Toward Companion Objects

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In this paper,¹ I take up Graham Harman’s critique of the philosophy of access as well as his proposed non-anthropocentric ontology, and I ask what it would be like for human beings to live or practice such a proposal. Drawing on Harman’s thinking about prehension, but shifting focus towards work in critical phenomenology and feminist science studies, I argue for the importance of human prehensive self-awareness within non-anthropocentric ontological practices, an awareness that emerges phenomenologically and in practice. Extending both Donna Haraway’s theory of companion species and phenomenological practices of being-here with other things, I lay a groundwork for practicing being human as companion object.

... what counts as an object is precisely what world history turns out to be about (Haraway, Simians 194-195)

As Jane Bennett has noted, reading Graham Harman’s detailed and often rich work in object-oriented ontology (OOO) induces “dizziness” (225); it can be difficult to find a clear point of entry for engagement. There are virtues in this difficulty, which is in keeping with Harman’s assertion that objects—including philosophers, their texts, and their work—“withdraw” from all relations (Towards 202). An object, he writes, is always able to surprise any of the entities that observe it, or to be described in new and unorthodox ways. This indicates that the currently accessible features of a thing do not tell the whole story about it. [A thing] is more than an appearance, because it is many different appearances at once to many different creatures. Beyond that, it is even more than all of these appearances put together,

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because it might harbor qualities that no current observers are equipped to detect … (Guerilla 17)

Harman argues that phenomenologists tend to disrespect objects by collapsing the distinction between appearance and reality, whereas “an appearance [for some other thing] cannot possibly step in for the thing and replace its labors amidst the world” (17). Thus, like those who took the linguistic turn, Harman criticizes phenomenologists for failing to “respect” objects and their “hidden reality” (Towards 202). Whether we have a philosophy of consciousness or of language, “the inanimate world is left by the wayside” (94). At most, the “lucid, squeaky-clean ego of phenomenology is replaced by a more troubled figure: a drifter determined by his context, unable fully to transcend the structure of his environment” (94). Harman finds that even after the linguistic turn, the central philosophical question continued to be about how to “bridge the gap” between subject and object—what he names the “philosophy of access.” In pursuing that line of questioning as central, philosophy forgets—and insists on forgetting—as Quentin Meillassoux puts it, “the great outdoors” (see Meillassoux 7). Or, in Harman’s words, philosophers forget “the chasm that separates tree from root, ligament from bone” (Towards 94). “[B]eneath” the “ceaseless argument” over access, “reality is churning” (94). Yet, as quoted above, “the currently accessible features of a thing do not tell the whole story about it” (Guerilla 17). In challenging the philosophy of access, Harman appeals to Whitehead, who describes a mutual “prehension” of objects, or things (Harman, Towards 38; Quadruple 46). In Tool-Being, Harman writes: “This word [prehension] designates the mutual objectification with which all actual entities confront one another, and thereby stakes a philosophical claim outside the limited realm of Dasein” (232). In other words, for Harman, prehension is not the purview of human being alone.

Yet, to understand Harman’s sense of prehension, it helps to notice that a central claim of his metaphysics is that there is a radical absence of contact between objects. In his words, they exist “in utter isolation from all others, packed into secluded private vacuums” (Quadruple 1), prehending one another in spite of their isolation “as a kind of caricature or objectification—the rock did exist beforehand, but never quite in the way in which the other rock objectifies it” (Tool-Being 208). Given this isolation, Harman argues that object-oriented ontology calls for a radical rethinking of objects, but without resorting to an ontology in which the (human) subject retains centrality—which, he argues, leads to the problem of access. Harman’s is an ontological picture in which the human position is de-hierarchized, in which ontology is “flattened.” Harman thus describes the “ultimate aim” of his “guerrilla metaphysics” as clarifying the workings of the medium in which objects relate to and withdraw from one another, “to such an extent that it unleashes a gold rush of further speculations, a
Wild West of philosophy to replace the constricted, tedious, human-centred mandate of contemporary thought” (Guerrilla 95). As he argues, in Guerrilla Metaphysics,

there is no object at all...capable of caressing the skin of another object so perfectly as to become identical with it or otherwise mirror it perfectly. When a gale hammers a seaside cliff, when stellar rays penetrate a newspaper, these objects are no less guilty than humans of reducing entities to mere shadows of their full selves. (83)

