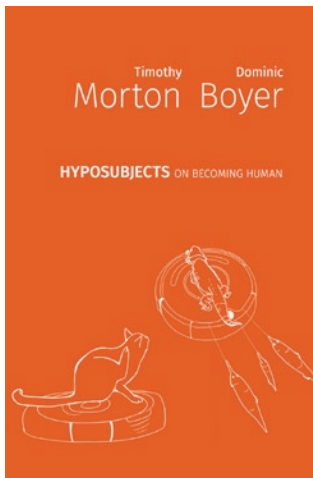


Concerning Books

Looking at Locality from a Performative Perspective

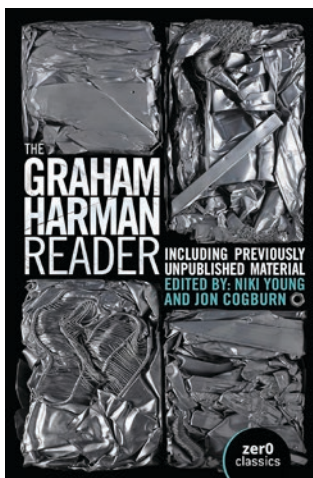
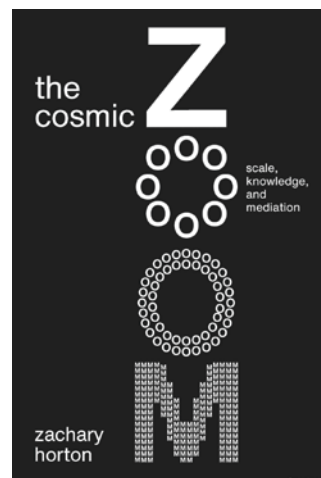
The Case of the Polish-Belarusian Border

Filip Ryba



Hyposubjects: On Becoming Human. By Timothy Morton and Dominic Boyer. Open Humanities Press, 2021. \$15.00 paper, e-book available.

The Cosmic Zoom: Scale, Knowledge, and Mediation. By Zachary Horton. The University of Chicago Press, 2021. \$95.00 cloth, \$27.50 paper, e-book available.



The Graham Harman Reader: Including Previously Unpublished Material. By Graham Harman, edited by Niki Young and Jon Cogburn. Zero Books, 2023. \$40.00 paper, e-book available.

Near a large swamp in the Białowieża Forest that stretches across the Polish-Belarusian borderlands, two Somali women sit leaning against a tall tree.¹ The older one, approximately 40 years old, scratches at her skin incessantly; her entire body is peppered with mosquito bites. There are so many of these marks that, after diligently applying antihistamine gel to each one, I begin to spread the gel all over her arms and legs. Within minutes, I discern a look of relief on her face. Sipping hot tea, Uba² becomes increasingly talkative. Through a blend of English and Arabic, we engage in a heartening conversation amidst the unusual backdrop of the Podlachia's forests (part of which is the Białowieża Forest) in northeast Poland—a landscape of wetlands, ferns, border guards, deer, and hovering Polish army drones. Uba narrates her journey to the tree where we sit, detailing her chance meeting with Idil, a young Somali aspiring to be a doctor. She speaks of how they continued together along a treacherous journey through African countries to reach the Middle East, their arrival in Belarus, and their challenging passage through the Białowieża Forest without essential supplies such as food, water, and medicine.

I

Since the beginning of my volunteer work at the Polish-Belarusian border I have been intrigued by the confluence of disparate realities. I recount my recollections of a forest intervention to demonstrate how local elements (the tree we sheltered under, the nearby Podlachia village, and the forest, which over time becomes increasingly familiar to activists) intertwine with global phenomena (the drought and famine in East Africa; the activities of al-Qaeda-affiliated groups across various world regions, including Somalia and Nigeria; and shifts in Russia's stance toward the European Union and NATO). This melding of the local and global piqued my interest even before my days as a volunteer. I have observed the term *local* gaining traction in academic circles over the years. However, its interpretation varies across disciplines. To an ethnographer, the local might encompass a single village, whereas a sociologist might extend this to a region, while for a geographer it could denote a country. If one were to perceive academic disciplines as hermetic and homogenous, these divergent views on the boundaries of locality might not present much of a dilemma. Yet, when integrating the lenses of interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, or postdisciplinary studies, these distinctions become increasingly challenging to reconcile. Essentially, the question arises: How magnified should a perspective be to rightfully earn the designation “local”?

