RESPONSE ESSAYS
There’s no question that ANT prefers to travel slowly, on small roads, on foot . . . .

Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social*¹

By the time you arrive at this point in the collection, you will have realized that the essays herein demand a

slow reading. Perfect: the practice of tracing connections between actors, slowly, as Bruno Latour’s ant (or ANT, short for Actor Network Theory) would tell us, is the way to go. According to Latour’s self-defined “slowciology,” we are to follow the actors themselves—examining the relationships they assemble, interrupt, or disturb. Latour’s process is “agonizingly slow” by necessity. Yet in writing my response, I find myself running down a fast lane. The time when these authors first presented their work at the conference, “Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics and Objects in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods,” coincided with one of the most accelerated points in my doctoral career. Then as now, I was deep in my dissertation topic of eco-materialism: reconceiving early modern waterscapes as vibrant, living, actor-networks of (non)human desires and assemblages. Ecocriticism is a vast road to travel. And six months later, I was racing onto the job market. Do academics move too hastily? So let us slow down. My response will pick up on Eileen Joy’s idea of the humanist as a “slow recording device,” a being involved in a world of complication who also describes a world of co-implication, of sentience, becomings, and desires shared between actors inanimate and animate. What happens when we slow down, when we take the time to take these ethical steps seriously?

Slowness, the ant tells me, is all. Could composing new relations actually bring us some composure? The contributors to this volume suggest that the ontological questions we ask—we need to ask—about humans and nonhumans are beginning to get more speculative. Eileen Joy, for example, references Timothy Morton’s work on the binary bind between human and non-human, inside and outside. According to Morton’s dark ecology, we cannot cancel or preserve this binary, just accept it, and should furthermore delve deeper into it.

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2 Latour, Reassembling the Social, 25.
than deep ecology allows. His “melancholy ethics” means “loving the thing as thing,” even if it means staying in “this poisoned ground.” Graham Harman is another interlocutor in many of these essays. Harman’s object-oriented ontology argues that objects and their relationships recede from us; never really touching, objects relate to one another only in the presence of a third (the vicar) in what he calls “vicarious causation.” Questions abound and complications emerge. The “ethics of interdependence” that Joy ardently speaks of suddenly feels necessary. Ethics is, in Joy’s words, a “slowing down,” a welcoming of the other, an addition of beauty. We should listen to the countless inhuman actors in the world, start forming alliances for more sentience (and keep doing it!), and make room for hospitality and its possibilities. Peggy McCracken’s emphasis on the “giving and taking” of hosts is a significant case in point. To paraphrase two (or four?) of Joy’s alerts, you are here and there are relations. Hello, everything—we are co-implicated.

I will try to trace a solid example. “Track,” actually, might be more useful when talking about steps left behind for us, borrowing from Julian Yates’s woolly essay. Not surprisingly, I turn to an object [Figure 1]: the stone I retrieved from Valerie Allen’s lapidary grab bag that passed through the audience during her presentation of “Mineral Virtue.” There is a surprise to this object, after all. In its very method, Allen’s lecture

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performed the stony agency her essay (of the same name) examines.

Figure 1. stone dispensed from Valerie Allen’s lapidary grab bag at the conference; photograph by author.

The randomness of the bag—why did I receive an alluring light blue rock that now cohabits my apartment?—underscores what Yates elsewhere has called “agentive drift.” For Yates, drift represents agency itself: when/how one becomes an actor, what these varying actors will become across their endlessly variable networks, into what aleatory directions they might go, “a dispersed or distributed process in which we participate rather than as a property which we are said to own.” This process importantly produces. Becoming light-blue stone, perhaps, is the slowest thing imaginable. But drifting with the random stone connected me at that moment, and connects me still, to others with their multifarious rocks. This form of

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audience participation (or petrification?) conveys one of Julia Reinhard Lupton’s points neatly: how the proximity of assembly and assemblage relates the essential (inter)dependence between persons and things. Is not this collection, at its heart, as event, this very thing?