Like other feminists reading Harman, I do not disagree about the potential error of collapsing appearance into reality or about the capacity for perfect mirroring. Instead, we disagree about the reduction that he assumes occurs in such instances. Gales, stellar rays, and human beings do not only reduce entities to shadows, “caricatures,” or “objectifications” (see Harman, Quadruple 74, 110; Tool-Being 85; Towards 202; Guerrilla 24-25). They more broadly make a difference for, enliven and limit particular expressive, ontological capacities in, other things—seaside cliffs and newspapers—through their interactions. Indeed, the reverse is also true: seaside cliffs and newspapers enliven and limit gales and stellar rays. But Harman refuses to characterize those relations as ontologically basic (Guerrilla 82-83); relations seem necessarily to misrepresent, and thus deny basic respect to, objects. Instead, Harman insists that to respect objects is ultimately to understand them as vacuums, as completely insulated from one another, that is, as non-relational (Guerrilla 76), so that the task of philosophy becomes explaining how any relation is possible.2 If this is so, then it is little wonder that, as Stacy Alaimo puts it, despite the flattening of ontology in OOO, “the human voice is the only thing we hear” (182; my emphasis).

In theory produced by human beings, and in the absence of basic relationality, the human voice might be the only one we could hear. Yet, it is also important to notice that the absence/refusal of basic ontological relations in OOO means that at the very moments when “the human voice is the only thing we hear,” context and situational particularity get glossed over, even in otherwise rich descriptions of objects. Specifically, human bodies and embodiment—human things—feel absent in all of the places one might expect to find them—and, I think, need to find them. The human voice we hear as non-relational is also crucially lacking in self-awareness.

In what follows, I employ Harman’s work—as an exemplar of OOO concerns about the philosophy of “access”—as a prompt to think more

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2 One of Harman’s central claims involves the need to “respect” objects (Towards 202), understood as radically individuated and cut off from what is around them. Objects are thus inherently reduced, compromised, by other things, and not also enlivened, enabled by them. While the move to notice the ways that objects aren’t fully knowable or graspsable is important, this feature of his work continues to appear as deeply inscribed by an orthodox Euro-American sense of the autonomous individual, and, indeed of ontological dualism.
about *prehension* as a fundamental moment of ontological engagement. In response to the call for flattened ontology, and shifting attention towards work in critical phenomenologies and feminist science scholarship, I argue for the potential of a concept of “companion objects” as mutual prehenders with other things. Against both the imagined de-contextualized selves of Harman’s OOO and the too-easy breaking away from human-centered practices that can be part of posthumanist theory, I suggest the role of companion object as a way of recognizing oneself as situated ontologist, committed to de-hierarchized (if not “flattened”) ontologies. One of the central reasons why such a move might be important is that it highlights and insists upon noticing, in each case of theoretical and practical engagement, particularly situated, human beings who make specific claims about objects (and subjects, and things), and about how ontology works. Such claims are, often, uncomfortably detached from the specificity of lived embodiment in Harman’s, and many OOO theorists’, work, and this oversight/refusal risks lapsing into familiar and well-deconstructed claims to uncritical objectivity. My project here is to allow Harman to prompt critically responsive thinking about how to take up ontologies in which human being is decentred, yet to do so without divesting oneself of one’s situation *qua* particular human being—that is, playing with the epistemic and ontological senses of the term, as critically *objective*.