However, the issue I engage here carries both cognitive and political significance. On the one hand, *locality* is currently seen as desirable in the humanities and social sciences. Some already historical research currents, such as poststructuralism (in a modified form popularized in the United States as *French theory*), deconstruction, and postmodernism have effectively attacked the universal character of science, exposing its narrative and contingent character, showing the role of the researcher and the research process in the production of knowledge, and emphasizing the political and institutional dimensions of this production. This trend is continued today by representatives of many different research currents, such as Anthropocene studies, more-than-human studies, post-humanism, and so on. Locality seems to be a suitable solution to move away from metanarratives,

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2. All names in this account have been changed.

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generalizations, and universal truths, since what is local appears as relative and particular. On the other hand, in political discourse it can serve as a means to trivialize certain concerns. Identifying a phenomenon as “local” often diminishes its importance, especially when compared to what is labeled as “global.” Glocality was supposed to be an alternative, but it did not renounce the universalizing aspirations of science. Moreover, its potential seems to be rather more critical than affirmative, as it draws attention to various processes related to globalization and highlights various strategies of mature capitalism. However, due to its critical potential, it does not seem to be a good foundation for any positive strategies. It is worth emphasizing that all the mentioned categories possess a vital performative dimension: their usage can shape or modify reality. Even when used as a rhetorical figure within discursive practice, the material consequences are significant. Labeling a problem as “local” might lead to its marginalization or a reduction in its perceived significance.

I am neither undermining the political implications of this category, nor proposing a rigid, interdisciplinary definition of locality. Instead, I do not view it as a research tool or a possible scale but rather as a cognitive practice. I understand it as an open set of modalities for creating relations between objects as well as “culturally endowed bodily manipulations of informational structures” (Menary 2012:150). Richard Menary here draws our attention to two crucial issues. On the one hand, he emphasizes the embodied dimension of cognitive practices, which cannot be separated from the experience of a specific body. On the other, he reminds us of the cultural roots of cognitive practices, which, although grounded in a specific cultural context, can be freely modified by the embodied subject. In this article, I focus on the practice of locating, that is “cutting” a fragment of space in the research process and recognizing it as sufficiently particular and specific to deserve the term “local.” In this regard, the mentioned practice is closely related to scaling, specifically determining the scale adopted at a given moment and in a given context in which reality will be perceived and described. My objective is to illustrate how the particular practice of specific localizing retains its utility even when one redefines academic disciplines or abandons them entirely.

My argument draws upon the example of the humanitarian crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border, eloquently described by Joanna Sarnecka:

Today, it is the Border Guard and the police who apprehend individuals—including families with children—and forcibly return them “over the barbed wire,” back across the border to Belarus. There, they confront heightened violence, torture, rape, and other threats to their lives. Only the strongest will survive; the most determined will achieve their goals, while a few will be favored by destiny. Others, reminiscent of Odysseus’s comrades, will either perish along the way or find themselves trapped for months, even years, in tightly secured detention centers for foreigners, stripped of rights and any semblance of control over their lives—as if in purgatory.³ (2022)

Sarnecka speaks of those compelled to flee their native lands, seeking asylum in the European Union. Some of these individuals, whom I refer to as “people on the move,” choose to get to Poland by traversing the Polish-Belarusian border, especially in the region of the Białowieża Forest, which they call the “Polish jungle.” On the Polish side, the uniformed services often breach international law, refusing asylum requests and deporting individuals (even minors) back to Belarus. This procedure, known as “pushback,” while sanctioned under Polish law, violates both international and EU standards. These displaced individuals, after days of navigating through forests, are typically in a dire physical and emotional state. As a result, numerous organizations at the border extend humanitarian support semicovertly. As a volunteer for one such organization, I have not only engaged with and listened to these individuals but also observed the effects of the brutal and illicit conduct of the border control agencies, both Polish and Belarusian.

3. Unless noted otherwise, all translations from Polish are mine.

I have chosen this case study for my discussion of locality for two primary reasons: one cognitive and the other ethical. On one hand, the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border epitomizes the intricacies of locality and globality. This is especially evident when considering Podlachia as one of the sites that “become a stop for refugees, a transit place through which their path to the desired destination runs. The proximity of the migration route transforms the local reality and affects the relationships of the inhabitants and their attitudes” (Potoniec 2022). Conversely, the situation on the border underscores the stringent migration policies of nations in the so-called Global North, which paradoxically align themselves with an anticolonial, equality-driven, antiracist, and nonviolent rhetoric.

