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Aesthetics, Politics, and Attunement: On Some Questions

Brought by Alterity and Ontology

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## Abstract

This paper engages the current vogue for addressing the space of the political through aesthetics. It argues that the turn to aesthetics to open up the space of the political risks reproducing particular historical ontologies and metaphysical principles inherent to the concept of aesthetics. These principles interpellate creative energies, expressions, and shared social relationships into forms that are made recognisable by particular historical and European geographical inflections of political legitimacy. As a result, aesthetics and a “politics of aesthetics” actually reproduces the social and political limits it is often invoked to overcome. Instead, the paper argues for a need to decolonise the register of the aesthetic, and so assumptions about “the political”, through a more radical attention to ontologies of difference expressed as *aesthesis*. Drawing from previous work in the field, decolonial and indigenous critiques are mobilised to show how the category of the aesthetic reproduces fundamentally self-limiting frames. The paper proceeds by explaining the relevance of attunement to the production of the subject in Kant’s legacy for aesthetic theory. It then situates the limits of the recent attention to geo-aesthetics as also invoking metaphysical latencies. A discussion of decolonising agendas, *aesthesis*, and indigenous performative critiques of the politics of recognition are briefly explored as specific means to potentially re-think aesthetics as a category. The paper ends with a short reflection on the implications of the argument for the sites and geographies of “the political” and the meaning of critique.

Keywords: aesthetics, attunement, decolonisation, ontology, politics

Do we value art or experience simply for its disturbance of *our* limits, in which case we are left with the goal of self-reflexivity: art makes us aware of the distance and mediation of all knowing. Is politics nothing more than liberal self-critique, where a certain not knowing yields a chastening humility, but nothing positive or genuinely destructive?

(Colebrook 2014: 147, emphasis in original)

### Introduction

The interrelationships of aesthetics and politics have, for some time now, been a productive focus for critical and cultural geographers. Many of these engagements have been influenced either directly by Rancière's (2004) "politics of aesthetics", or indirectly by the conversations inaugurated with his now persuasive work (for ex. Dikeç, 2005; Cant and Morris, 2006; Dixon, 2009; Gabrys and Yusoff, 2012; Jazeel, 2013; Shaw and Sharp, 2013; Dikeç, 2015; Hawkins and Straughan, 2015; Jazeel and Mookherjee, 2015). Broadly, the former treatments might be said to be drawn to how "the political" derives its pertinence from the dissensus created by aesthetic experience (Dikeç, 2015: 113). Their claim is that aesthetic experience becomes relevant for the question of politics because it reveals the play of difference and division within the ostensible commons of human engagement (Rancière, 2011: 1). The other latter engagements (ex. Dixon et al. 2012a; 2012b; Yusoff, 2014; 2015), while also invoking the importance of aesthetics for differentiating the spaces of ethics and politics, draw out different, indirect purposes regarding the conceptual tradition shared by Rancière. These might be said to emphasise how a tradition that locates itself within what Kant inaugurated as the discourse of modern aesthetics may invoke "abyssal moment[s]" (Dixon, et al. 2012b: 292), that is, the implicate capacity of all material gradients, living or non, to be read

as aesthetic. For such readings, aesthetics is relevant to questions of politics and ethics in highlighting endless deferrals through the textual and material play of (mis)reading and contingency. Both the direct and indirect senses place an emphasis on how aesthetic experience reveals always already fundamental openings for epistemic and political claims; for each, aesthetics is politics *in perpetua*.

Exploring the relationships of endless limits within aesthetics and politics has been productive within geography for good reasons. They are summarized here with three ‘R’s’: resistance, reflexivity, and relationality.

First, for critical geographers, aesthetics enables a means to conceptualise resistance to empirical, pragmatic, and normative forms of knowledge production legitimated by an oppressive bio-politics of state, capital, and data. Aesthetics engages that most difficult work: attempting to “resist mere appropriation by the dominant” (Spivak, 2003: 11). But, to do so, without also legitimizing dominance, aesthetics must be reflexive. It must be relentlessly self-conscious, in order, as Walter Benjamin famously warned, to counter the tendency that “...all efforts to aestheticize politics culminate in one point. That one point is war” (Benjamin, 2002: 121). In other words, we must always be critically self-conscious about the relationships between aesthetics and politics so as to preclude the aesthetic allures of political extremism. Benjamin’s remarks were made in the context of fascism in Europe and Stalinism in the Soviet Union; we may invoke his caution today against, for instance, the appeal to some of ISIS, or to others of Donald Trump’s American presidential candidacy.

Second, then, critical attention to aesthetics encourages reflexion in order to open, as suggested at the beginning, self-conscious thought and praxis to proliferating futures of sensible difference. Thinking and feeling otherwise is possible; aesthetics, ostensibly, cultivates how. Hence, art and creative sensibilities are important for translating, imagining, and performing new individual and collective ways of understanding being-with others in the

*polis* of worlds. Part of that attention also entails cultivating new insights regarding the collective forms sensibility takes.