To begin, I consider how taking Harman’s Whiteheadian talk of prehension seriously can lead towards attending at once to ontological specificity—including what is traditionally called subjectivity—and to more general terrains of de-hierarchized ontologies. As I will suggest, far from forgetting “the great outdoors” or churning reality, significant contemporary phenomenological work deals with racialization and racial formations, sex/gender, class, disability, environment, queer bodies and beings, and other material-discursive worldly things as questions of what “*it*” is like to live (with) them. Such work, such attention, invariably alerts us to the need for ontological “double-consciousness,” the capacity to distinguish world and prehension, and to notice *their connections*, precisely by taking seriously the extra-conscious force of worldly reality. Similarly, feminist science scholars—I here invoke Donna Haraway at length—have long engaged with many of the concerns Harman raises about access, and have done so with extraordinary sensitivity to pressing metaphysical and ethical questions. Drawing on Haraway’s critical metaphor of “seeing,” I argue that prehension is a way of describing ontological responsiveness, which shows up most clearly in the ways things enliven, repress, engage with or refuse one another not just in thought, but in practice, in mutual prehension. In this way, prehension, or ontological responsiveness, may also be described as *affective*, and I engage Ancient philosophical thinking about *technē* and *poiēsis* to point to a pre-“philosophy of access” tradition of attending to oneself as ontologically responsive, one which has ties that run through even Euro-American philosophical orthodoxy.
Finally, holding on to both critical phenomenological and feminist sciences studies insights, I propose a concept of “companion object,” a way of taking up oneself as a prehender among others. Using the confluence of prehension and poïësis, I argue that noticing the rich variety of prehensive capacities, the multiplicity of responsiveness (and lack of response), between things—including ourselves—is not primarily a site of investigating belief, but of attending to practices, to embodied or material responses, and to the genealogies that produce them. Thus, (re)calling to oneself a sense of being a companion object can both de-hierarchize human ontologies over other prehensive capacities, and can call direct attention to the ontology of the object that is in companionship with particular, situated others. The question of how to be human in a de-hierarchized ontology thus shifts to questions about what Rebekah Sheldon, following Brian Massumi, following William James, calls the “happening doing” (Sheldon 214) of human being. As a “subject” qua companion object, then, one is both decentered without escaping one’s status of being perpetually “at issue” in one’s own prehensions. The ontologist, qua companion object, can remain inescapably metaphysically responsible and be re-enlivened as responsible.3

I. Phenomenological Practice and the “Gap”

There is, in Harman’s early work, a sense—which I and others share—that there are lives and “things” happening all around us in the world, things which are importantly varied and rich and palpably laden with possible—if inaccessible—meaning, with relationships that do not include the human “us,” and there are “carnal,” worldly things that are, for many of “us,” inseparable from our needs for and practices of philosophy. For many philosophers, experiences of being with concretely phenomenal things, in their rich and complex materiality, provide the most compelling philosophical prompts: the differential treatment of human (and other) bodies, concrete situational meanings, strange experiences, daily practices, cultural assumptions and sensibilities, and wonderment about non-human animal relationships and material workings.

In part, Harman identifies philosophical forgetting of “the great outdoors” with and as leading to a philosophical emphasis on generality,

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3 This proposal rubs in crucial ways against many of the projects of OOO and speculative realist theorists. Most pressingly, in those ontologies, there is often a division between the political and the ontological, and between the epistemological and the ontological. The return to highly orthodox readings of metaphysical realism in OOO is peculiar in light of sophisticated developments in realist work in post-Kuhnian philosophies of science and feminist STS, on the one hand, and in developments in scholarship and activism work on colonization, on the other. See Isabelle Stengers contribution to The Speculative Turn (368-380) and Zoe Todd’s work on ontology and colonialism.
which refuses the particularity of objects and which finds their commonality only in our “discussion of the condition of the condition of the condition of possibility of ever referring to them” (Towards 95). Thinking with Alphonso Lingis’ Foreign Bodies, Harman writes, in an earlier paper:

Making room for one another… objects contest each other, seduce each other, empower or annihilate each other. Commanding one another by way of the reality of their forces, the objects exist as imperatives. Like fish hunting food or dogs playing with balls, it is possible that gravel and tar, cloth and magnesium wage war against one another, compress one another into submission, command respect from one another. (Towards 21)

For Harman, objects “prehend” or “grasp” one another, in Whitehead’s pre- or non-epistemic sense (Towards 38; Quadruple 46); entities are “open” to one another even without being known to one another. Most compellingly, on this Whiteheadian picture, human beings are “organisms” along with innumerable others, and “consciousness is only a special case of experience” (Towards 38), an activity not unlike fish hunting for food, dogs playing with balls, or comingling gravel and tar. As Harman later puts the point in The Quadruple Object, “For Whitehead, unlike for Heidegger, the human-world coupling has no higher status than the duels between comets and planets, or dust and moonlight. … Instead of placing souls into sand or stone, we find something sandy or stony in the human soul” (46).4