II

Within the bustling operations room of the organization with which I am affiliated, two maps of the Białowieża Forest and its environs are prominently displayed. Apart from the conventional road map, another denotes various forest types. I consult it before every intervention to check whether the region I am headed to is damp or arid. I need to know if I will be walking under tall pines, which provide shelter from overhead helicopters and drones belonging to Polish services hunting people on the move and activists; or if I will wrestle through dense woods strewn with fallen trees. This map-based consultation is complemented by discussions with colleagues, some of whom may have recently ventured into the pertinent areas and offer timely insights. The deliberations go beyond mere topography, because some areas are the destination of mushroom pickers, others are rich in berries, and in still others you can meet numerous birdwatchers. Such data is pivotal for successful interventions and key to the very localized nature of border work since it provides the opportunity to estimate risk and select the appropriate strategy for a specific intervention.

Every hamlet, forest, reserve, or wetland has factors that acquire monumental significance for activists, including the traffic on a road or the trajectories of a migration pathway—the routes of people on the road, which are influenced by various factors, such as where they cross the border wall. I decided to characterize these invaluable insights using the well-known term *local knowledge* introduced by Clifford Geertz (1983). By local knowledges (plural) I mean cognitive practices not necessarily grounded in scientific methodologies but affording profound familiarity with local landscapes and experiences of their interwoven networks. The inclusivity embedded in this concept stands in stark contrast to the exclusiveness of academia-produced knowledge using hermetic language and based on narrow specialization. Local knowledges are indispensable for successful interactions with communities during activist interventions and for acquainting new volunteers with the “Polish jungle” operations.

I intentionally spotlight the inclusiveness of local knowledge at the Polish-Belarusian frontier. There is an inclination in persistent academic discourse, especially rooted in the Foucauldian power-knowledge concept, to mystify local knowledge. Wilson Akpan, observing the discourse centered around the concept of local knowledge, notices the twofold dimension of this discourse. This knowledge is perceived as the informational basis of Indigenous and local communities, which often contradicts the official international knowledge produced by universities and the private sector (2011:117–18). In line with Akpan’s compelling critique, one might deduce that integrating local knowledge into dominant discourse is but a veneer of knowledge decolonization. Akpan further contends that juxtaposing local knowledge with a kind of global knowledge is used in political and academic discourse “to assimilate the ‘global’ by all means. In the global knowledge power play, therefore, the relationship between ‘global’ and ‘local’ is not unlike that of master and servant” (2011:118). However, employment of local knowledge on the border leans more toward pragmatism than politics. While the political undertones remain in force, they are somewhat subdued. Local knowledge may seem like a “natural” way of knowing reality, but in fact it is a political construct as it still requires combining various cognitive practices into a top-down whole. As Akpan highlights, local knowledges are constructs contingent upon historical and social factors (2011:125).

How does the critique about local knowledges apply to the maps and related cognitive practices? At first glance, the maps refer to some locality. However, in the light of criticisms such as that of Akpan, it becomes apparent they are not sufficiently localized. A more nuanced, temporally sensitive knowledge is required—one that caters to the specificities of days, weeks, or months, revealing details such as a newly set camera trap or a recent proliferation of chanterelles near Adamów that indicates potential dangers to people on the move.

On the border, local knowledge and scientific knowledge are not isolated but intricately entwined. This confluence is evident in something as seemingly trivial as traversing a marsh. Navigating it demands a skill set that prevents sinking into the mire, possibly sacrificing a treasured shoe. As I walk through pine forests on dry, sandy soil, I know I do not need to look for swamp plants to warn me of approaching marsh. However, when I see these plants in other woods, I take it as a warning and step more carefully, looking for bogs, a grass snake (*Natrix natrix*) scurrying between my legs, or a bouncing moor frog (*Rana arvalis*).

