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## **Article commentary**

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# "Mossification": Subverting the Human-Centric Portrait with a More-Than-Human Triptych

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**Abstract:** Motivated by a sense of ethical obligation and environmental urgency, I commissioned a Toronto-based artist to take a portrait of a "more-than-human" me that embodied nonhuman elements. The aim of this artistic endeavor was to re-evaluate humans' impact on and relationship with the organic and nonorganic beings and stuff with which we are entangled. My aim with the resulting portrait, "Mossification," was three-fold: to visually represent a more-than-human (multiple-singular) self; to subvert the human-centric portrait by giving moss and lichen more visual space and symbolic agency; finally, to suggest, through movement in the form of a triptych, that if we do not change, humans will end up buried under by nature. This short essay is broken down in three parts. In the first two, I provide philosophical context then synthesize a brief history of portraiture with the aim of showing how "Mossification" subverts the genre. In the final part, I demonstrate how "Mossification" might be positively received but nonetheless fails to embody transcorporeality because of its entanglement with neoliberal systems that instrumentalize and objectify nature. I conclude that even though "Mossification" is problematic, it remains a productive visual experiment because of its generative capacity to destabilize human-centric representative traditions and symbolic codes.

Keywords: Posthumanism, material feminism, nature-culture, portraiture

Toronto-based artist Nicole Crozier's triptych, "Mossification," is a portrait of 'me' embodying a movement by which the human is taken over and buried under by moss and lichen. If my face is recognizable in the first photograph, by the third image the human figure is mummified and buried under the lush and fibrous moss, lichen and springtime flowers. In May 2018, I approached Crozier, an emerging artist focused on exploring the physical and psychological confines of the female body through various critical frameworks. I requested a portrait of a posthumanist aesthetic of being, of 'my' more-than-human 'self.' My aim was to foreground nonhuman agency and destabilize the concept of the modern individual who is characterized as independent of, and separate from, others and nature. In short, I wanted a portrait of 'me' which erased me. The West fetishizes the entrepreneurial, neoliberal self that Nietzsche apprehended in *The Will to Power*. In the pursuit of social status, power and prestige, we instrumentalize time and resources as well as our bodies, each other and nature in the never-ending pursuit of more; more, bigger, better, faster, disposable goods resulting in the production of tons of land and water waste and emitting atmospheric pollution in an unsustainable model of resource extraction that has changed the Earth's geology and ecosystems. In this article, I will argue that lichen is a metaphor for mutualistic relationship that intrinsically opposes capitalist ways of being that have culminated to a moment in which humans have turned from being biological agents

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to becoming a geological force which may eventually be responsible for our extinction.



Figure 1. "Mossification," photograph triptych by Nicole Crozier, 2018.

Scientists have empirically proven that humans' impact on the planet has brought us to a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene. From anthorpo, meaning "man," and cene, meaning "new," this manmade time of environmental crisis situates us in the midst of the Sixth great extinction, a global and ongoing "extinction event" of species (Wake and Vredenburg 11470). In "Geology of Mankind," Paul Crutzen offers various examples of human exploitation of the planet: "About 30-50% of the planet's land surface is exploited by humans. Tropical rainforests disappear at a fast pace, releasing carbon dioxide and strongly increasing species extinction. Dam building and river diversion have become commonplace. More than half of all accessible fresh water is used by mankind" (23). Crutzen believes that human environmental impact on the planet will continue and that scientists and engineers are needed to help steer humanity in the right direction if we are to avoid apocalyptic results: "Unless there is a global catastrophe—a meteorite impact, a world war or a pandemic—mankind will remain a major environmental force for many millennia" (23). He is not the only one ringing the alarm bells. The publisher Elsevier launched a new academic journal, Anthropocene, in 2013, with countless academic articles published worldwide on the topic before and since; popular media, too, has intensified discourse around the anthropocene, species extinction, climate change and environmental rights issues, with countless books, documentaries and television shows targeted to the general public. With so much buzz on the urgency to re-evaluate our impact on and relationship with the organic and non-organic beings and stuff with which we are entangled, my aim with "Mossification" was three-fold: to visually represent a more-than-human self; to subvert the human-centric portrait by giving moss and lichen more visual space and symbolic agency; finally, to suggest, through movement in the form of a triptych, that if we do not change, humans will end up buried under by nature. If, as "Mossification" seems to suggest, the great extinction wipes us out in the same way dinosaurs were eliminated, then the planet will go on. Thus, this more-than-human portrait of me, a writer, cannot resist the pull toward narrative. This short essay is broken down in three parts. In the first, I provide a philosophical background for my posthumanist position. Second, I synthesize a brief history of portraiture with the aim of showing how "Mossification" subverts the genre. In the final section, I demonstrate how "Mossification" opens up generative possibilities for posthumanist ontologies at the level of viewer reception while it fails to embody transcorporeality at the level of artistic process because of its entanglement with neoliberal systems that instrumentalize and objectify nature. I conclude that even though "Mossification" is problematic, it remains a productive visual experiment because of its generative capacity to destabilize human-centric representative traditions and symbolic codes.

