Overgrowing

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Recently, at a conference on environmental ethics, I noticed there was a lot of discussion about the value and preservation of “untouched” nature; the wilderness, the world without human interference. This idea of untouched nature intrigues me, I want to explore the idea of wilderness and what it means for the human to touch the natural. The declaration of the Anthropocene - a proposed name for the current epoch, in which human action exerts more influence on the earth than any other geological factors - has led to declarations of “the end of nature”. Both experts and news outlets, like the article “Have we reached the end of nature?” by Derek Lynch, have stated the end of nature since human influence, via pollution and climate change, is now everywhere, there is no nature left that is untouched. In this article, I will examine this idea of “untouched” nature and wilderness and think through what it means to touch nature, and to be touched by nature in return. I want to explore different kinds of “untouched” natures, and see what they have to tell us about the meaning of human touch.

Touching nature

Touch, in philosophy, has often been analysed as an action, a sense perception. To touch is to explore, to get to know. Touch allows for sense perception: it allows you to gain information about the texture, the temperature, the weight of the object you touch. To touch is an action, a way of acquiring knowledge about the world around you. However, touch is never done alone; there is always something that is touched. **Edmund Husserl** describes the experience of touching your own left hand with your right, according to Husserl, this causes a split where both hands simultaneously experience touch and being touched. **Maurice Merleau-Ponty** takes this experience and adds that touch is not a one-way street: when we touch, we are at the same time touched. When we shake hands we are not only the subject, feeling and touching the hand of the other; we are also the object, the hand that is shaken, experienced and touched.

Donna Haraway describes a different way in which touch is a two way street. Harraway in *When Species Meet* (2008) describes the intimate act of petting her dog, Ms. Cayenne Pepper. She describes touch as an exchange of particles: in touching her dog she touches everywhere her dog has been and everything she is made of, and Cayenne does the same in return. When touching Cayenne, Haraway is exchanging microbes, bacteria, dirt and hair, and a myriad of other substances with Cayenne.

If we see touch as a mutual action where both parties influence and affect each other, rather than an act of one individual upon something or someone, we are forced to reconsider the object and subject status of the human and the natural. If when we touch we are always touched back, we are not only the active subject of touch but also the passive object of it. The world is always reaching out to touch us. We are the passive receiver of the touch of bacteria, dirt, disease, viruses, but also of nourishment, oxygen, and vitamins. When we pet a dog we do not experience it as a mere exchange of microbes; we can experience it as a greeting, a moment of joy, the touch of a friendly creature. Haraway’s analysis also tells us that the differentiation between the human and the natural may be a false one. We already contain nature, and we acquire more nature every day. Even if we claimed the human body was exempt from nature, we are still in a constant state of being touched by it. If nature and the human are not necessarily separate, and we are constantly reaching out as well as being touched, what does it mean to speak of “untouched” wilderness?

Wilderness

When we speak of “untouched” nature or wilderness and question its continued existence or fear its demise, nature is almost always featured as a passive object. Nature is touched or untouched, nature is saved or destroyed. There is an aesthetic quality to what we consider “wilderness”. Untouched nature is seen as having a special quality and being more worthy of saving than nature that has already been touched by the human. Nature that has been touched is no longer wild, it has been tamed. The virginal wilderness seems to have some kind of special value that a park - per definition maintained and upkept - lacks.

The idea of untouched nature bears a resemblance to what **Walter Benjamin** says about the aura of an artwork in The Artwork in the age of Mechanical Reproduction (2008). According to Benjamin the aura of an artwork is what makes it unique, and where its emotional value lies. Part of this aura is the authenticity and the context of the artwork. The artwork has been made by a specific person or by specific people, at a specific time in a specific context. For Benjamin this aura is undermined by mechanical reproduction: the reproductions do not capture the aura, due to being removed from the context and the authenticity of the work. A reproduction is made to sell for capitalist gain, and therefore is intent on removing the context of a work of art in order to make it palatable and marketable. Think here of the popularity of Frida Kahlo’s self-portraits, removed from their political and social context, and sold as bracelets and t-shirts. Her self-portraits are deeply personal, and rooted in her own life experiences, Mexican history, and indigenous culture. However, her portraits are now an extremely popular motif on clothing and jewellery sold anywhere, something that she, as a communist, probably would not have approved of. According to Benjamin this taking out of context not only cheapens the reproduction, but also the original. Kahlo’s paintings cannot be seen without having first seen the reproduction, and according to Benjamin this subdues the aura of seeing it for the first time. Context and authenticity are opposed by mass marketability and accessibility.

