



Labour

Living Lexicon for the Environmental Humanities

Jennifer Hamilton

New York University, Sydney, Australia

What will it take to change the future? Towards the end of *Specters of Marx*, Derrida argues that to create a more ethical future, we need questions that bring “representation back to the world of labor.” But, he continues, “[t]hey are not even, in the final analysis, questions but seismic events. *Practical* events, where thought *becomes act*, and body and manual experience ... labor.”¹ Our work in the Environmental Humanities needs a similar kind of manual gearing, because for any kind of ethical and, indeed, livable future on the planet, we not only need new ways of thinking about the world, but new ways of being in and of the world. In this regard, it might pay to state the obvious: the environmental crisis is not a magical side effect of industrial civilization. This situation was built, not conjured.² Imagining the crisis as collectively *wrought* invokes the sweaty, material and embodied effort invested in making the crisis and invites speculation as to what kinds of labours it will take to actively create a different future.

I begin rethinking labour as a useful concept for the Environmental Humanities by troubling the spectacle of the skyline of Sydney’s Central Business District (CBD): a sublime image of late Capitalist growth.³ I live on a hill in Earlwood, 12 kilometres southwest of the wealthiest business district in Australia, a nation leading the world in carbon emissions per capita. My backyard takes in the

L
E
X
I
C
O
N

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 170.

² I echo and recontextualise the logic of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick here: “In dealing with an open-secret structure, it’s only by being shameless about risking the obvious that we happen into the vicinity of the transformative.” (*Epistemology of the Closet: Updated with a New Preface* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 22.) It could be argued that the environmental crisis operates on an open secret structure too: we all know there is an environmental crisis, we all know we need to be working and living differently, and yet, for the most part, we proceed as if it is not happening.

³ Here I use the term “spectacle” with reference to Eben Kirksey, Brandon Costelloe-Kuehn and Dorion Sagan’s definition of the term in “Life in the Age of Biotechnology” in *The Multispecies Salon* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014): “Spectacles alienate spectators ... (and) promote false consciousness. Workers who are enlisted in the production of these illusions are also kept separate from one another.”

view of the skyline. What do the hundreds of thousands of people who converge upon this place from all around the Sydney basin and beyond actually do everyday?



Figure 1. *The view from Earwood Farm before a storm, 2014. Photograph by author.*

The workers of Sydney's CBD come in all stripes: telemarketers, lawyers, bankers, doctors, artists, taxi drivers, insurance brokers, tradespeople, gardeners, service staff, cleaners, builders and bicycle couriers, among thousands of others. Despite the variety of different labours undertaken both in the CBD and across the country, Australia's economy was recently defined as "knowledge-intensive" because the majority of the nation's monetary wealth is generated through intellectual labour right in the heart of the city. Knowledge-intensive work involves "coming up with new ideas, solving complex problems, or finding better ways of doing things."⁴ Such labour is often executed in the air-conditioned confines of a high-rise office by technocapitalist cyborgs.⁵ Can an ethical and livable future be wrought by highly paid

⁴ Jane Frances Kelly and Paul Donegan, *Mapping Australia's Economy: Cities as Engines of Prosperity* (Carlton: Grattan Institute, 2014), 22.

⁵ The "technocapitalist cyborgs" of Sydney's skyscrapers are the "illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism" that have remained faithful to their origins. See Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 151.

computer-human hybrids, directing their labours, from processing power to intellect, towards the Corporation's future, insulated from the wind and the rain in the petroleum-fueled fantasy bubble of a skyscraping office block?

It pays to remember that skyscrapers were built not conjured too, wrought by human and more-than-human labours. Thus, while Elise Lemire and Benjamin Flowers argue that skyscrapers create "a landscape disposed to support the needs of a modern, corporate, and capitalist" city,⁶ once the contract builders have clocked off for the last time, the skyscraper does not suddenly become a life-support system in and of itself fulfilling the needs of the city. The city's needs are pumped, piped, wired, flown, shipped and trucked in.