#### Context: Ancient Roots and Modern Alliances of Posthumanism<sup>1</sup>

Before plunging into a discussion on the triptych, I will consider the philosophical context framing the posthumanist position "Mossification" attempts to embody. As early as 6th century BCE in the West with Heraclitus and 4th century BCE in the East with Zhuangzi, anthropocentrism has been criticized. This critique was interrupted by early modernist Enlightenment idea(l)s, and has recently been revived by ecofeminists, queer ecology and environmental philosophers. Yet, over 2,500 years ago, Heraclitus claimed all things were one, united by an everlasting Logos (the Word of the creator, the principal of divine reason and order). From the laws of nature, always hidden and inaccessible to us because "[h]uman nature has no insight, but divine nature has it," moral laws manifest for human beings (Curd 45). These moral laws can be synthesised by working towards caring for the soul rather than the pursuit of power, status and wealth: "Those who seek gold dig up much earth but find little" (43). We hear echoes of this philosophy two hundred years after Heraclitus, between 369-286 Century BCE in China. Against tradition, which emphasized moral, filial and personal duty, Taoist/Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi advocated for spontaneity in action and freedom from conventions in order to align with the Dao or "the Way," by following nature. The Way, which emphasises being-with nature rather than the pursuit of useful doing, also demands we accept death which is an aspect of life and nature, a transformation:

"Once Zhuang Zhou dreamt he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting gaily. He knew nothing of Zhou. Suddenly he woke up and there he was, solid and unmistakable Zhuang Zhou. But he didn't know if he was Zhuang Zhou who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming that he was Zhuang Zhou. Between Zhuang Zhou and the butterfly there must be some distinction! This is called the Transformation of Things." (22)

This passage is a good anecdote of Zhuangzi's philosophy, who considered the soul free roaming, or wandering, and the body or form as our soul's physical boundary. The soul can wander from body to body, since Taoist metaphysics imposes no hierarchy or dichotomy between butterfly and human. Human exceptionalism is not only decentred here, it is entirely abolished. While Heraclitus and Zhuangzi's philosophies differ in many respects, including the position of Logos and the importance accorded to order, they both suggest humans are in and of nature, on the same metaphysical plane as its many diverse manifestations.

While pre-modern thinkers were critical of the human-centric view, anthropocentrism begins to take hold with the philosophy of Descartes, whose epistemological project was primarily concerned with truth or certainty. Emphasising clarity and distinctness as forms of justification for knowledge, he settles on what he considers to be a foundational truth, I think therefore I am. A turning-point one might characterize as 'early modernity,' the Cartesian framework positions human beings as subjects apprehending the world, while nature and its many manifestations are reduced to mere objects. Nature is framed as a totality of objects accessed through the senses which can be deceptive. All manifestations of nature-including animals, plants and elements-are fundamentally geometrical and corporal, mechanical operations. Humanity is thus constructed as separate from nature by virtue of the metaphysical gap between subjects and objects. Only God allows us to bridge this gap, that is to say, God allows us to know nature and the world. Unlike humans, God does not deceive. However, this Cartesian turn, formally known as 17th-century continental rationalism, has come under heavy criticism over the last century.

The heavy emphasis on human subjectivity remained a key feature of philosophical discussion for nearly three hundred years and it is not until the early twentieth Century that strong critiques of Cartesianism begin to emerge with the work of Heidegger. For Heidegger, human beings are not Cartesian subjects, disinterestedly reflecting on an objective natural environment. Human being, for him, is Dasein, which means "being there" [Da = there, sein = being]. To be there is to always already be in-the-world [in-der-Welt]. That is, to be human is to be thrown open into meaning and necessary involvement (the word Heidegger uses is "care" [Sorge]). Dasein is always already ahead of itself, temporally projecting towards

<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank my friend Josh Livingstone, a Heideggerian scholar, for his notes and his help with this section.

future possibilities, taking part in projects and events. This is non-voluntary: what we do and who we are, are largely determined by the world we are thrown into. Throwness [Geworfenheit] is an existential characteristic of Dasein. Heidegger notoriously declares that animals are poor in world, meaning they lack *ek-sistence*. By this he means animals are so imbedded within the world, so intuitively focused that they lack an existential awareness of their place in a world. Thus, animals are still very much in the world, but not existentially. Inanimate beings, like stones, are not just poor in world, but worldless. Heidegger is opposed to anthropocentrism: human beings do not determine the meaning of the natural or living world.