As a consequence, third, the trans-disciplinary moment continues within geography wherein critical energies are focused on the diverse, relational materialities shaping sensibility, embodiment, and transversal agency. Attending ecologically to *aesthesis* (sensual perception) – that is, to the “horizon of affects” (Corcoran, 2010: 2) and felt assemblages that constitute the more-than-human capacities for sense and perceptibility – affords relational means to recognise, and to deliberate, plural modes of becoming otherwise. An aesthetics of politics, then, is resistant, relational, and, crucially, reflexive.

There is a problem, however, with too simple an appeal to aesthetics to legitimate “the political” via an opening to the unthought. The following paper is concerned to identify and situate this problem. In what follows, I do not argue against the broad ethics that art is often used to foreground – i.e. the three “R’s” above. Nor do I argue against art itself, nor art’s value for feeling, thinking, and becoming otherwise. Creative expression, self-aware concern, and sensual freedom are undoubtedly essential for ethico-political life; there is little, if anything, more important. What I do want to locate within contemporary discussions of geographical aesthetics and politics are two inter-related problematics. The first is the reticence to recognise that aesthetics is a formal category invented to take account of “...the system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It...simultaneously determines the place and stakes of politics as a form of experience” (Rancière, 2006a: 13). It is a theory for making sense of the sensible, not the material and textual forms *aesthesis* (sensibility) takes. Unlike Kant, who argues for a universal, *apriori* character for aesthetic judgement, Rancière argues that, as a formal category, aesthetics is “an historically determined concept” (2006b: 1) for making sense of *aesthesis*. What is important for the present analysis is the fact that aesthetics is an invented category on which an approach to thought and sociality is based (Mignolo, 2011:

20). The second problematic emerges from the first. If aesthetics is a way of rendering meaningful sense and sensibility for thought, then, importantly, we need to recognise that it also assumes, and mobilises, a particular idea of a thinking subject. This idea of the subject is itself equally a product of a specific historical geography, the same co-implicate geography that gave rise to the conceptual invention of aesthetics as a formal category: 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe.

The question that follows from these problematics is quite simple: if we appeal to aesthetics as a politics of making possible, then, without reconstructing the category of aesthetics itself, do we not, in mobilising the category for thought and action, also presume an idea of the critical subject that thinks, and that, consequently, is necessarily politicisable? In other words, by invoking aesthetics to think about politics, the paper asks: are we also not implicitly invoking co-determinate categories and grand narratives, the very frameworks a “politics of aesthetics” is asked to re-think? This is not to suggest that *any* critical reflection made through an appeal to aesthetics is false; there are undoubtedly benefits to a critical subject reflecting on its sensibilities and their limitations within worlds of difference. But simply invoking a “politics of aesthetics” neither necessarily entails radicality nor openness. Indeed, a “politics of aesthetics” is not radical. How transformative can a radical politics be, one that emerges from appeals to an unreconstructed aesthetics, if it necessarily assumes a metaphysical category (i.e. the subject) as the unit of politicisation? As the paper will show, a “politics of aesthetics” does re-enforce an Enlightenment idea of either a transcendental or historical subject (in the epigraph, Colebrook emphasises this as “our”) upon which the theory and concept of aesthetics itself depends. In a critical moment wherein geographers and the wider social sciences and humanities are increasingly impelled to account for alterity, relational ontologies, and the commensurate collapse of classical social binaries (i.e. subject/object, nature/culture, etc.), we cannot assume that invoking aesthetics necessarily does the critical

and political work necessary to problematize or decolonise these relations. I argue, in what follows, that, as a concept, “aesthetics” actually risks reproducing the social and political limits it is often invoked to overcome.

Rancière is not particularly concerned with this as a problem. He is, largely, an unreconstructed Kantian who is quite content with positing a subject for whom reflective self-awareness is “...disconnect[ed] from the habitual conditions of sensible experience” (2006: 1). Kant and Rancière’s aesthetic subject is produced in, and for, an experience manifest by a nature-culture distinction, one for whom subjectivity is the self-aware and critical navigation of self-understanding in its phenomenal separation from the *noumenal* world. For geographers also comfortable with the modern, Eurocentric idea of the transcendental and/or phenomenological subject, aesthetics – as a formal system for thought – together with its consequent politics, may, similarly, not be a problem. For those seeking, however, to provincialise “a politics of aesthetics” either through appeals to other than Western human sensibilities and categories for which such separations and dualisms are deeply problematic, or simply anathema to how they live their lives (ex. Spivak, 2012; Jazeel, 2013), or to the promisory potential of relational ontologies in the posthuman or more-than-human mode (ex. Clark, 2012; Dixon et al., 2012a; 2012b; Yusoff et al. 2012; Yusoff, 2014; Hawkins and Straughan, 2015: 10; Yusoff, 2015), more work may need to be done than simply invoking aesthetics to disturb hegemonies or open up alter- or counter-political possibilities. As a discursive category, aesthetics is neither simply descriptive of *aesthesis* nor ontologically neutral.

Such are the questions posed, I suggest, by alterity, human and otherwise. Similar questions have been posed by decolonial and indigenous scholarships in the effort to decolonise aesthetics (Overing and Passes, 2000; Mignolo et al, 2011; Mignolo and Vasquez, 2013; Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2014). They are situated here in an argument for a much stronger claim



for *aesthesis* than the simple referent “aesthetics” can provide. I argue that we need both to decolonise the ontologies latent in unreconstructed appeals to aesthetics, and to recognise that in doing so, the scope and range of political aesthesis opens up transformative, and perhaps even troubling, possibilities for things like critique and the subject of politics.