III

It is April. I'm not in Podlachia but in Beirut. From my room in the Geitawi district, I can see the town of Burj Hammud (practically a part of Beirut). Historically home to the Armenian population, some from the Syrian refugee community now also reside here. As I glance out, news updates flood in about the harsh forced evictions of Syrians from homes in Burj Hammud. Without hesitation I message an activist friend stationed at the Polish-Belarusian border, informing her that refugees in Lebanon face worsening conditions, which suggests that some might soon seek refuge in Europe. Anticipating these developments is crucial for our operations, even when such insights stem from places thousands of kilometres away from the Podlachia region.

The situation at the Polish-Belarusian border exemplifies the intricate web connecting global and local events. International politics, which may seem remote from the vantage point of the Podlachia countryside, manifests tangibly in the forests in the diversity of the people on the move. The Lebanese government's shifting stance on refugees directly influences this seemingly isolated region of Poland. Events such as the outbreak of the war in Sudan, the intensifying conflict in Yemen, and Taliban activities in Afghanistan all converge in our immediate vicinity. Moreover, these events—more often than not—overlap with the paramount issue of *climate refugeeism*.

Many people on the move flee regions riddled with armed confrontations, while others escape from places bereft of opportunities for a dignified existence. Intriguingly, a substantial segment from both these groups can be brought under the umbrella of climate refugeeism. The ongoing climate crisis, a kind of war of its own, stands apart from conventional wars. Amitav Ghosh elucidates this in relation to Bengali refugees:

It is often said that climate change should be tackled as though it were a war. What refugees like Khokon know is that climate change already is a war. But it is not the kind of war that climate activists have in mind, like the First and Second World Wars, when Britain and the United States mobilized to confront and defeat a human enemy. Environmental changes and nonhuman entities do not typically play a significant part in wars of that kind. (2021:172–73)

In my view, the nexus binding most migrants at the Polish-Belarusian border is undeniably the climate emergency. A cursory examination of modern conflicts, such as the civil war in Sudan, reveals underlying environmental precursors: dwindling potable water sources, flood risks, and diminishing arable lands. However, fully acknowledging the enormity of climate migration requires viewing the climate crisis through lenses distinct from dominant global narratives. As Ghosh astutely observes:

It was not till much later that I began to understand that the difference between the migrants' thinking and mine was that for them climate change was not a thing apart, a phenomenon that could be isolated from other aspects of their experience by a set of numbers or dates. Rather, their experience was formed by sudden and catastrophic intersections of

many different factors, of which some were undoubtedly new, like smartphones and changes in the weather. But some other factors were not new at all, being rooted ultimately in deeply entrenched structures of exploitation and conflict. (2021:162)

It is not my contention that all people on the move encountered in the Polish wilderness directly correlate with climate migration. My intent is to highlight how a seemingly hyperlocal scenario in a diminutive Eastern European enclave can be reframed within a global context. This reframing portrays not only how localities of different scales intertwine, but also how globality blurs and dissolves within different localities.

IV

As I wrote the preceding paragraphs, I felt like I was continually accessing an imaginary elevator, a mechanism granting me the ability to toggle fluidly between varying scales of reality perception. My vantage point oscillated: from the global expanse, encapsulated by the planetary repercussions of the climate crisis; through the lens of international affairs spotlighting state and group dynamics; narrowing further to the general landscape of individual nations; and finally, zeroing in on the local tableau, evoking vivid images such as the chanterelle clusters near Adamów. Each viewpoint corresponds to a distinct scale, helping articulate particular facets of an issue. Intriguingly, I was engrossed by the seamlessness with which I hopped onto this metaphorical elevator, effortlessly shifting between distinct levels.

Adopting both the global and local lenses can be construed as a performative act of scaling. Performativity dwells in the very act of designating something as “local” or “global,” dovetailing with the overarching theme of provincialization and its inherent political ramifications. Labeling an issue as either local or global amplifies or diminishes its political salience. I take the liberty of using the adjective “performative” in this nonobvious context, because I understand performativity broadly, as a philosophical category. In this respect, I draw on the thoughts of Karen Barad, who in an article with a significant title, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,” refers to these issues:

A performative understanding of discursive practices challenges the representationalist belief in the power of words to represent preexisting things. Performativity, properly construed, is not an invitation to turn everything (including material bodies) into words; on the contrary, performativity is precisely a Contestation of the excessive power granted to language to determine what is real. (2003:802)

Yet, viewing *scale* as an inherently cognitive category is crucial; every observation is tethered to a scale, which is not innately set. This scale might hover close or stretch far from the sensory field of the human body, but it’s never inherently neutral and natural for a particular body or species. Those scales remote from our sensory grasp are merely conglomerates of other, usually smaller scales. Zachary Horton sums up this issue by noting that “ever increasing scales of accumulation take the form of a widening milieu of the human, organized concentrically around our native scale—that is, the scale of our immediate sensory field” (2021:7).

