reverence grounded not on conceptions of the beautiful or even the sublime,<sup>15</sup> but on fecundity as ambivalent contact with the messy proliferations of the world.

By presenting life in its unrelenting dynamism and fluidity, an account of fecundity may help ground and further animate theories of ecology in which life is conceived as an interconnected “mesh,”<sup>16</sup> humans and nonhumans are “enmeshed,”<sup>17</sup> and human bodies are invariably “intermeshed with the more-than-human world.”<sup>18</sup> Fecundity, in short, gives palpable, concrete expression to these complex interweavings and crossings over between human and nonhuman bodies.

The fact of all life is fecundity. So, what are we going to do about it? Retreat in disgust and revile with distance? Or should we allow ourselves to experience the grotesque, the lamentable, the uncomfortable, which is also the generative, vibrant, and affective? Here’s to a beginning for new phenomenologies of ecology, of interspecies relations, of life.

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14. For an elaboration on what she calls “art science worldings,” see Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.

15. For a critique of the sublime as resonant with masculine imageries of dominating nature, see Morton, “Queer Ecology,” 274.

16. *Ibid.*, 275.

17. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 13.

18. Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 2.