In developing an argument that queries, and potentially decolonises, aesthetics, I first turn to the role that attunement plays in both the conventional Kantian category, and to the questions it raises for the more radical approaches advocated here. After the paper frames the significance of attunement for Kant’s aesthetic theory, it situates the need to rethink how sensibility is invoked by turning to alternative approaches – geo-aesthetics, decolonial, and indigenous critique – that problematise Kant’s category as a starting point for thinking about what art and feeling offer for “the political”. Indigenous and decolonial critiques are invoked for two reasons: first, as a way of provincialising aesthetics via *aesthesis* (ex. Mignolo et al., 2011); and, second, to illustrate how “aesthetics” and a “politics of aesthetics” are conceptual frameworks that depend upon, and reproduce, Western ontologies and colonising meta-narratives. I conclude with a brief exploration of the implications of the argument for the sites and geographies of “the political” and the meaning of critique.

### Judgement, *Sensus Communis* and Attunement

#### Judgement

While geographers often turn to the Kantian tradition to ground reflections on aesthetic theory and its potential for action (ex. Dikeç, 2015, *passim*; Hawkins and Straughan, 2015: 4), it is important to remember that, for Kant, the aesthetic is a class, or species, of judgement. What is significant in Kant’s systematisation of the concept of the aesthetic, and distinct from earlier accounts (for ex. Baumgarten’s invention of the concept in 1735), is that aesthetic claims arise in the making of judgements about the relation between subjects and objects. Aesthetic

judgement is not a capacity of sense itself, but, as Kant writes in *Critique of Judgement*, it is a function of the uniquely human ability “to rise above the senses to higher cognitive powers” (§40, 1987: 160). Those who “lay claim to the name of human being” (Ibid.) are those able to abstract from the experience of sense in order to judge.

Aesthetic judgements are important, for Kant, in at least three ways. First, they are types of judgement that enable navigating a central problematic at the heart of attempting to unify philosophy around a universalisable, transcendental argument. They reveal the transcendental conditions necessary for making any act of judging possible. Second, they navigate the problematic of unity by being a type of judgement that unites, or, at least, excites the potential of uniting, imagination and understanding within the transcendental conditions for cognition. Such union or harmony of the faculties is projected as a capacity possible in others deemed human. Recognising in others the capacity for aesthetic harmonisation or attunement of the faculties is also one way, Kant argued, for recognising capacities to think and act morally. For him, morality and rational judgement are, however, only the domain of limited geographies.

In spite to his undoubted influence, Kant is also infamous for “Section Four” of his short 1764 treatise, *On the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* wherein he notes, amidst much other racist and nationalist nonsense, that “...savages have little feeling for the beautiful in moral understanding” (1960: 112). Citing these constitutive exclusions in Kant, Hamid Dabashi’s recent book length commentary on the legacy of colonialist attitudes within scholarship, *Can Non-Europeans Think?*, reminds us of the necessity “...to mark the historical enabling of any philosophical legacy by the imperial power of denying it to others”(2015: 259). In what follows, it is important to note that appeals to “our”, “we”, “us” and “humans” are qualified under the Kantian schematic as always already produced by colonising categories and logics.

Third, and crucial for the transcendental account, aesthetic judgements have a purchase beyond individual, subjective experience; this purchase is a universal, logical principle of cognition, at least for some European subjects. The argument goes that we (Northern Europeans) share certain commonalities of feeling about art, beauty, landscape, or the like. But the indeterminate feelings we share are not adjudicable by appeal to determinate concepts: there is no number or formula that we can agree on to say that a poem or painting is good or beautiful. Nor, the argument continues, can we appeal to the object itself, for the sense object is made meaningful only through the *apriori* conditions of human thought that shape experience, which we also share. Kant set about to address the problem that emerges from this by asking: why are we able to agree, or disagree, despite indeterminate feeling? How is it that we can share or empathise with feelings about objects that move us, without also appealing to a concept against which that feeling is measured and understood?

### *Sensus Communis*

The answer lies, for Kant, not in a shared proximity or ontological attunement across material beings or object relations (see Hawkins and Straughan, 2015: 290), but in a subjective, individual awareness of the mental capacities within one's own mind that enable it to recognise the same theoretically possible capacities in others it labels human. This reflective self-awareness he terms *sensus communis*, an abstractive ability shared "by all of us" (Kant, 1987, §40:160). *Sensus communis* is not common sense, but "...a power to judge that in reflecting takes account (*a priori*), in our thought, of everyone else's way of presenting [something], in order *as it were* to compare our own judgement with human reason in general" (Ibid, emphasis in original). The *sensus communis* is a subjective capacity to judge others' similarity, not by reflecting on actual determinate judgments, but on the formal possibility of their commensurate judgements, and our ability to empathise with their possible feelings and experiences.<sup>1</sup> It is,

thus, an abstractive removal by the critical subject "...from as much as possible whatever is matter, ie. sensation" (Ibid.).