Every cognitive practice is tethered to a distinct scale, whether that is the microcosm of yellow mycetozoa amidst forest debris, the expansive mixed woodland near the village of Dubicze Cerkiewne, the broader scope of the Hajnowski Powiat county, or the overarching canvas of an entire province or nation. It is entirely plausible to envision a paper on mycetozoa fungi where the writer seamlessly glides through the above scales without casting an analytical spotlight on them. Moving between scales and perspectives seems natural and requires no comment, because human consciousness is based on processes of stabilization and communication between different scales of perception. Echoing Horton’s sentiment:

The human emerges from fundamental scalar differentiation [...], stabilizes certain scales through discursive and medial infrastructures, and then harnesses them for further production.

The result is a kind of “scalar accumulation,” strata upon strata of produced objects and subjects organized and sorted according to their naturalized scales. (2021:7)

According to Horton’s schema, this metaphorical elevator ride is a quintessential facet of human cognitive practices. Nevertheless, especially within academic realms, it is imperative to critically examine both the elevator and its stops—the chosen scales of analysis. In my reckoning, discourses centered around the binaries of local vs. global essentially bypass such introspection, effectively neutralizing the scales at play. This circles back to the pivotal performative dimension of scaling.

Yet, when dissecting locality and globality, I discern an even more foundational issue. I contend that globality is intrinsically tied to the very conceptualization of *world*, a notion Timothy Morton critiques, arguing that “*World* is a fragile aesthetic effect around whose corners we are beginning to see” (2013:99). If Morton’s assertion stands, the world becomes the zenith of scales, the grand canvas onto which all subscales are projected. In Morton’s words: “*World* is more or less a container in which objectified things float or stand” (99). Paradoxically, the scale perceived as neutral is not the one immediately accessible to our sensory realm but is, in fact, the most abstract and overarching.

The gaze from the global perspective is necessarily based on the imaginary of the world since it is necessary to imagine an abstract wholistic entity—in this case called “world”—to gain the power to determine something as concerning everything and everyone and resultingly being a global issue. This linkage between “world” and “global,” in its performative dimension, is intended to ensure an ostensible neutrality, mirroring a universal coordinate system. Yet, I concur with Morton’s assertion that the climate crisis and global warming have eroded the feasibility of upholding this neutrality. No backdrop remains that can be viewed as politically untainted—be it temperature shifts, precipitation patterns, cloud formations, or even the rise or decline in certain species populations. All these elements are pivotal when discussing climate change. Articulating his views on the subject, Morton firmly posits: “In an age of global warming, there is no background, and thus there is no foreground. It is the end of the world, since worlds depend on backgrounds and foregrounds” (2013:99). A feature of the background is a certain neutrality that allows other elements to come to the fore. In times of climate crisis, there are no longer any irrelevant, neutral elements, because every thing becomes a potential symptom of this crisis. The existence of the foreground and background creates a coordinate system, which is the condition for the existence of universal knowledge. But what happens to this knowledge when the coordinate system disappears?

Given that even the semblance of a neutral perspective is no longer tenable, what becomes of the categories once crafted to convey neutrality? Regarding the world, Morton’s stance is unequivocal, its demise referenced in the very title of his book (2013). The fate of globality is somewhat more intricate, chiefly due to the binary contrast that engenders it. Globality as a type of discursive and cognitive practice doesn’t vanish; instead, it metamorphoses. Shedding its purported universality, it merely transitions into another form of locality. This metamorphosis of globality is underscored by Morton in collaboration with Dominic Boyer in their discussions of hyperobjects:

We are no longer living in a world in which we can say “I’m in the local right now as opposed to the global. I’m in a place vs. space. I’m here, which is in the middle of everywhere.” So what’s happened actually is that this supposed abstract global has turned into another kind of local, only really, really big. (in Morton and Boyer 2021:47)

Once the illusion of a neutral world or a global backdrop cannot be effectively performed, the container Morton alludes to also fades. In its place, a myriad of localities emerge, each defined by its unique scale and specificity, contrasting the overarching sweep of the global. This new-found understanding upends previous notions of containers or backgrounds, and as Morton suggests: “this supposed abstract ‘anything could happen really,’ even though I’m restricted locally, has completely and utterly crashed at this point. And the crash has come, ironically enough, through a greater amount of global connectivity between humans” (47).