Heidegger sees technology as the culmination and epitome of Cartesian metaphysics, with its assumed objectivization leading directly into a desire to order the world as though it were comprised solely of resources. The essence of technology, Heidegger tells us, is revelatory—it reveals the world (Heidegger uses the term "enframing" ["Gestell"]); it makes us see ourselves as resource users and/or the manifestations of nature as objects/resources for our use. The world as revealed by technology is a "standing reserve," a totality of resources waiting to be used and exploited (a kind of expansion or extension of metaphysical objectivity). Technology uses the language of machination, totalization and gigantization, in line with capitalist modes of production and capitalist ways of being. Technology even reveals other human beings as "human resources," also a result of neoliberal modes of living; and a resource is potential energy, waiting to be unlocked. Heidegger was inspired by the grandfather of bio-semiotics, Jakob von Uexküll, whose work is the earliest attempt to develop a language for animal life that does not objectify or flatten their abilities to sense, communicate and exert agency. Uexküll assumes a priori that language is not specific to humans or Logos, arguing instead that organisms' perceptions, communications and purposeful actions are part of a nature filled with sensations, meaning and language, capacities that are not limited to human beings. For von Uexküll, human subjects are on the same plane as animal subjects, even if their lifeworlds ("Umwelt") are very different. This intersubjective model is not taken up in exactly the same way by Heidegger, however, who still gives humans a special place not as superior to animals—rather, humans are special because of their capacity to exert extraordinary (often destructive) agency, beyond that of other creatures. Perhaps even more so than Heidegger, von Uexküll is taken up by animal activists and posthumanists who advocate for intersubjective models of co-existence between humans and nonhumans. While "Mossification" owes inheritances to philosophers from antiquity and modernism, its alliances are more deeply entwined with scholars, artist and activists coming out of ecofeminism and queer ecology who also attend to cultural studies.

Ecofeminists use feminist frameworks to understand and apprehend ecology. There are many branches of ecofeminism, but they all draw on the concept of gender to understand relationships between humans and nature within matrixes of dominance and power in global, patriarchal and neoliberal societies. According to the woman who coined the term ecofeminism, Françoise D'Eaubonne, the field relates to the oppression of all marginalized groups including women, people of colour, working class people, sexual minorities and others, to the oppression of nature, an umbrella term that stands for animals, plants and elements including land, water and air (Le Féminisme ou la Mort 10). In dominant cultural norms within Western societies and their hegemonic mythologies, be they religious or otherwise, women were imagined as wild, bleeding and milking natural creatures, overly emotional, if not hysterical, granddaughters of the original sinner in need in taming and domestication. If nature was seen as feminine, women were not exactly human, at least not in the better way men were: rational, physically stronger, cultured, intelligent and in command of their emotions. As Stacey Alaimo points out in *undomesticated ground*, the very meaning nature "contains [only] Man's Truths" (3). As she explains, "casting woman as that which is in and of nature thrusts women outside the domain of human subjectivity, rationality and agency "(2), positioning women and nature as objects existing for the purpose of fulfilling the needs and pleasures of men. Feminists had to dissociate themselves from nature in order to regain their independence and emancipate themselves. They dislocated gender from sex for the same reasons. But as many ecofeminists have recently argued, nature is a feminist space, hospitable to women. Instead of separating ourselves from nature in order to regain our subjectivity and shift gender relations, many environmental feminists argue that we need a radically novel way for humanity to relate to nonhumans.

We must begin by transforming the matrix of power that constitutes what and who counts as life and non-life, and by extension, embrace difference politics and models of distributive justice that are sensitive

to the needs of the complex web of biodiversity on our planet. Not only is there nothing essential about women, since race, class and sexuality translate to diverse material experiences for women, but there is also nothing essential about what is meant by nature. Nature is not a static thing. If in the past, culture was presented as dynamic, complex and ever-changing and opposed to an image of nature as static, silent, easily knowable and manageable, today the distinctions between culture and nature are falling apart. Nature is not a mute background against which human cultures flourish. Nature is active; the many, diverse and complex animals, plants and elements do things to us. In turn, we do things to them in a reciprocal but uneven relationship of power. Like feminists who have shed light on the associations between 'woman' and 'nature' for the benefit of patriarchy, queer ecologists recognize the implicit and explicit associations of heterosexuality with the concept of "natural" and, conversely, homosexuality with the "unnatural." Existents defy "pure" and binary categorizations, and are enmeshed in queer interrelations that blur traditional scientific assumptions and categories (Morton, 273–282). According to Timothy Morton, queer ecology transcends dualism and strict boundaries and recognizes instead that relationships exist between existents ("life forms") at different scales. Like "Mossification," Giffney and Hird challenge the distinction between human and nonhuman, introducing the idea of fluidity from queer theory to relationships between humans and their environments (25-30). But should be Like (some) ecofeminists, (some) queer ecologists see there is nothing essential about gender, sexuality and nature, pointing toward culturally and socially constructed discourses. But how does the production of culture intersect with our understanding of nature?

In The Long Revolution Raymond Williams examines the gradual changes in our political, economic and cultural lives, with an emphasis on 'creative minds' in relation to our social and cultural thinking. What are the forces that shape social change and foster a common language? The gradual emergence of a common eco-culture is what our planet needs in the face of rapid climate change, massive pollution and toxicity levels, species extinction and other phenomena that threaten our very survival on Earth. According to Williams, "culture is a description of a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour" (2 emphasis mine). The next sections of this paper considers the meanings and values we must abandon and those we might wish to cultivate in order to fan the fires of a gradual eco-cultural revolution for a future in which all beings, human and nonhuman, can co-flourish.