It also serves as a universal rule for appreciating the commonality of human understanding. *Sensus communis* is an imaginative capacity for human understanding (but, recall, a particular human); cognition and empirical knowledge become possible to the extent that the faculties of understanding and imagination resonate for one another. Kant terms this crucial feature of cognitive harmony, attunement (*Stimmung*).

### Attunement

Attunement, as one might expect, is a process for and by human cognition in its purposive relationship with the differential sensibilities objects present. It is "...the subjective condition of cognition" (Ibid., §21: 88). It is also the basis for presupposing *sensus communis* (Ibid, 87) and the means for rationalising and communicating the universalisability of judgements. Objects present themselves in experience; the extent to which they occasion, in the subject, an attunement of the cognitive faculties (i.e understanding and imagination) is a matter, Kant attributes, to feeling. Communication of this feeling depends upon "...the attunement of the cognitive powers...required for cognition in general" (Ibid, 88). Differences in feeling – *aestheses*, after all, are different and arise from difference – are reflected in different mental attunements.

In addition, one's overall capacity for communication and judgement itself also reveals an underlying principle of attunement: "...there must be one attunement in which this inner relation is most conducive to the (mutual) quickening of the two mental powers with a view to cognition...in general" (Ibid.). This ideal or refined attunement, and the *sensus communis*, together represent the philosophical perfectibility of a cognitive union between imagination and understanding. It is a union that strives, through aesthetic attunement, to awaken in us the

sense of our own rational mastery over particular being. An attuned, cognizing subject subsumes sensual particularity to rational generality.

The fact of its unified and communicative striving in light of the logical possibilities of others means that aesthetics, for Kant, operates as a process to bridge, in systematic ways, judgements about “the moral law within” (the concept of freedom) and “the starry sky above” (the concept of nature). As a systematic theory of the imagination, understanding, and communicability of sense, the goal of aesthetics is to harmonise or attune *subjective* faculties in the fulfilment of human ideality. What is most important, for Kant, about attunement and the *sensus communis* as features of aesthetics, however, is that the ideal or perfectible harmony of the faculties is a constituting, logical principle of subjective cognition. Imagination is the mode by which the subject reaches out, indeterminately, to the sensible; understanding finds structure in subsuming particular sensibility under a general concept, never the other way around (Wolfe, 2006: n.p.). Aesthetics brings them together in the harmonic superiority of human reason and so legitimizes universal cognitive claims by a subject. Attunement is “...the necessary condition of the universal communicability of our cognition, which must be presupposed in any logic and any principle of cognitions” (Kant 1987, §21: 88).

Important for the argument here is the fact that the indeterminate play of cognition incorporates or subsumes the object judged as beautiful to *apriori* conditions. Aesthetics, as a category for thought’s genealogy within modernity, is about how subjects judge. Transcendentally, for Kant, and more historically for post-Kantians like Rancière, the locus classicus is still an idea of the reflecting subject, a posited agency mobilised for action in the world. Indeed, the reason I have spent some time emphasising the category through attunement and the *sensus communis* is simply to underscore how Kantian aesthetics is part of a system for delimiting the subject’s power to make judgements. I turn now to the effects this legacy has had on readings that embark on a “politics of aesthetics”.

## Metaphysics of an aporetic subject

There is little question that art and feeling as read through the lens of the aesthetic are capable of disturbing normative sensibilities by "...refram[ing] the network of relationships between spaces and times, subjects and objects, the common and the singular" (Rancière, 2002, as quoted in Dixon, 2009: 412). Different sensibilities demand different cognitive attunements. But, as I have suggested above, if sense is disruptive, it is so for a specific idea of the attunement done by an agent and, therein, for a specific idea of what constitutes both art and that on which art acts: the subject. To quote from Ranciere,

Aesthetics...designates a specific regime of visibility and intelligibility of art, which is inscribed in a reconfiguration of the categories of sensible experience and its interpretation. It is *the new type of experience* that Kant systematised in the *Critique of Judgement*. For Kant, aesthetic experience implies a certain *disconnection* from the habitual conditions of sensible experience (2006: 1, emphasis added).

Importantly, aesthetics inaugurates a formal means of understanding an experiential mode of subjectivity, what Rancière refers to here as "the new type of experience" (Ibid). But, this subject is one for whom self-reflection is possible only in so far as it is disconnected, transcendently and phenomenologically, from the heterogeneous objects that constitute what is experienced as the material world. Aesthetic attunement is posited for a rational construct that thinks, the "I" of "ergo sum" or, in Kant's case, "...a transcendental subject of thought = x, which is cognized only by means of the thoughts that are its predicates" (Kant, 1988: 142). Indeed, for the moderns since Kant, critique is precisely the navigation of this self-awareness in and for its limitations.