Dust and moonlight. Taking this insight seriously—and agreeing with it—I nevertheless will immediately turn the following discussion back towards the human. Yet, in an academic paper, where else would it, at least implicitly, turn? Even if human interactions with worldly things are simply prehensions among worldly things, ontologically equivalent with prehensions among non-human things, academic and philosophical practices take deeply human forms, and we would still need to take seriously how those interactions reveal their particular form and character. Attending to the particular possibilities for human things and the things with which they are mutually prehended, the particular ways they can “withdraw” from other things (and be withdrawn from by those other things) (Harman, Towards 202) is important if we are to be sufficiently precise about what we are talking about. Taking consciousness to be but one kind of experience among many others does not remove it from consideration as (a) particular. And prehensive particularity emerges in no small part as a function of situation, or of context.

Despite his concerns about the propensity to generalize in philosophy, in a rare criticism of Whitehead, Harman writes that he must

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4 For a differently inflected discussion, see Sara Ahmed on “stone pedagogy” in Willful Subjects (191-192).
part ways with Whitehead’s insistence that it is a “cardinal philosophical error” to “attempt to refer to an actual entity apart from its complex of relations with other such entities” (Guerilla 82). Rather, Harman finds he must counter “the contemporary reflex that opposes all attempts to view anything out of context” (82). I therefore suspect that one of the troubles phenomenological practice presents for Harman is that it reveals that refusing anthropocentric ontologies does not remove the anthropocentrism of my experience, in so far as I am (a particularly situated) anthropos, whatever that is or can be. Phenomenological practice inescapably reminds human beings of the simultaneous distinction between the thing itself and my/our context-dependent experience(s) of it. That reminder, moreover, puts “at issue” the ways my own experiences are contextual and particular and, perhaps, open for and in need of critical consideration. We are, in Beauvoirean terms, ambiguous. But that experience emerges from experiences with worldly things; such a reminder is not of a “gap,” but of the particularity (that is, non-universality) of direct prehensive response to, being caught up and enmeshed with, those worldly things.

Contemporary phenomenological practitioners attentive to worldly phenomena—those who are not only talking about phenomenology, but who are practicing, doing phenomenology—help in thinking about this attunement to ambiguity: (non-exhaustively) Lewis Gordon, Lisa Guenther, Linda Martin-Alcoff, Susan Wendell, Sandra Lee Bartky, Sara Ahmed, Iris Marion Young, Judith Butler, Gail Weiss, and George Yancy. Lisa Guenther’s skill, for instance, at articulating a how and a why for doing phenomenology suits my inquiry here. She writes, in a piece of her work on the penal practice of solitary confinement,

Phenomenology begins with a description of lived experience and reflects on the structures that make this experience possible and meaningful [my emphasis].

… we do not exist as isolated individuals whose basic properties and capacities remain the same in every situation. We are not in the world “as the water is ‘in’ the glass or as the garment is ‘in’ the cupboard,” [Heidegger] wrote in Being and Time (1927). Rather, we exist … in a complex interrelation with the situation into which we have been thrown. The work of phenomenology is to make this web of relations visible, so that we can appreciate the complexity of even the most simple, everyday experiences.

… My body plays a special role in this triangulation of experience. My body is my central perspective on the world, the “here” from which I encounter every “there.”

… The other confirms, contests, enriches, and challenges my own experience and interpretation of things.
While here “the other” is a human other, I take Guenther’s point about the capacities of phenomenology to attend to the webs of relations that provide the structures of experience, and I am interested in expanding her description of the other’s role out towards the other enlivening, contesting, and helpful forces that human bodies encounter, towards the other prehending presences, animal and object, that allow ways of being human.5 This is inherently relational. And it is inherently ontological.