# "Mossification": Subverting Human-Centric Portraiture

As editors Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin explain in their introduction to Art in the Anthropocene:

The possibility of extinction has always been a latent figure in the textual production and archives; but the current sense of depletion, decay, mutation and exhaustion calls for new modes of address, new styles of publishing and authoring, and new formats and speeds of distribution. (n.p.)

The ecological crisis has informed and inspired artists who respond to it by producing environmental art (Kaufman 1). One of the essential problems of the ecological crisis is our ability, or inability, to collectively respond to it. Donna Haraway's concept of "response-ability" pertains to our capacity to be sensitive to, act appropriately and proportionally to the current state of ecological affairs (Art in the Anthropocene 255-267). However, before acting, we must a priori become attuned to what this action requires of us. I would like to suggest that to be "response-able," we must first undergo a profound ontological transformation, one which will compel us to take action in posthumanist terms. Portraiture, because of its focus on the human subject, is, in my view, a very good place to start subverting human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism.

Beyond formal and commissioned portraiture, artists have produced portraits to represent their "psyches, represent their intimate circles, or serve as manifestos of artistic style or purpose" (West 17). Whatever the intention behind a portrait, Shearer West's 2014 book, Portraiture, explains that "as portraiture represents specific people, its practice tends to flourish in cultures that privilege the notion of the individual over that of the collective" (17). That is precisely why she places portraiture as emerging from the West. Enlightenment's radically singular individualism plagues our modern obsession with individual subjectivity, deeply entangled with capitalism, colonialism and consumerism. The Western obsession with the neoliberal self is characterized by what Deleuze and Guattari call "faciality"—the impulse to place our gaze toward the singular face of the signifier (as opposed to a polysemic gaze, which makes possible the coexistence of many meanings for a sign). As they explain, the face is "a surface: traits, lines, wrinkles; a long, square, triangular face; the face is a map" (A Thousand Plateaus 170). Portraiture, in this context, flourished as a cultural commodity alongside other modern genres including biography and autobiography, as well as the science of psychology which studies an individual's mind and personality. As West explains, "The very idea of individuality is thus socially and historically constructed and contingent, and portraiture both grows from and reinforces this particularly Western concept" (17). If portraits at once represent individual identities and culturally solidify the concept of the individual, then "Mossification" subverts one of its primary functions by decentralizing the human figure in its attempt to embody a more-than-human (singular-multiple) self. My face, although clearly recognizable in the first image, is quickly overtaken by moss and lichen in the second photograph and disappears completely by the third. Even if the second image shows more moss and lichen than human, I remain recognizable because of Crozier's decision to keep my eyes, nose and mouth visible, and because of my decision to keep my glasses. Thus, although the human figure is completely buried by the third photograph, we know exactly which human remains underneath the carpet of moss and lichen.

However, even if etymologically the genre is associated to likeness and mimesis, portraiture is not merely defined by its verisimilitude to the individual. As West demonstrates in her genealogy of portraiture, people of power, monarchs and dictators alike, have commissioned portraits not to represent their faces with any sense of physical accuracy but rather to position themselves socially and to convey symbolic messages (to express virtue, for example). Portraits, therefore, have often been used for propagandist purposes, to assert a sense of power, social standing/role, and to convey idealized values and symbolic orders. Crozier's "Mossification" might at first glance appear to function as a biographical object, representing something specific and unique about the human it represents, even as it tries to decentralize her. Representing an emerging writer, the triptych might appear to valorize difference. There is a long tradition of portraits of artists and intellectuals whose difference—that is, whose perceived 'unique creative genius'—is emphasised. Although it would be premature and presumptuous to position myself within this lineage, "Mossification" might also be said to straddle another tradition, of representing the unknown or underclassed, the 'common everyday person.' However, I argue that "Mossification" does not build on or emerge out of either one of these human-centric traditions. Portraits undergo a complex negotiation between tradition and artistic intent. The intention behind "Mossification" was subversive from the get-go: to disrupt the very genre of portraiture, with its focus on the individual, by representing a more-than-human figure. "Mossification" embodies, symbolically, the death of the Cartesian self and foreshadows the inevitable end of the West's obsession with individualism. The human body featured in this triptych functions as a vessel for staging and disrupting anthropocentrism since it is the moss and lichen, not the human, who is the active agent in the photos. But a green face is nothing new, for it, too, has a history.