Poststructuralist accounts of the critical subject emphasise textual and cognitive limits in an effort to de-naturalise political claims. In fact, this limit, and its self-awareness, which is a function of aesthetic attunement (see Spivak, 2012), inheres the merit of judgement for a

responsible ethics and politics. In the epigraph with which I started, Colebrook queries this politics as one of “chastening humility”. Such approaches to ethics and politics are often captured under the term “aporetic”. Aporetic positions, after de Man and Derrida, make a virtue of critical self-awareness and the abyssal, impossibility of justice. They are “...a guide to practical being and doing *as if* one could be ethical toward the other, all the while knowing that this is impossible” (Wainwright, 2013: 70, emphasis in original). The effort is *not* to wallow in passivity, but the opposite: to impel acting toward possibility through self-criticality. As such, attunement via the aesthetic becomes a means to capture not the impossibility of representation, but the abyssal, non-exhaustiveness of political subjects (Dikeç, 2015: 177), human and non-human (Dixon et al. 2012b), and their always already excessive capacities to become otherwise through aesthetic experience and practice.

Kant literally figures the genealogy of the aporetic mode. In fact, there is a chain of conceptual relationships at the heart of the denaturalising imperative that is fundamental to most critical and poststructuralist thought. It continues today in the recognition of textual contingency (as read predominantly through de Saussure’s structuralist semiotics), is inflected with observations about power and material ownership shaping knowledge production, and returns through critique (see Butler, 2006) to Kant’s *sapere aude*, “Have the courage to use your own understanding”. But courage is framed within a subject’s experiential recognition of the limits of reason alone. Thought’s predicates here are simply a more uncertain subject, but one still situated, and crucially, situated as separate from that which makes it think: the object world. Aporetic critique, denaturalising critique, and critique that invokes aesthetics to attune thought to shared sensibilities, all boils down to negotiating the problematic of a fundamental, insuperable separation between subject and world. Which is why theorists like Dikeç, Arendt, Rancière, Spivak, or even Foucault’s “aesthetics of ethics” (ex. 1982; 2005), all return, canonically, to Kant. To do otherwise is to open the door to a radically different account, or

dissolution, of the subject, thought, experience, of critique, semiotics, politics, and of aesthetics – even object worlds.

Never-the-less, Kant is very clear: aesthetic attunement is disinterested in the world; it is not an attunement that comes from the world, but is an attunement that legislates over itself. Political aesthetics, as it is often read today, is a tradition that explicitly, and implicitly, does the same. It commits us, therein, to a politics of the subject defined by a transcendental negotiation of critique's limits. If we privilege aesthetics as subjective attunement and disruption to "the system of self-evident facts of sense perception", what Rancière terms "the distribution of the sensible" (2004: 12), then we also privilege a particular approach to a subject for whom sense is being perceived. But, it is also posited as necessary for becoming political. My claim is simple: an unreconstructed aesthetics will not reveal a reconstructed subject or, necessarily, a reconstructed politics. This is because it assumes both a metaphysical principle and an ontological correlate of subjectivisation, each a product of a particular modern, geographical history. Yet, aesthetics is often invoked to do precisely this more radical destabilising work. A contradiction or problem ensues.

### Decolonising the aesthetic subject

As I noted at the beginning, aesthetics is often invoked because it is seen to negotiate, creatively, an epistemic commitment to attuning sensibility within the insuperable contingencies and separations of word and world, experience and thing-itself, *noumena* and *phenomena*: resistantly, reflexively, and relationally. In doing so, the emphasis, ironically, risks precluding many voices, forms of life, imaginative possibilities, and attunement practices that aim to be politically transformative precisely because they do *not* begin within modern epistemological distinctions like nature-culture, for whom aesthetics signifies neither a distinct



cognitive, nor even sensible, register, indeed, for whom the category “aesthetic” is a false or colonising imposition.

In this section, I approach, if only very briefly, two modes of analysis that attempt to think the aesthetic subject differently, and from positions that mobilise radical alterity for critical politics. The first is the effort made within cultural geography for a geo-aesthetics. The second is an appeal that draws both on decolonial work, including indigenous critiques of politics, aesthetics, and the subject for whom the predicates of thought are different and distinct than those often assumed by a Euro-enlightenment mode. In respect of the former, I suggest that, while the emphasis on the more-than-human opens potential to a more radical decentring critique, aesthetics, as a formal category, itself remains the frame through which *aesthesis* is made legible. The result is often a less transformative critique than first imagined. In respect of the second mode, following Mignolo, I suggest the need to consider the silencing problematics that aesthetics, as a colonising category, presents for *aesthesis*, and for the need to read creative expression through different predicates.

Indigenous scholarship offers one important way to figure *aesthesis* otherwise than through the colonising category of aesthetics. Appeal to indigenous ontologies is made in the spirit of both provincializing theoretical touchstones, but also to emphasize how ontologies that derive meaning not in separations of subjects from objects, natures from cultures, etc. necessarily re-figure or *pre-figure* the resonance and meaning of *aesthesis* for politics (Coulthard, 2014: 18). In other words, sometimes *aestheses* simply cannot be recognised by extant orders, including those that seek to subsume them under categories like aesthetics. Indigeneity is also invoked so as to highlight how the Amer-European theoretical frameworks often underpinning geo-aesthetics and the ontological turn have long been prefigured by indigenous perspectives and scholarships (Sundberg, 2014; Todd, 2014). This is not to suggest that indigenous approaches to *aesthesis* and whose categories we have learned, in our technical

disciplinary vocabularies, to call “art” and “aesthetics” are necessarily also better. That would risk romanticism. It is to suggest, simply, that they are different. We cannot assume that mobilising the historical category aesthetics and what it means for politics translates across ontological domains or social worlds.