In essence, Morton and Boyer propose that one binary component (the local) has subsumed its counterpart (the global) by exposing the fictitious nature of a neutral global scale that envelops all. If the global was conceived to encapsulate a universal whole, should the local not be confined to the most discrete and specific fragment? Graham Harman, a philosopher whose theory Morton borrows, aptly addresses this quandary while outlining his novel ontological framework. He perceives a dualistic urge in philosophy and science: one, to identify the most elemental fragment of reality; and two, to commandeer the broadest viewpoint, rendering everything a neutral (hence, universal) backdrop (2018:38–41).

While the topic of the overarching viewpoint has been broached in relation to the world and globality, the quest for the most granular particle aligns closely with locality. Harman introduces the notion of *smallism* to tackle this focus on the minuscule. Smallism denotes an intense desire to determine reality's tiniest constituent, while also presupposing that these minuscule entities are the only authentic realities, with all else being infinite configurations of these entities (30). Veering away from smallism, Harman writes:

Object-oriented thought holds that objects exist at numerous different scales, including the electron, the molecule, the Dutch East India Company and the galaxy. The mere fact of complexity and largeness does not make something less real than its component parts. (40)

Harman's theory postulates that every object—a holistic entity emerging from a scalar perspective adopted by the observer—exhibits an intrinsic truth of existence akin to its constituent parts. This is because an object cannot be solely reduced to its components. Such irreducibility stems from a surplus intrinsic to each object that makes it unrepeatable. This surplus is an addition to the components that can be summed up. For instance, the existence of Białowieża Forest holds as much authenticity as a real object as each tree within it and every atom comprising those trees. The forest, tree, and atom represent three wholes, each of which emerged from cognitive practices employing varying scales. Each scale corresponds to a perspective which, I posit, rightly bears the moniker "local." Consequently, Harman's critique does not necessarily resolve the quandary of understanding locality since, fundamentally, any perspective can be perceived as local.

Diving deeper into the tenets of object-oriented ontology (OOO)—a contemporary philosophical current created in opposition to relational theories and aimed at maintaining the autonomy of an object—it is pivotal to acknowledge that any object discernible at a specific scale merely constitutes a *local manifestation* of its complete form (Bryant 2011:31). The surplus Harman highlights remains partly elusive from tangible reality (2018:78), implying an object's inability to fully represent itself. Reflecting on the surplus sounds vague or even esoteric, because the surplus itself defines a certain unattainable quality of the object that cannot be expressed directly in language. In this context, the Białowieża Forest is but a rendition of its entirety, not its absolute form. The surplus of the forest is partly based on narratives and cognitive practices concerning this entire forest, and not any singular part of it. The rest of this surplus is withdrawn along with the withdrawn part of every object; a part which is impossible to perceive. Withdrawal here refers to a certain epistemological inaccessibility that is active, not passive—any attempt to capture what has been withdrawn makes it more elusive. Hence, pinpointing the dangers and advantages for people on the move journeying through this forest is arduous.

Guided by Levi R. Bryant's viewpoint, it is possible to "recognize the locality of local manifestation and the openness and excess of virtual proper being, refusing any reduction of the being of beings to their local manifestations" (2011:268). The concept of local manifestation introduces a relational dimension to this particular ontological theory. This manifestation emerges only in contact with a perceiver, who cocreates the manifestation during the act of cognition. Harman, commenting on Bryant's theory, notes: "there is a distinction between the non-relational 'virtual proper being' of an object and its 'local manifestations,' and only the latter can be said to have qualities" (2023:119). Therefore, it is impossible to talk about the general conditions that await people on the move in the Białowieża Forest. We never know what local manifestation of this forest they will

encounter. Local knowledges, produced and collected by activists, refer only to a particular local manifestation, which—being variable and fluid—may transform at any time.