In "Green Face," Devon Schiller explains that the hybridization of the human face and its environment—embodied in the figure of 'the Green man' since the mid-twentieth century—are part of a group of recurring imagery and iconography featured across numerous architectural spaces in Western cultures and European civilizations (496). As early as 1939, "with her article 'The 'Green Man' in Church Architecture' published in the journal Folklore, Julia (née Hamilton) Somerset (1901-1971)—known as Lady Reglan—described a 'man's face, with oak leaves growing from the mouth and ears, completely encircling the head'" (quoted in Schiller, 498). Although Lady Reglan's Green Men have been featured in art and architecture since the first of second century CE, it is in 1939 that she invents the figure and retroactively ascribes a particular type of signification to it (500). The Green Man acts as the symbolic bridge between humans and nature (498). One of the primary reasons for the Green Man's success and popularity (which persists until today in more commercialised forms such as the "Big Green Man" icon used by the canned pea company, *Green Giant*), is its easy readability to illiterate and literate people alike. Whether literally green or a stone sculpture of a man with vegetation around or coming out of his face, the Green Man is infused with mystical meanings, illustrating the ecological relationship between humans and their material environment. Lady Reglan

identifies Robin Hood as the inspiration and historical origin for the Green Man motif. Dressed in green, living in the forest, Robin Hood embodies human's relationship with the physical environment. He is also the hero of the people, opposed to the greed of the ruling class, a motif "Mossification" builds upon. As Schiller explains, the Green Man "comes just as much from our relationship to ourselves as our relationship to the world" (502); symbolic of the union between humanity and the vegetable world, a symbiosis "at once in harmony and struggle," the Green Man embodies the cycle of life/spring/renewal and death. Indeed, depending on how you read it, from left to right or right to left, "Mossification" also embodies the life and death cycles. However, because it features the body of a woman, "Mossification" comes closer to the highly mythologized Goddess figure of Mother Earth, also known as Gaya, who "compliments and contradicts the Green Man within an archetypal dualism between the feminine and the masculine" (503). In popular renderings of Gaya, we see a pregnant woman whose belly is the earth or, as in Montreal's botanical garden, the face of a woman entirely sculpted with flowers and moss, which also represents Gaya. In the 1970s, James Lovelock developed a notion of a secular "Gaia," suggesting organic and non-organic beings are engaged in a fragile and complex system through which phenomena modify the planet. While "Mossification" starts out with a hybrid green face between a woman and moss/lichen, it departs from the highly mythologized figure of the Green (Wo)man by the third photo in the triptych, positioning itself within a posthumanist narrative. Nonetheless, "Mossification" engages with the figure of a secular Gaya, one that Bruno Latour finds a productive starting point for envisioning a more ecologically just and sustainable future in Facing Gaia.

In the book, Latour establishes an ambitious vision in which he calls for a new body politic wherein the people of a secular Gaya are sensitive to and able to respond (building on Haraway's "response-ability") to the complex sets of cycles and relationships that characterize our planet's many interdependent ecosystems. Echoing the concept of entanglement by physicist Karen Barad, Latour explains that human beings are always already materially-energetically enmeshed in Gaya's diverse local and global networks of organic and nonorganic beings. The Moderns—that is, human beings that constitute and are constituted by modernity's institutions, discourses, sciences and technology, theology, politics, economics and relationship with themselves and nature—the moderns, he argues, are paralyzed by the ecological crisis that risks razering us off the planet because we are not "true materialists" (191). As Schiller so aptly demonstrated in his study of the Green Man, and as Latour suggests, Moderns have complex inheritances which have created ruptures with their "relations to the ground," that is, with materiality (Latour 169). I would like to focus on how portraiture has contributed to this rupture with the ground and how "Mossification," through a complex negotiation between the Green Man/Gaya figure embodies a posthumanist rewriting of the form.

Since "Mossification" is presented as a sequence, it stages movement in time in such a way as to narrate the movement between humanism and posthumanism. We witness a reversal of the appropriating narrative in the triptych: it is not the human who conquers the land, privatizing and owning it, working and excavating it for resources in a market economy; rather, the moss and lichen, in a seemingly quick and effortless movement, take over the human body. The "apocalypse" trope (a word and concept we have inherited from the Greeks), is ancient and popular, older than Noah's flood, as modern as T.S. Eliot's epic poem "The Waste Land," and as popular in our imaginations as George R. Stewart's Earth Abides (1949). Alan Weisman's 2007 best-selling novel, The World Without Us, is perhaps the first one that is ecologically-focused, speculating on how long the planet would need to erase our presence, popularising the idea that "Without us, Earth will abide and endure; without her, however, we could not even be" (4). If "Mossification" shares affinities with The Waste Land's tone of humanity's decay, the triptych, like The World Without Us, departs from it with an emphasis on the very real and material—not merely imagined as an ideal escape—possibility that humans may become extinct. If the characters in "The Waste Land" are stuck in crumbling post-war Europe, unable to leave it behind, Mossification's visual narrative gives the immortal yet aging Sybil what she can only dream about in Eliot's poem; death. Though few, if any, critics have read "The Waste Land" in posthumanist terms, it is, in my view, a deeply material poem. It embodies the tension between unity and multiplicity of experience, and uses Pound's fragmentation and Imagism techniques to express the contradictions of material entanglements with others, including our enmeshment in historically traumatic events. Although the trauma here is not climate disaster and mass species extinction but the resulting horrors of WWI, the poem shows a broken London populated by ghostly figures like Stetson, the fallen soldier, rats and waste. Humans are embeded within a living planet with seasons that change, animals and rodents, as well as human-produced waste and destruction. A 'grounded' poem, to use Latour's language, "The Waste Land" refuses transcendental ideals: in part three, "The Fire Sermon," for example, St. Augustine and Buddha appear as embodiments of Western and Eastern Philosophical traditions, but irrelevant of how passionate and spiritual they are, they simply cannot transcend the ground of a stubbornly material world. Like "The Waste Land," "Mossification" refuses transcendence, remaining firmly 'grounded' and material, revealing the futility of trying to eclipse or escape our ecologically entanglements with nonhuman beings like moss and lichen. Unlike the novel and the poem, however, "Mossification" is a text-object with a unique function and aura.