It seems clear, after the many late 20th century philosophical challenges to objectivity as Archimedean detachment, as anti-subjective, that when certain human beings—like OOO theorists—make claims about particular objects, about their engagements and interactions with other objects (i.e., about object-to-object relations), they do so as particular objects themselves (e.g., the one we call Graham Harman, or Anna Mudde) and as a particular sort or kind of object (e.g., the ones we call human bodies/organisms which use particular sorts of perceptual systems, languages, bodily comportments, movements, and actions—that is, objects/bodies which can, sometimes, make ontological claims). An ontology oriented towards the plurality and multiplicity of objects does not seem justified in ignoring (collective or individual) human prehensive particularity, even as it refuses it a privileged position and/or seeks to renegotiate the category “human being.” At least some practices of phenomenology—the ones attuned to double-consciousness—seem to offer resources for such an ontology.

Yet the extensive philosophical preference for refusing context remains in many circles, and it is a shared source of worry and site of critique among critical race, feminist, queer, anti-colonial, environmental, and critical disability theorists. That preference has long made phenomenological resources salient for many contestatory philosophers. Another, related, form of response that is widely used in thinking about accessing worldly things through de-hierarchized ontologies produced by human beings 6 comes from feminist science studies. There, the commitment to distinguishing between objects themselves and the

5 What it is like to be in solitary confinement is in no small part a prehensive response to being put into specific relations with other things. More specifically still, it is an enlivened capacity in response to being cut off from all other things except those that are not easily engageable.

6 While work in the new materialism is in the background of this paper, this area is large and diverse. Some of the work in that area seems to forget or move away from the centrality of human experience and ontological systems for human beings in ways that I cannot—or cannot yet—accept. In part, echoes of Linda Alcoff’s 1991 paper on “the problem of speaking for others” — here other sorts of things, ground my concern. In Haraway’s work, by contrast, knowing-with is an important category that does not involve refusals to try to “see”—in the learned technological sense—with others, but also does not involve a claim to prehend (or “see”) as others do.
encounters and interactions human beings and other objects have with them emerges from longstanding feminist rejections/queerings of key features of the “philosophy of access.” Rebekah Sheldon writes,

… feminist science studies has traced an arc through the question of representation, moving from the urgent and necessary epistemological task of untangling science’s encoding of and complicity with sexed, gendered, raced, and anthropocentric assumptions through the hard-won and hard-maintained insistence on the ontological co-constitution of matters and discourses to the recognition of wholly non-discursive agency of other than human forces. (217)

These approaches, like Donna Haraway’s thinking about companion species, Karen Barad’s thinking about apparatuses, and Nancy Tuana’s thinking about bodies of viscous porosity, take notice of direct engagements between human and non-human beings. Here, practices of knowing and being make material-discursive differences in the world—things show our engagements with and refusals of them, as we do theirs. In the section that follows, I invoke a Harawayan consideration of prehensive capacities. The “gap” between consciousness and world Harman identifies as arising in philosophies of access are difficult to maintain when one considers practices which pay close attention to the materiality of labour, science, and technologies, as many feminist science scholars do.

II. Companion Species and Prehensive Responsiveness

Much as in critical phenomenological practice, attunement to what it is like to be and to emerge as a knower (a human being in a particular sense), along with other knowers and with the concrete particularities of the things one is trying to know, is an indispensable feature of feminist science studies. In particular, I am perpetually inspired by Donna Haraway’s assertion that we are always already becoming with others, a “companion species,” “at table” (cum panis) with others: human beings, other “critters,” materials, structures, words, and discourses (see Species; Staying). Haraway writes, in When Species Meet, that as a category,

… “companion species” is less shapely and more rambunctious than [the category “companion animal”]. Indeed, I find that notion, which is less a category than a pointer to an ongoing “becoming with,” to be a much richer web to inhabit than any of the posthumanisms on display after (or in reference to) the ever-deferred demise of man.

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7 While I have not engaged their work directly in this paper, Vinciane Despret’s ethology-philosophy is worth mentioning, as is Annemarie Mol’s anthropology-ontology. Both have provided me an incubating space for many of the ideas I am here only gesturing toward.
never wanted to be posthuman, or posthumanist, anymore than I
wanted to be postfeminist. … Fundamentally … it is the patterns of
relationality and, in Karen Barad’s terms, intra-actions at many
scales of space-time that need rethinking … The partners do not
precede their relating; all that is, is the fruit of becoming with: those
are the mantras of companion species. (16-17; my emphasis)

While in phenomenological experience there can appear to be more stability
over time than Haraway seems to suggest, her proposal for making kin of
and with those other “things” that surround and situate us, for living as
“companion species,” is a proposal for recognizing becoming-with. But it is
also a recognition of our genealogical already having become-with. As
Haraway articulates, this re-orientation de-centers the human, but it does
not remove, or perhaps forget, its particularity so much as it troubles the
boundaries of the human as ontological category.