Treading this path, while locality permits the recognition of the Białowieża Forest's specific manifestation, it restricts a comprehensive understanding of it. A fundamental distinction between OOO's perspective and the traditional local-global dichotomy is the inherent implausibility of the global. This is due to the intrinsic surplus of every object, perpetually remaining withdrawn, thereby defying complete comprehension. If a segment of reality remains inherently inscrutable, no cognitive category can encapsulate it. As Bryant argues, objects "always harbor an excess within them that refuses any reduction to local manifestation" (2011:268).

Drawing from OOO's conceptual framework, it can be surmised that any conceivable perspective within cognitive practices is, in essence, local. This is because the perspective only uncovers localized manifestations of entities, which are indivisible wholes. As such, locality determines every conceivable cognition. Yet, this realization does not eclipse the political implications inherent in the category of "locality." I assert that discarding it entirely might not be judicious. The OOO doctrine, however, proffers tools for its nuanced redefinition. Primarily, through the concept of smallism, OOO illuminates the compelling desire to discern the most minute of particles. This yearning appears central to academic debates, which ask whether a perspective is truly dealing with sufficiently minuscule entities to warrant the designation of local. OOO arguably enhances our understanding of arbitrary and discretionary delineations demarcating locality. Both these demarcations and their origin warrant scrutiny for a conscientious engagement with the concept of locality. OOO equips us with robust arguments for such critical examination.

V

Recognizing the particularity of scale applied to any situation offers numerous advantages. Primarily, such awareness allows one to move beyond the confines of a specific locality, venturing towards its partial universalization. At first glance, this notion might seem paradoxical, especially given prior critiques of universalism and globalism. However, I envision a reconceptualized form of universalism, echoing sentiments presented by Anna Tsing:

To turn to universals is to identify knowledge that moves—mobile and mobilizing—across localities and cultures. Whether it is seen as underlying or transcending cultural difference, the mission of the universal is to form bridges, roads, and channels of circulation. Knowledge gained from particular experience percolates into these channels, widening rather than interrupting them. ([2005] 2011:38)

Defining the boundaries of locality in any context should invariably lead to a transcendence of these confines, shifting towards a renewed universality—one distinct from neopositivist scientific understanding. To clarify, border activists forge a unique bond with the forest, shaped by both the traumatic experiences they endure during interventions and their deep appreciation for the forest's beauty and its myriad living organisms. From a neopositivist viewpoint, the manner in which these activists interpret their relationship with the forest is relegated to mere ethnographic fiction. Yet, from Tsing's perspective on universalism, local knowledge cultivated at the border holds equivalent merit to knowledge produced within formal scientific discourse. Such an inclusive universality eliminates any hierarchical valuation of produced knowledge. This paradigm allows for interpretations of cognitive practices and their results that, under traditional logic, might seem contradictory.

Drawing upon Tsing's metaphor of "channels," the channel of various perceptions of diverse relationships with the forest empties into another, main channel made by other conceptualizations of the forest and relations with it, which in turn contributes to the emergence of yet another new channel without being assimilated by any dominant conceptualization or relationship. These novel interpretations not only enrich but also broaden the channel. Tsing's vision of universality does not negate what might be deemed incorrect; it embodies a dynamic and evolving essence that sidesteps Harman's "smallism." It makes sense to say that there is no singular, overarching idea of "forest"

emanating from individual forests. What exists are holistic entities recognized as forests and based on our experience and vision of these entities—utilizing select cognitive practices—a distinct concept of the forest emerges. This concept surpasses a mere aggregate of trees and organisms, containing an element that allows us to conceptualize the forest beyond its tangible constituents.

I contend, somewhat provocatively, that it is necessary to dissect and critique locality not solely for its intrinsic value but also to pave the way for a revamped universality—a platform facilitating communication. As Tsing argues:

The specificity of global connections is an ever-present reminder that universal claims do not actually make everything everywhere the same. Global connections give *grip* to universal aspirations. Working through global connection, the book is an exploration of ethnographic methods for studying the work of the universal. As soon as we let go of the universal as a self-fulfilling abstract truth, we must become embroiled in specific situations. And thus it is necessary to begin again, and again, in the middle of things. ([2005] 2011:24–25)

Tsing's concept of universality aligns seamlessly with the interpretation of globality as merely another version of locality. Following Tsing's perspective, one must acknowledge that both universality and locality are, in essence, fluid and dynamic. Consequently, defining a specific locality is akin to making an arbitrary cut within the changing reality. By using the metaphorical term *to cut*, I mean an attempt to determine a particular part of fluid reality and freezing it in time. These cuts establish the boundaries of a particular locality, reflecting the perspective of the perceiver.