## The Production of Art in Neoliberal Consumer Networks

Because of their materiality, portraits are objects that come in different forms: from the painting to the photograph, the statue and the coin, portraits are objects that serve varying public and private functions. The photograph, for example, occupies the domestic and public spheres because of its ease and cheapness of reproduction. Photography has fantastic mass appeal and cuts through social class structures; from family portraits, to magazine and newspaper images, to selfies on Facebook and other social media platforms, the photographic portrait is a democratized medium. That is not to say, however, that portrait photography does not have a complex aesthetic, political and social history, a fascinating area of study that is outside of the scope of this essay. "Mossification" was first published on Crozier's Instagram feed and Facebook page, followed by my own author page on Facebook, where it stands as the main banner alongside a short blurb, which you can find in full length in the Appendix. I will consider here only the first two paragraphs:

Reindeer, mood and sheet moss, along with hair lichen, slowly take over this portrait of writer Sanita Fejzić by Nicole Crozier. Subverting human essentialism and traditional portraiture, "Mossification" is a highly stylized and choreographed triptych representing our messy, intra-active material world.

Fejzić's portrait is quickly taken over by lichen, erasing her face and leaving only the contour of her bust in the final photograph. This movement away from human essentialism toward representing non-human agencies gestures toward two distinct but mutually constitutive ideas: intersubjectivity and transcorporeality. (Facebook.com/SanitaFejzic777)

If we bracket out processes of production for a moment to first consider reception aesthetics, "Mossification" subverts not only human essentialism and traditional portraiture, as the Facebook blurb suggests, but it also confronts human exceptionalism. Indeed, as Nicole Crozier and I have recently talked about, had we only kept the third photograph and got rid of the first two, which create a narrative movement, "Mossification" would have been grounded in posthumanism without making echo to the green face motif. I insisted on the triptych because it embodies movement and relationship between human and nonhuman, an interdependency that is usually erased by traditional portraiture. It demands that viewers start reading humans in more-than-human plural terms. As the extraordinary book, Lichens of North-American, illustrates, lichen is not a plant since it does not have roots; instead, it is a composite organism arising from cyanobacteria and algae, and living among webs of mushrooms in a mutualistic relationship (Brodo et al 5-20). It is considered one of the oldest living organisms on the planet, able to survive anywhere on Earth, from the arctic to deserts, on rocky landscapes to woody forests of all kinds across the globe, in water and hanging in the air, this remarkable species covers 6% of the planet's surface and has over 20,000 subspecies that live happily on walls and gravestones, perhaps humanity's own if we do not learn to co-exist in *mutualistic relationship* with nonhumans. Thus, from the perspective of viewers who are not aware of the artistic process and its entanglements in unsustainable modes of production that contribute to destroying the planet (and which I will dwell on shortly), "Mossification" fulfils its promise of de-centring the human subject, complicating the separate and independent first person singular, "I," and gesturing toward a more-than-human, entangled "we."

The posthuman subject is an embodied, material being entangled with other embodied beings in a complex world of "intra-actions" (Barad 141). Intra-action, a deeply relational term, suggests that agency does not emerge from within an individual who then exercises this agency; rather, intra-action is understand as a "dynamism of forces" (141) in which the stuff of the world is constantly and inseparably diffracting, exchanging and influencing oneself and others. That is to say, subjects or phenomena do not precede their interactions; rather, phenomena emerge through intra-actions. Agents are, therefore, derivative of their inter-relations; bodies that matter are bodies that discursively matter within formal and informal interrelational contexts. Thus, discourse shapes what we know and what we believe to be true in a matrix of power that disciplines and punishes bodies according to given normative models of a particular intersection of time and place. Building on this, Barad's theory of agential realism claims that the universe is made up of phenomena that are ontologically inseparable from intra-acting agencies: "We are of the universe—there is no inside, no outside. There is only intra-acting from within and as part of the world in its becoming" (396). The stuff of the world is deeply entangled with everything else in a 'material-discursive' way, producing determinate meanings and material beings while excluding the production of others. What matters, for Barad, is always already material-discursive. "Mossification," then, can be seen as a material and textual embodiment of Barad's concept of intra-action.