In "Shadow Places and the Politics of Dwelling," Val Plumwood argues that we of the Global North are becoming increasingly "out of touch with the *material conditions (including ecological conditions) that support and enable our lives ... this means losing track of the labour of others that supports our lives and the labour and agency ... of earth others.*"⁷ While Plumwood's critique focuses on the domestic sphere, the same statement can apply to workplaces. The spectacular image of the densely populated inner city, equally dense with wealth represents the dominant myth governing such a system. The myth is that knowledge-economies place "greater reliance on intellectual capabilities than on physical inputs or natural resources."⁸ While it is clear such economies place greater *value* on particular forms of intellectual labour, they *rely* perhaps more heavily than ever on physical inputs, natural resources and human and more-than-human support labourers. In Sydney's CBD, for example, with manufacturing all-but gone from the inner city and peri-urban farmland on the fringes of the city gradually being consumed by suburban development,⁹ the material conditions that support and enable the lives of citizens benefiting from the CBD's knowledge-economy are becoming increasingly remote. What would a city that valued the support work of both human and more-than-human labourers actually look like?

In order to rebuild the world for an ethical and livable future, the first task is to radically expand the definition of labour required to sustain the current system. When Donna Haraway asks "What ... if *human* labor power turns out to only be part of the story of lively capital?"¹⁰ she implies that our current economic system already depends on the manifold labours of earth others and goes on to trace the multiple ways in which we are indebted to dogs, mice and many other critters. When thinking about the work required to maintain a wealthy urban knowledge-economy, labour is not confined to the cyborg orgies in the skyscrapers, it is everywhere inside, outside, above and underground. What of the labours of the plants and animals that are turned into food for human consumption? What of the human-machine

⁶ Elise Lemire and Benjamin Flowers, *Skyscraper: The Politics and Power of New York City in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 36.

⁷ Val Plumwood, "Shadow Places and the Politics of Dwelling," *Australian Humanities Review*, 2008.

⁸ Walter W. Powell and Kaisa Snellman, "The Knowledge Economy," *Annual Review of Sociology* 30 (2004): 199-220.

⁹ See Sarah W. James, "Protecting Sydney's Peri-Urban Agriculture: Moving Beyond a Housing/Farming Dichotomy," *Geographical Research* 52, no.4 (2014): 377-386. For an artistic exploration of the same development see Ian Milliss and Lucas Ihlein, "The Yeoman's Project: Investigating the work of P.A Yeomans," <http://yeomansproject.com>.

¹⁰ Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minnesota: Minnesota University Press, 2004), 46.

assemblages that process the food? What of the labours of the once-living, whose fossilised remains are mined for our energy? Indeed, in what kind of political economy could the sun be valued as a labourer?

The second task is to imagine and then enact the kind of labours required to build this future. This is a more complex task because in many cases it is not the choice of an individual human worker where, how and to what ends she works. Moreover, in inner Sydney, proximate to the CBD, there are a range of human workers already directing energy towards building an alternative future, but struggling on the periphery of society, from the labours of activists trying to prevent particular modes of development¹¹ and those of permaculturists cultivating new ways of living with earth-others¹² to community energy groups trying to build renewables infrastructure.¹³ In this regard, the Environmental Humanities needs to work alongside such ambitious projects and open up even more pathways to different kinds of material labours that are manually geared towards creating a livable future.

Bibliography

- Crosby, Alexandra, Jacquie Lorber-Kasunic, and Illaria Vanni Accarigi. "Value the Edge: Permaculture as Counterculture in Australia." *M/C Journal* 17, no. 6 December (2014).
- Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Translated by Peggy Kamuf. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Haraway, Donna. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- _____. *When Species Meet*. Minnesota: Minnesota University Press, 2004.
- Kelly, Jane Frances and Paul Donegan. *Mapping Australia's Economy: Cities as Engines of Prosperity*. Carlton: Grattan Institute, 2014.
- Kirksey, Eben ed. *The Multispecies Salon*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.
- Kosofsky Sedgwick, Eve. *Epistemology of the Closet: Updated with a New Preface*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.
- Lemire, Elise and Benjamin Flowers. *Skyscraper: The Politics and Power of New York City in the Twentieth Century*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009.
- Plumwood, Val. "Shadow Places and the Politics of Dwelling." *Australian Humanities Review* 44, March (2008).
- Powell, Walter W. and Kaisa Snellman. "The Knowledge Economy." *Annual Review of Sociology* 30 (2009): 199-220.

¹¹ There are innumerable protest movements attempting to block certain kinds of development in Sydney, for example, the range of groups against the multibillion-dollar Westconnex road project and the urban wing of Lock the Gate movement against Coal Seam Gas.

¹² In "Value the Edge: Permaculture as Counterculture in Australia," Alexandra Crosby *et al.*, argue that permaculture remains on the edges of mainstream politics, but is nevertheless becoming "part of the repertoire of contemporary activism" in Sydney.

¹³ See, for example, the work of the Sydney based renewable energy group, Pingala, <http://www.pingala.org.au/>.