While I borrow the concept of universalism from Tsing, emblematic of the relational approach that stands in contrast to OOO, I have no intention of fully adopting her theory. Doing so would introduce irreconcilable contradictions throughout this article. Nevertheless, Tsing's notion of universality provides a way out of the cognitive impasse engendered by an endless array of localities. Instead, I emphasize an approach that acknowledges the autonomy of objects, asserting they are more than mere aggregates of relationships. Were they only such aggregates, the concepts discussed herein would be unthinkable. Harman underscores this:

Namely, relational ontology is incapable of thinking adequately about the concept of “locality” [...]. A completely interconnected cosmos would have no individual location at all: everything would affect everything else, and all things would be mutually and utterly near. (2023:239)

My choice to adopt an OOO perspective is, at its heart, pragmatic. While Harman contends that it is untenable to consider locality when reality is viewed solely through a relational lens, this should not be misconstrued to mean that while reality undergoes apparent changes, objects remain static. Even if some objects possess parts that are elusive and reclusive, they are dynamic and mutable. Furthermore, objects are also perceived differently by different perceivers, which results from Harman's concept of the fourfold and the epistemology based on it (Harman 2011:94–99). Harman states:

Objects may change rapidly; they may be perceived differently by different observers; they remain opaque to all the efforts of knowledge to master them. But the very condition of all change, perspectivism, and opacity is that objects have a definite character that can change, be perceived, and resist. (2023:240)

Consequently, reality is in perpetual flux, and no dissecting gestures—such as cutting—can halt its motion. Each cut on reality, always tailored to a specific scale, is executed by the perceiver. This, however, doesn't imply unfettered freedom on the part of the perceiver in executing these cuts. Objects possess distinct shapes, forms, and the capacity to resist. Every act of perceiving and conceptualizing what was perceived is inseparably knotted to the performative act of cutting since from every cutting a new material entity emerges and—as Barad notes—“performativity is linked not only to the formation of the subject but also to the production of the matter of bodies” (2003:808). It is necessary

to determine the boundaries of perception through the very act of cutting. These boundaries stem from the previously mentioned structure of what is perceived as well as from the bodily experience of cognizing by the particular and limited body of the perceiver. Thus, each act of cutting is an establishment of a unique relationship between the perceiver and the perceived. Consequently, from each relationship new forms of being emerge.

VI

The mere mention of the contemporary situation on the border, especially from the perspective of direct activist experience, has ethical value in and of itself. I believe that it is crucial, above all, to share information about the continuing crisis in the Białowieża Forest. However, I also believe that a case study of this crisis should not be used purely instrumentally—as an illustration for abstract academic considerations. Therefore, I wrote this essay in parallel with my reflections on my work on the border. Here I propose a cognitive practice that would enable the description of the entanglement of many distant localities using an academic language that would be embedded in both bodily experience and the activities of local activist groups. The transition from tangled localities to a new universalism provides linguistic tools to describe situations in which I have repeatedly participated in the forest. These situations are often nonobvious meetings of various entities shaped by different localities, who suddenly find themselves in the unusual surroundings of the forest, which is a representation of a densely tangled more-than-human landscape. The creation of new communities results from the entanglement of many localities—those related to activists, those shaped by people on the move, and those in which meetings take place. My proposed approach to locality and new universalism makes it possible to describe such encounters.

Considering the humanitarian crisis in the Białowieża Forest reveals how traditional distinctions between classically understood locality and globality are in the process of disintegrating. Instead, we see the emergence of countless specific localities. With the rise of these localities, a new form of globality surfaces. This globality is not merely an aggregation of individual localities but represents a distinct form of locality in itself.

The aforementioned cuts might serve as the very foundation for reconceptualizing locality—a unique perspective or scale enabling the discernment of specific objects and their interrelations. In essence, locality becomes a performative act of scaling, fostering the emergence of objects and their interactions. Grounded in this nuanced understanding of locality, a vision of communicative globality can emerge in tandem with Tsing’s construct of universality. By reinterpreting both locality and globality, not only are categories preserved and infused with palpable political agency, they are also adapted to contemporary perspectives within the changing realm of the humanities.

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