### The Limits of Geo-aesthetics

Influenced by posthumanism, geo-aesthetics offers itself as a complex and potentially productive way forward from the limits of the transcendental, human agent (see for example, Dixon 2009; Clark 2012; Dixon et al. 2012a, 2012b; Yusoff 2012; 2014; 2015). As I read it, geo-aesthetics locates itself within what a modernist legacy of aesthetics makes possible as a field and method of enquiry, but seeks to move beyond such limits within immanent critique to the potentials non-human aesthesis. As Dixon et al. (2012a) suggest, geo-aesthetics explores how sense-making emerges, experientially and reproductively, as a function of organic metabolism itself. More-than-human approaches, broadly, begin to trace how politics and ethics opens not simply to the value of de-naturalised indeterminacy, a politics of the (impossible) to-come, but to attunements that come from the world. These attunements seek to disassemble constructs of word and world in order to re-naturalise human agency and cognition as functions of temporalities long preceding us – of chthonic and extra-planetary spatialities. Geo-aesthetics thus introduces a cosmo-political dimension to the art of judgement. As Yusoff notes: “...contracting and elaborating on imperceptible cosmic, biological, and geologic forces of the universe, art is the materialisation of these forces on the body: sensations that allow our becoming otherwise” (2012: 972; see also Hawkins and Straughan, 2015: 288). Geo-aesthetics, then, is an effort to construct a modality of “geo-social” “...proximity, contact, and *at times* inter-mingling and entanglement” (Hawkins and Straughan, 2015: 290, emphasis added). Proximity, contact, and entanglement still imply, as the “at times” reveals, ontological

separability; the subject persists in latent ways. “Entanglement” might also be the wrong word. A subject tangled up with materialities from which it cannot extricate itself is still distinct from those tangles. And entanglements convey snarls of difference, conflictual strictures from which “we” (i.e. posited liberal subjects) seek to be free. Latent political humanisms creep back in with these conceptual vocabularies, and undermine the radical potential geo-aesthetics has for orienting thought to our fundamental de-subjectifying plurality within cosmo-political alterity. The reason for this slippage resides in the extent to which ethico-political meaning is conventionally produced by recognising the contingencies emergent from a semiotic register that separates word and world, text and matter, a register upheld by aesthetics. Geo-aesthetics needs to overcome these latencies.

If sensibility is read, as the geo-social needs it to be, as an ontological facet of the more-than-human, then more-than-human worlds, including the inorganic, need to be read as *themselves* semiotic (see for ex. Bains, 2006; Barad, 2007: 375-377; Bracken, 2007; Kohn, 2013). For the critical gap between text and world, the gap on which critique has depended from Kant onwards, dissolves into the presentness of “pure feeling” (Massumi, 2015: 2), or *aesthesis* as such. Just *aesthesis*. As Massumi continues, “[t]he world’s phenomenal constitution must be understood as the infractive appearance of a pure thinking-feeling behind which there is neither substance nor subject” (2015: 4). This more radical approach poses a much more fundamental challenge to the Kantian tradition of the subject separated from the object – it (if we can even call it that) does not simply inter-mingle now and then, it is! – than a simple appeal to aesthetics is able to mount.

By implication, aesthetics as a category for thought itself needs to be jettisoned or radically re-thought as a specific tradition of categorising sense and sensibility for a cognising agent separated from the world. Attunement from and by the object (whether tree, animal, molecule, sound or whatever) is not, under the ontological approach geo-sociality affords, a

reflective commensuration with representational objects as such, but with the semiotic relationships that singular object relations enfold as worlds or worldings. Which is what all good art does. It moves. Literally. We become different amalgams of sense as thought. The shiver, the tear, the little leap of joy, the indifference, whether spoken by colour, reverb, touch, or word, these are participation in the immediacy of material relation (Bracken, 2002: 324). Attunement by the object-semiotic world, and not a specifically aesthetic, categorical sense, requires a pluriversal commitment rather than distanced attunement to difference within an unknowable, shared universe. It is a politics of commitment: ‘commit’, from the Latin, *committere*, to join and entrust in a putting forth, or sending out; as against ‘critique’, from the Greek *krinein*, which means to separate and decide in judgement. The ontological emphasis of committing lies less in constitutive impossibility than in necessary, compositional plurality that enacts or commits or entrusts with diverse, incommensurable worlds. The issue here becomes not aesthetics, for that category no longer maintains a grip on a dispersed geo-subject of non-duality, but non-linguistic semiosis within which commitment arises as sense.