However, upon closer inspection, "Mossification" fails in its promise to represent transcorporeality and intersubjectivity in an attempt to forge better ethical relations between humans and nature; because the moss and lichen take over a passive human body, the triptych seems to represent a reverse image of what it tries to disavow itself from: appropriating agencies that stifle co-existence. In spirit and practice, however, transcorporeality is porousness between bodies, not a violent taking over of one body over another. The problem lies in the triptych's narrative moves. On the one hand, it wants to represent a morethan-human self and raise "questions of ethics and responsibility in our trans-species material world" (see Appendix), and on the other, it threatens viewers with the risk of human extinction. Straddling a hopeful tone and an apocalyptic threat is bound to create internal contradictions. Yet, that is not its only internal conflict. If we define intersubjectivity as shared meaning in the spaces between humans and nonhumans, then "Mossification," a triptych made by me and Crozier, fails in its promise to represent lived spaces of intersubjectivity between human and moss/lichen. These are, after all, families of dead moss and lichen. Crozier bought them from ecostems, "an environmentally and socially sustainable flower shop" in Toronto (ecostems.ca). At the time, the store provided a selection of three moss types: reindeer, mood and sheet moss (although called "reindeer moss," it is part of the lichen family), alongside hair lichen, which come in recyclable 4x4x4 inch cardboard boxes. Crozier purchased enough to cover my bust while keeping costs around \$75. The store has a strict sustainability policy, delivering on foot or bike, or by electric car, and selling only seasonably available flowers and plants. That is why today, a year later, one of the four moss/ lichen we used is no longer available for purchase. Half of it came from Newfoundland and the other half from Florida, most probably delivered by CO2-emitting trucks. As Matthew Zantingh reminds us in his essay, "When Things Act Up: Thing Theory, Actor-Network Theory, and Toxic Discourse in Rita Wong's Poetry," we cannot forget how material objects, and organic food or plants bought from a flower shop, emerge from international networks that are "often intentionally obscured by a North American marketplace" and that "link consumer practices to manufacturing centers" abroad (622). Therefore, even if tempted, we cannot forget that the moss and lichen we bought are part of a global production network that extracts resources, pollutes and creates waste. Eco-standards and green labels advertised by ecostems offer pause.

As the authors of Eco-Standards, Product Labelling and Green Consumerism ask, how can ecological complexities be translated into a trustworthy and categorical label? Boström and Klintman remind us that "we live in a risk culture" (1). Everyday consumer choices are complex and imbedded in larger political and material networks whose practices and ecological impacts are often difficult to measure with accuracy and certainty. Labels are knowledge claims, yet "labellers face an ambiguous relationship to science," (5) not to mention that the companies that produce green products have their own politics, value systems and interests. It's not surprising then, that Boström's and Klintman's conclusion errs toward caution, toward what they call "mutual, reflective trust" among those involved (109), an act that demands work on the part of the consumer alongside informed faith. Even if, however, the moss and lichen were extracted in a sustainable manner, it remains that sustainability models are enmeshed within unsustainable neoliberal networks since, for example, there is a contradiction within the delivery of the lichen: the company will walk or bike it to your door, but does not seem concerned that the lichen travelled 1,650-some miles between Florida and Ontario in a truck that emits carbon dioxide.

However, beyond the ways in which purchasing moss and lichen at ecostems positions "Mossification" as part of a network of resource extraction and pollution, the biggest contradiction is that the moss/lichen, which are supposed to have agency in the triptych, are in fact dead. Not only was the bunch of moss and lichen killed so that consumers can see it "perfect for potted plant decoration and as a terrarium accent" (ecostems.ca), turning it into a resource for my instrumental use, but the moss/lichen's total lack of agency is apparent in the process of its creation. Its anaesthetized and stylized quality, mentioned on my social media blurb, betrays the difficulty in escaping human-centric art production and practices. Whereas the 2018 documentary, The Anthropocene, a collaboration between filmmakers Jennifer Baichwal, Nicholas de Pencier and photographer Edward Burtynsky, features images of nature as it is being manipulated, instrumentalized and commodified (a thing bought and sold for profit), "Mossification" does not show where the moss/lichen comes from or how it got on my body. Crozier's photographs—like the ones Burtynsky is famous for—hide their entanglement in the global networks that objectify nonhuman beings, especially what we call natural 'resources,' organic plant life and nonorganic elements such as coal and others. The Anthropocene documentary brilliantly demonstrates how humans have killed elephants for the sake of creating beautiful art objects sculpted from their trunks. We are compelled, through association, to wonder about the cost of producing the documentary-the countless technological objects that made it possible, and I do not only mean the cameras, but the computers that edited the film and the countless planes rides the team must have taken around the globe to make it possible. Art, and the production of culture and knowledge, is caught up in seemingly inescapable global networks. As I pen this, for example, I am conscious of the laptop that I'm using, made to be obsolete in a few years with most of the parts that will end up in a landmine somewhere, decomposing for perhaps hundreds and thousands of years after my death. Nonetheless, the project of transcorporeality, according to Stacey Alaimo who coined the term, "may incite inquiry into global networks ... Thus, although the notion of trans-corporeality may seem [entangled with] anthorpocentri[sm] ... inquiry as a sustained practice is crucial for trans-corporeal environmentalism" (Bodily Natures 16).