Like copies of an artwork a park is often treated as a mere copy of nature, made to be accessible and easily consumable for visitors. Worse than a park is an industrial forest, at least according to some: in Finland I have heard people say of an industrial forest, that “It is not a real forest, it is planted”. The neat rows of trees do not bother to hide their artifice. The aura of “untouched” wilderness is lacking in a park or planted forest, and therefore these are often not seen to be as valuable as untouched nature. However, a park or a planted forest is not a mere copy, it is undeniably alive. A copy is unchanging, but that is not the case with a park or planted forest. Both are rich worlds full of plants and animals that live there, either by design or by accident. Furthermore, despite not being “wild”, parks and industrial forests are haunted by wilderness. Even playgrounds and swimming pools are constantly rewilding. Algae, weeds, wild animals and insects haunt even the most artificial of outdoor spaces, like the chlorine filled public pool. When humans try to dictate the context and accessibility of a public space, it turns out that nature is always harder to keep out than other humans.

Tamed nature

Unwild, domesticated and tamed places are touched, and in their touchedness they tend to be perceived as lacking something, an aura, that makes them special. *The Little Prince,* by **Antoine de Saint-Exupéry**, offers an interesting perspective on taming and touch. When the Little Prince meets the fox on earth, the fox tells the Little prince that they cannot play together, because the fox has not been tamed. When the Little Prince enquires what it means to tame, the fox explains that it means “to establish ties”. The fox says "To me, you are still nothing more than a little boy who is just like a hundred thousand other little boys. And I have no need of you. And you, on your part, have no need of me. To you, I am nothing more than a fox like a hundred thousand other foxes. But if you tame

me, then we shall need each other. To me, you will be unique in all the world. To you, I shall be unique in all the world . . ." (de Saint-Exupéry, p. 21)

Taming, or touching, in this case is not an act of domination of the human over the natural, but instead the forging of a bond. It is the creation of a relationship between, in this case, the boy and the fox. Just like the touching when two people shaking hands, the act of taming in *The Little Prince* is mutual: when the boy tames the fox, the fox also tames the boy. This is similar to what Haraway describes about her relationship with her dog Cayenne. When they do agility training, Haraway describes it as moving as one, both of them trained to react to each other. Even the famous joke "do you think Pavlov thought about feeding his dogs every time he heard a bell?" is testament to the relational nature of taming. When we prune apple trees, the trees teach us the correct time to prune.

Additionally, the passage of *The Little Prince* points to the way taming or touching can make something more special. Untouched nature is discussed as special in its untouchedness, however, in this passage we learn that sometimes nature can be special because of the way we have touched it and the way it has touched us back. Of course, this is easy to understand with a fox or a dog, but the little Prince also talks about his rose, back on his home planet, as having tamed him. And when we think of landscapes we have relationships with, gardens we have worked or forests we have walked, these landscapes may not be anything special to anyone else, but they are special to us because we have a relationship with them.

Devastation reclaimed

There are certain natural things that remain "untouched" because we do not want to touch them. They are abject to us, toxic, diseased, necrotic, dangerous. These are not the things we have in mind when we speak of protecting "untouched" nature. We do not mean the wasps in the park next to the pool, or the mould in our basement. This nature we do not want to touch, rather we want to destroy, and yet it keeps coming back. This nature both haunts us and keeps reaching out to us, while we try to avoid its touch. We try and fail to avoid getting stung, or breathing in the spores.