But wait! Slow down. There is an additional thing out of the bag (at least for now). I am speaking about the rock as part of a “domestic ecology” (Julia’s phrase). Or, should I say, I am speaking to it? Or, should I say, it is speaking to me? As I write this, it is “over there” on my desk. For some critics, minding place poses the very problem of contact and how things relate. Yet in my conversation with the stone—and I use “conversation” deliberately: stressing the con- (with) and the verse (to turn)—my very writing (right now!) is an alliance, a thing that exists because it is a relation and produces relations. These continuous connections—stone, keyboard, rain, you the reader—should not primarily lead to the complications of causality, origin, and distance, for they fundamentally take us to the weird joys, strange horizons, and new modes of being that co-implicated assemblages afford. And they should at least drift us away from the bullying terms of anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism that too often mire ecocriticism. The speaking-writing-stone-subject-object that I am does not dissolve the human / non-human border in an act of prosopopoeia, but in fact challenges this border’s ontological existence. In turn, an “ethics of interdependence” involves the “humanist recording device” tracing these tracks of (non)human connections, all the while making new ones slowly across time. Composing my response with a rock “over there” would be one (ecopoetical) example. What else?

Like speaking stones. Like stooping to stone. I think we have a lot to learn from the zany ethics of someone like John Muir, the nineteenth-century Scottish naturalist known for, in addition to his tireless
preservationism, his eccentric habits and perambulations in the Yosemite Valley. Muir, in other words, was a consummate drifter; he drifted with the world. Coincidentally, he was ridiculed for the strange habit of “stone sermons,” moments when he dialogued with rock he believed to be alive. Like a good ant, he recorded the lessons learned—and on foot, no less:

I drifted about from rock to rock, from stream to stream, from grove to grove. Where night found me, there I camped. When I discovered a new plant, I sat down beside it for a minute or a day, to make its acquaintance and try to hear what it had to say. When I came to moraines, or ice-scratches upon the rocks, I traced them, learning what I could of the glacier that made them. I asked the boulders I met whence they came and whither they were going. I followed. . . .

Muir stoops to listen, not to conquer. His methodology beautifully encapsulates what Jane Bennett invokes in her piece about hoarders: hearing “the call of things.” As such, Muir risks the same pathologization that hoarders incur for being “preternaturally attuned to the call from things.” As I have been suggesting in this response, an ethics of interdependence is just Muir’s method: an ethics attuned to the voices of things (like rocks) spoken to (“I asked”) and heard from (“to hear what it had to say”). The humanist recording device translates these voices into a body of work, thereby inventing an assemblage of (non)human traces. By drifting “from rock to rock” with a living landscape, by following the boulders’ physical tracks (“whence they

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came and whither they were going”), Muir’s “traced” (or written) experiences emerge. Nevertheless, although hearing the call of things is a powerful moment of interdependence for Muir, Jane reminds us that this call is not devoid of complications. Kellie Robertson, in her exemplary essay on Chaucer as “human-rock assemblage,” notes how rocks are often “wall ed off from the animate.” Karl Steel’s and Sharon Kinoshita’s essays put pressure on animal / human boundaries but also expose the fears that perpetuate them: the precarious “living, lupine home” (Steel), the “apparent religious and cultural divides” that Muslim-Christian animal exchanges cross (Kinoshita).

In others words, things are complicated. Slowing down means taking the time to record the complicated relationships between things—and, at times, to address their grievances. There is no question: we must continue drifting—even if slowly, even if the road is small, even if the delays pile up—to truly reach an ethics of interdependence. Ultimately, what is crucial to remember is that there are relations, and that hearing the calls of animals, vegetables, and minerals—hello, everything—leads us into places unknown, both dark and beautiful, and into co-implicated conversations, Muir-like, that we “follow” and “follow” and “follow” some more.