### *Aesthesis*

If we frame aesthetics from a tradition located since Kant, which has been the dominant propensity thus far, we risk not disassembling the colonising register of the aesthetic itself. It is colonising because it posits a separate and separating subject as a critical, self-reflexive unit necessary for politicisation. Instead, we need to attend to how the sensibilities themselves pluralise “genuinely creative and destructive” (Colebrook, epigraph) capacities in terms of which thoughts otherwise arise. In not doing so, we risk continuing to exclude those for whom thought or the aesthetic is not a register of experience as we have learned it in our Euro-modernist tradition. This is part of the argument that Mignolo offers up in his effort to “decolonise aestheTics” from “...a normativity that colonise[s] the senses...so as to liberate

them from the regulations of modern, postmodern, and alter-modern aestheTics” (2013; see also Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2014).<sup>2</sup> A “decolonial aesthesis”, he argues, “...does not seek to regulate a canon, but rather to allow for the plurality of ways to relate to...the sensible that have been silenced” (2013, n.p.).

Think, for instance, of the non-European perspectives for whom the separation from “nature” is not a pre-condition of critique or reflexivity?<sup>3</sup> It would follow from what has thus far been argued that, if aesthetics, even in the geo-social mode, does not at the same time attend to a potential complicity in what Mignolo terms, “...a normativity that colonized the senses” (Ibid.), it cannot assume itself, unproblematically, to be an “untimely” commensurating space of experiential attunement whose differential material and temporal embodiment “...is its politics” (Yusoff, 2014: 384). Aesthetics as a category for thought, along, perhaps, with its correlates ethics and epistemology, is a very recent historical construct within a larger programmatic for a politics of universalisable human subjectivisation. An over-dependence on a Kantian tradition to figure “the aesthetic” as the arbiter for thinking about *aesthesis* limits us in crucial ethical and political ways. What of the many approaches to aesthetics and sensibility not couched in continuing a Eurocentric approach to subjective self-awareness, like, numerous indigenous peoples’ socialities within the non-human, or Buddhist orientations to resonant forms of non-duality, or South Asian *rasa*? They too listen and speak the experiential sensibility of relational co-existence. But, they require of being-with new ideas and other political possibilities than perhaps couched in the genealogical tradition of aesthetics. Can these be understood socially and politically if we begin again with Kant’s commitment to a transcendental phenomenology and derive politics from aesthetic critique? I argue they cannot, and so it follows that we cannot presume the sensibility of long distant signs and texts, like rock inscriptions, or songs, or dances, under an aesthetic aegis. Their ability to speak through perhaps familiar traces, and across aeons, may be as much about what we call “art” today, as

about performing feeling and presence, sensible engagements with ontological worlds *incommensurable* with any recognisable subject we know.

It is for this reason that Leanne Simpson deliberately articulates, in her book, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back*, “performance” in quotation marks (2011: 34, and ft. 46, p.45) when writing about the processual emergence of a cosmo-politics sung, danced, filmed, spoken, etc in “...an individual and collective experience” (Ibid) of place and transformation. Because it is about diverse *aestheses* whose particularities are not subsumed to more general principles of what can become political; dance or story-telling or song, etc., are *already* what we may term political, but in different ways than those inherited from colonial conceptual registers; their semiotic force comes from the embodiment of “thinking-feeling” as a function of the diverse ecological assemblages that constitute them. What is crucial in this recognition is that dancing, story-telling, singing, etc. need to emerge as part of the contexts that make them possible as a sensible relation. As Simpson writes, “...[dance/performance] is most powerful in terms of transformation in its original cultural context because that context places dynamic relationships at the core” (Ibid.). They are always already more than simply the text itself; they are the place from which the text emerges, for that is the immanence of what becomes textual.

Simpson actively invokes *aesthesis*, in her case, dance and song, to refuse a colonial politics of recognition or inclusion. If, as Alfred argues, we need “...to think thoughts that are outside foundational premises of [our] imperial background” (2008: 10) in order to “dance new worlds into existence” (Simpson, 2011: 149), I am suggesting that aesthetics is also one of these foundational premises. This is, as I noted at the beginning, not to argue that categories like “art” and “aesthetics” are not important (far from it), or that indigenous people are “closer” to “thinking-feeling” (that would be a false romanticism), or that indigenous perspectives are not able to be subjects in Euro-modern frameworks (again, false). It is simply to show that, if we wish to decolonise political regimes and conceptual frameworks that underpin legacies of

on-going human and ecological harm, we also need to re-think and decolonise one of the foundational conceptual premises increasingly mobilised to do this critical and political work – aesthetics – rather than assume it does this conceptual work for us.

Aesthetics in an Amer-Euro-modern tradition has become tied to a representational mode of making sense of shared sensibility. When we swivel it as an inherited meaning making lens onto the question of the other (i.e. the problem of politics) and diverse sense makings, we interpellate that other into a mode of intelligibility through the provision of an inhabitable subject position (Stevenson, 2014: 161; see also Butler, 1997). Aesthetics makes possible that interpellation in a way that is recognizable by a particular regime as politics, rather than asking: what modes of difference does *aesthesis* as such make possible for being together or not being together?