However, although "Mossification" is problematic in that its process fails to embody transcorporeality and intersubjectivity between humans and nonhumans, it remains that by subverting human-centric portraiture, it offers a provocative appeal for a posthuman vision of the future. In "The Future City" Frederic Jameson writes, "Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. We can now reverse that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world." The final photograph in "Mossification" is an imag-inative leap toward a future nobody wants: one in which the human is buried under, mummified into past history like the embalmed corpses of Egyptian Kings. However, unlike Jameson's proposition that imagining the end of the world is to imagine capitalism, "Mossification," by featuring moss and *lichen as metaphor for mutualistic relationship*, is opposed to capitalism, which is a model based on win-lose and master-slave dynamics.

In closing, even if it is a photographic reproduction, I believe "Mossification" has a unique aura. This aura is sustained by a tension between content and form, intent and outcome, and it is, I think, a generative tension: we appear as separate bodies yet are deeply porous with nonhuman beings and elements. As Astrida Neimanis explains in *Bodies of Water*, "Watery embodiment thus presents three related challenges to humanist understandings of corporeality: discrete individualism, anthropocentrism, and phallogocentrism" (6). It is easy, almost cliché, to accept that we *are* water, since more than 70% of our body is water we drink, eat, urinate, the same ancient water we garden with and consume back through food, all of which is fluidly entangled with industrial modes of production that use water to cool their machinery, release toxins back into rivers and oceans, which becomes rain that seeps into the land and the food cycle we depend on to live. But we are not just water and food; we are also increasingly plastic and toxic, like all bodies of water on earth. "Mossification," which assumes we are always already more-than-human attempts to embody and re-organize a new symbolic language, one in which the human is

not the centre of the universe, no longer the central framework for apprehending an aesthetic of being and engaging in everyday practices. The transcorporeal and intersubjective human co-creates with everything in her environment; that is, she co-creates material and metaphysical futures worth living in. Take Chernobyl, for example, a human disaster whose tragic mess resulted in the banishing of humans and, in the decades since, has resulted in being "one of the few places in the world that's getting wilder" (Chanel 4 News). Although still radioactive in some hot spots, the area is seeing a rise in bison, wolves, wild horses, lynx, brown bear and moose (Chanel 4 News). Less famously, the abandoned Houtou Wan fishing Village, located on Gouqi Island, China, has been taken over by dense layers of ivy that are slowly creeping over every brick and path in much the same way moss and lichen overtook my face in "Mossification." The faces of these two cities, like my own in the triptych, have been reclaimed by nonhuman beings, begging the question: are we waiting for disaster to make space for nonhuman beings to flourish? Can we create a posthuman liveable future without erasing ourselves from the picture? Indeed, "Mossification" embodies a narrative of transformation that comes with a sounding alarm, a warning of our forthcoming possible extinction nobody really wants to see happen. Instead, let "Mossification" be a call to action that transforms our relations to other vibrant materialities and makes us more sensitive, more response-able, to the needs of nonhuman beings. Like the Addam's Family's Cousin Itt, who is covered by a robe of hair, in the last photograph of "Mossification" I am no longer recognizably human but am instead a mossy, lichen hill, an outline and memory of the Enlightened individual I aim to destabilize; even more: the myth of the separate and autonomous individual I aim to kill. As Ovid's Metamorphoses and Kafka's The Metamorphosis have shown us, we rely on the trope of transformation at once on the physical and metaphysical planes, as a way to deconstruct systems of oppression, and for the love and hope of a better vision for the future. That is why, on the one hand, we can no longer see ourselves as separate from nonhuman beings, while, at the same time, we continue to walk the earth as transcorporeal individuals or groups of individuals (societies, governing bodies) who are responsible for our actions; responsible and therefore accountable for our impact on animals, plants and elements.

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## **Appendix: "Mossification" Facebook Blurb**

Reindeer, mood and sheet moss, along with hair lichen, slowly take over this portrait of writer Sanita Fejzić by Nicole Crozier. Subverting human essentialism and traditional portraiture, "Mossification" is a highly stylized and choreographed triptych representing our messy, intra-active material world.

Fejzić's portrait is quickly taken over by lichen, erasing her face and leaving only the contour of her bust in the final photograph. This movement away from human essentialism toward representing non-human agencies gestures toward two distinct but mutually constitutive ideas: intersubjectivity and transcorporeality.

Intersubjectivity suggests a shared, social subjectivity between minds. It can be understood as thought communities or as psychic energy moving between subjects. Is it possible that we are intersubjective with the non-human organic world around us? Material feminists suggest we are transcorporeal; that is, humans are open-ended systems interacting with other open-ended systems. A commonplace example of this are microorganisms such as bacteria that make up as many, if not more, cells in the human body. We are water, air and other organisms, quite literally. How do we capture a portrait of Sanita Fejzić, then, when other life forms have agencies over her body and mind?

"Mossification" flamboyantly embodies the posthuman promise that a person can exist beyond being simply human. We are porous, permeable and always changing. Other life forms have agencies over us. Lichen may be small but it has power. We hope this tryptic reminds you of the beauty and power of naturecultures while simultaneously raising questions of ethics and responsibility in our trans-species material world.