Like many feminist challenges to the “philosophy of access,”
Haraway’s urges us to reject any pretense to interchangeable, disembodied
knowers, insisting instead that knowers are situated, that we have learned
how (become able), using the troubled metaphor critically, to “see,” in some
ways and not others (Simians; Modest_Witness). Momentarily privileging
“eyes” as a trope, as a way of parsing “prehending system,” Haraway writes,

The “eyes” made available in modern technological sciences shatter
any idea of passive vision; these prosthetic devices show us that all
eyes, including … organic ones, are active perceptual systems,
building in translations and specific ways of seeing, that is, ways of
life … All these pictures of the world should not be allegories of
infinite mobility and interchangeability, but of elaborate specificity
and difference … (Simians 190)

“Seeing” and “eyes” are not only the visual things those terms usually
invoke, but can—for some people—provocatively solicit a self-conscious,
embodied sense of prehension. “Seeing” is necessarily situated, invested,
and implicated. It is also inherently limited, different from any other
instance of “seeing” and from other ways of “seeing.” Being tied to
particular, material, prehensive systems disqualifies from the outset any
pretense to disembodied or personally divested knowers who simply
discover what there is. In different terms, Haraway considers the experience
of walking with dogs, and trying to imagine what the world must be like for
them, creatures who lack the sort of prehensive visual system she has, but
who have prehensive scent receptor systems no human being can, really,
imagine (Simians 190), systems which allow them to “see,” to prehend,
differently from human beings. In this context, attending to seeing, and to
“seeing,” is helpful for avoiding binary oppositions, particularly that
between the subjective and the objective (Haraway, Simians 188), as well
as challenging the philosophy of access and recognizing the particularity
and plurality of ontologies in a shared world. Situated “seeing” is a resolute form of critical objectivity—of being a “seeing” object and of being part of what there is to “see,” one prehends and is part of what there is to prehend.

Rather than taking ourselves to innocently mirror the world, to “see” without touching, Haraway argues that responsible knowing assumes that our prehensive engagements already leave inscriptions on reality—they produce partial perceptions, and partial accounts of what we are prehending or trying to know. Such inscriptions often assert themselves in practices, and thus in shared reality. Haraway attends to the production of “difference patterns” (diffraction; interference patterns) in worldly phenomena as an inescapable feature of knowing. While reflection (and representation) involves reinscribing sameness (as in a mirror-image), Haraway appeals to diffraction to describe the interference human knowing creates in the world (Simians 195). Prehending, or “seeing,” is revealed as an activity and an emergence, an engagement with other things, within phenomena, such that understanding things in the world requires close and attentive study of patterns made through these interactions. Knowers become—with the difference patterns they inscribe, with what other objects will allow.

Extending Haraway’s earlier work to her most contemporary thinking, knowing relations reveal the status of human beings as a companion species among others. Taking up the role of companion species precipitates a shift from questions of self-as-knower/thinker to self-as-already-active-presence, a self that makes and can make particular differences to other things as a part of what is happening. In reflecting on the relationships that hold between racing pigeons and human beings in California, Haraway notes how crucial it is in that context not to use one’s capacities to “offer proof” that one is a self-recognizing self, but to be and to make worldly things in ways that “make sense to the other sorts of lives … critters will lead” (Staying 19). She writes,

The capabilities of pigeons surprise and impress human beings, who often forget how they themselves are rendered capable by and with both things and living beings. Shaping response-abilities, things and living beings can be inside and outside human and nonhuman bodies, at different scales of time and space. All together the players evoke, trigger, and call forth what—and who—exists. (16)

Yet this practice requires significant prehensive or ontological choreography, using Charis Thompson’s term, negotiations between various situated ways of “seeing”—a pigeon’s and a human being’s—and of thinking about how to be and do things so as to make sense, be intelligible, to those with different prehensive systems and capacities than one’s own. Those capacities, rendered in the attempt to work together, require a special sort of learned attention, attunement, and translation. What is required, then, is a capacity not only to prehend and make sense of “what
there is,” but to imagine how it might appear to another creature who, you have observed, prehends in ways you do not, whose ontology is not your own.  