Indeed, how do we square self-conscious separation, if increasingly humble, with efforts to radicalise the ecologies that constitute different performative politics of life without also re-thinking the critique that emerges from what Kant's separation makes possible? Think, for example, of other critical indigenous accounts of "performance", what the anthropologist Carl Union calls "living knowledges" (1999, as cited in Stewart-Harawira, 2005: 35), or the political theorists Alfred and Corntassel call "self-conscious traditionalisms" that emerge from specific performative commitments to the authenticity of place-based opposition and building social autonomies of "...conscience, non-coercive authority, and the deep interconnection between human beings and other elements of creation" (Alfred, 1999: 53; see also, Alfred and Corntassel, 2005), or what the educational theorist Stewart-Harawira invokes in her discussion of radical human ecologies that return to vital, sacred ontologies (2012). How do we square transcendental critique and the self-aware, attuned subject with a politics of self-determination driven by ontological and cosmological principles of spatio-temporal interconnectivity and reciprocity, inter-connections that work to build worlds of being-together – political worlds

*sensu stricto* – not predicated on human separation from the material relationships that make us possible? These, as we know, often get marginalised by modernist categories whose familial provenance helps to constitute the legitimacy of aesthetics as a critical register, for ex. ‘religion’, ‘nature’, ‘subject’, etc.

### Conclusion

We need to be cautious, therefore, in unproblematically claiming aesthetics identical with politics “...in principle” (Ranciere, 1999: 58, as cited in Dikeç 2012: 264). Often, as shown in the case of Kant, the principle territorialises *aesthesis* for an idea of politicisable agency, something itself built on exclusionary grounds of the human and more-than-human, and, so with suspect legacies. Neither politics nor *aesthesis* can be at their most radical when read within new relational conditions for the possibility of critique (Dawkins and Loftus, 2015: 93), nor as diverse achievements in reimagining “a global communist project” (Saldanha, 2012: 278), if aesthetics is unreconstructed. The consequence is that critique needs to be re-thought as a function of sensible immediacy to what felt worlds “cultivate...in their creative ground for relating” (Shilliam, 2015: 30). As Stevenson (Ibid: 157) writes of the Inuit *katajjait* (throat song),

[It] is the way a particular kind of attention, figured by song, can make space for the existence of another, and thus, in a certain sense, call that other into being. Singing is not just about mouthing the words to a well known song. In its simplest sense...song [is] an invocation that depends less on words per se, and more on the voice as a kind of gesture.

The sharing back and forth of resonating breath, touch, rhythm, and expression can be described in part by the category aesthetic, but the *aesthesis* of the song also exceeds what aesthetics makes possible for meaning. In generating a gathering or worlding of care, *katajjait*



also worlds forms of sociality and ethical relation outside the colonising domains of the aesthetic and the subject that it requires for political recognizability.

As I have argued, we cannot square denaturalising political aesthetics on the one hand, with the effort to use aesthetics, especially as it is framed in the modern tradition, to deconstruct the fundamental division Kant helped to inaugurate. Or, rather, my concern, simply, is that we cannot do both: we cannot denaturalise via aporetic, excessive, or even some geo-aesthetics, and re-build an ontology of attunement, which, on the one hand, navigates a commitment to difference through symbolic contingency, and on the other seeks to commensurate that contingency in a shared experience of sensibility. Naturally, this tension begs the question of what to do with aesthetics, but more fundamentally, it also begs the question of semiosis and human sociality. If we want to go beyond the human, even aporetically via planetarity, then we need to accept alternative ontological and cosmological accounts as parallel and plural. As de la Cadena writes, the political problem becomes twofold: first the need “...to recognize that the world is more than one socio-natural formation; second we need to interconnect such plurality without making the diverse worlds commensurable” (2010, 361). We return full circle to the many alter- and indigenous ontologies to which modernist categories have been doing repeated epistemic violence for many centuries.

Perhaps, then, there is scope, in bridging the posthuman and the political, to learn much from decolonising endeavors, which also long predate contemporary posthuman concerns. Doing so requires ‘partnership, connectivity, and knowledge sharing [i.e. politics] at the deepest material levels’ (see also, de la Cadena 2010, 361). These levels, however, mean engaging a new semiosis for cognition, one that emerges from more-than-human worlds themselves, and not from reflective judgment – a daunting, but essential, task.

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> Kant's *sensus communis* is an important facet of Hannah Arendt's political philosophy. The concept allows, she argues, capacities for an "enlarged mentality" whereby subjects are able to "liberate [themselves]...to attain that relative impartiality that is the specific virtue of judgment" (1992: 73; see also Dikeç, 2015: 19, and ft. 8., p.121). Enhanced potentials for commonality and communicability ensue. Arendt "embraced Kant's aesthetics in her politics" (Dikeç, 2015: 20) so as to open up subjects' capacities to plurality and commonality. The emphasis is still, however, that of a phenomenologically limited subject navigating her own separation from others. For a lucid explanation of Arendt's political aesthetic, and its relation to Kant, see Dikeç's *Space, Politics and Aesthetics* (2015, Chp. 2 & 3).

<sup>2</sup> Mignolo capitalises the second "T" in "aesthetics" to draw attention to its difference from aesthesis, which he mirrors as "aestheSis".

<sup>3</sup> I put "nature" in quotes because, as a concept, it too is a product of the modern epistemological division between *res cogitans* (thought or word) and *res extensa* (matter or world). It is a conceit indigenous thought and scholarship has always critiqued (see, amongst many, for ex. Graham, 2008).

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