Another kind of landscape that becomes untouched or untouchable is the kind of landscape we think of as dead or destroyed, such as the site of an industrial forest that has been harvested, or the site of a nuclear disaster. The Chernobyl nuclear power plant is an example of what we would usually consider to be a dead landscape. Chernobyl, in popular imagination, features as a nuclear wasteland where nothing alive can grow. In reality, however, biologists **Mike Wood** and **Nick Beresford** describe Chernobyl as "a nature reserve like no other". Despite the lives of both animals and plants being shortened by the radioactivity in the area around the power plant, the near 40 years of human absence has given space to both animal and plant life. Not only are the animals surviving in the area, they are thriving: Endangered species like the Przewalski's horse seem to be successfully breeding in the contaminated area.

In the book *The Mushroom at the End of the World (2015)* **Anna Tsing** talks about the matsutake mushroom and how it has a preference for destroyed pine forests. The mushroom grows on the dead roots of burnt or harvested trees. Tsing describes the world around the matsutake: the economies of immigrants in the United States that live of finding these mushrooms and selling them to Japanese buyers as a delicacy. Tsing also interviews matsutake harvesters In Finnish Lapland, where the matsutake and its harvesters have a vibrant network that sustains people's livelihood when other job opportunities are scarce in the area. Tourism and matsutake harvesting are some of the ways that people can remain afloat in northern Lapland. Tourism is a surprising engine of wilderness

preservation, as almost every place that we would describe as untouched can be visited for a price. Even Chernobyl's nuclear disaster site is a relatively popular tourist destination. The availability of these places as tourist destinations makes them viable sites of capital, and in turn makes them able to keep existing. Wilderness does not make revenue, except if you can pay to go there.

When we kill a landscape we do this by declaring and imagining it dead. When we state that with the rise of the Anthropocene there is no longer untouched nature or wilderness, because humans are now the most influential geographical force, this is the act of declaring wilderness dead. **Jaques Derrida** in *Specters of Marx* (1994) claims that something is always haunted by what it is not, and by what it could be. When we declare something dead, life is haunting that declaration. In the case of a destroyed landscape, a harvested forest, or the site of a nuclear disaster, there is still life under the surface. There are mushrooms and pine trees that still grow in these destroyed places. Life is haunted by the possibility of death, but death is haunted by the possibility for life. These dead or destroyed sites contain forms of life that do not fit our imagination of a dead landscape. There is untouched and untouchable life even in the places we imagine dead. Both in parks and in sites of devastation the untouched still haunts the site. Life haunts toxic and undeniably touched landscapes in ways we cannot control. Pines still grow in Chernobyl, and algae grow in the public pool.

Touched nature

Tsing talks about the possibility of life in the ruins of capitalism when she describes the matsutake mushroom and the transient lives lived around its economy. It is, according to Tsing, a life on the borders of capitalism. Yes, the harvesters make money internationally, but they are also nomadic groups with their own shadow economy, dependent of the sometimes legal, sometimes illegal entry into these destroyed pine forests. Chernobyl, in a different way, is also a testament to the possibility of life in the ruins of exploitation of nature, in this case under communism. The nuclear site is still toxic and the lives of the creatures that live there are cut short by the radiation. However, it is also a refuge from the masses of people that would have been present there before the disaster took place. And, of course, Chernobyl is a tourist destination, and in this way becomes a site of capitalist exchange.

As the declaration of the Anthropocene states, human intervention touches everything. Chernobyl gets hailed as a site that proves that nature can bounce back after disaster, that the absence of humanity balances out the presence of toxic radiation. However, neither Chernobyl nor any nature reserve is truly untouched. Humans are attracted to the idea of the untouched, yet we seem to want there to be a possibility for touch, if only for select groups of people. We want the national geographic photos and the drone images; we still want to be able to reach out and touch this "untouched" nature.

When we touch nature, nature touches us back. We are always in an active relationship with the world around us, even when we do not engage it physically. Some journalists have claimed that this will be the end of nature, but places like Chernobyl and the industrial forest show us this might not be the case. These abandoned places reclaimed by nature have undeniably been touched; however, they are also haunted by the wilderness. Perhaps there must be places where humans cannot go, but this cannot be to preserve an untouched nature. Instead, it must be in the spirit of good companionship with the rest of nature around us. Some things we must only touch gently.

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