III. Towards Companion Objects

The multiple forms of pigeon prehension, dog prehension, magnesium prehension, and human prehension evince a plurality of ontological engagements between those things and their companion objects. Much as Haraway proposed “situated knowledges” as a way of countering the philosophy of access, and more accurately describing the necessary position of knowers in relation to the world and to what is known, I propose taking prehension as an expression of immediate ontological emergence under or out of particular conditions. “Prehension,” as I am using it here, names ontological responsiveness; its mutuality allows what there is or might be to emerge under conditions of particularity. Taking inspiration from Haraway’s companion species, I propose a conceptual category of companion objects. Companion objects are situated ontologists; they are extended, already reaching “outside” of “themselves” by responding to and with others, and by being parts of larger phenomena, situations, and engagements. And they are non-hierarchical even as we recognize that the ontological, prehensive capacities of each is limited, situated, so that they cannot prehend just as their companion others do.

As the insight behind situated subjectivity or knowing suggests, each of us is one among many; knowers are multiple, and their particularity is not simply a feature of their essential nature, but of the situations in which they find themselves—situations in which they and the knowledges that emerge are conditioned by others. Extending this insight to apply not only to other human beings, other knowers, but to other sentient and non-sentient prehenders is not such a stretch, especially for those who already recognize the ways that human and non-human things situate us. Thus, one can be one among other things, a companion to other objects.

A few points of clarification may be called for here. First, I do not have in mind that such objects are comprised of their relations alone, though that might be so. Unlike Harman, I do not think it is within the human capacity to say from the outset that objects are enclosed in vacuums (or that they are not, though I am skeptical about the completeness of such possible

8 This resonates with another phenomenon of ontological skill in that it suggests that the often mundane-seeming question “how could she/he/they do that?” can be read in a different register, and taken up as a philosophical question. What is it like to be that person, such that one could do (think, say, make sense of) that thing? Part of the skill here is recalling all the while that one cannot actually prehend as others do; the challenge is to try to understand without claiming to be the other. For a related discussion, see Mudde (“Embodyd”).
enclosure). The limitations from which pigeons meet the ontologies of human beings, and vice versa, the limitations from which humans and pigeons must engage with the prehensive capacities of magnesium or dog toys, are already such that their descriptions are immersed in uncertainty. While I am not sure that this is a situation of incommensurability, uncertainty about whether our prehensions “get one another right” has a lower threshold than the incommensurable—as is evident in everyday misunderstandings or uncertainty about communication, in wordy as well as practical conversations with other human beings, and from practical engagements with non-human things.

Second, Haraway urges that selves, situated subjects, are “split and contradictory,” “unfinished,” imperfect, and can be “stitched together.” As such, they are also selves that can enact solidarity and engage in becoming-with: they can “join with another without claiming to be another” (Simians 193). Similarly, companion objects, in taking up a phenomenological practice of “relentless” (Haraway, Staying 13) becoming-with other things, require vigilance against the “reinstall[ation of] a humanist and masculinist disembodied subject” (Alaimo 181). The dangers of that subject are, perhaps unexpectedly, that in no small part, failing to notice it/him makes that subject’s voice “the only thing we hear” (182). Describing OOO theorist Ian Bogost’s “alien phenomenology,” Alaimo writes,

The philosopher asks, “What is it like to be a computer or a microprocessor, or a ribbon cable? ... As operators or engineers we may be able to describe how they work. But what do they experience? What’s their proper phenomenology? In short, what is it like to be a thing?” He rejects science studies as the route to an answer because it “retains some human agent at the centre of analysis” ... Instead, the knower who undertakes the phenomenological explorations of the aliens that surround him is separate from that which he ponders. (181)9

Alaimo asks what I take to be a companion object’s question: “I do wonder ... albeit rather anthropocentrically, what it is like to be a human imagining what it means to be a thing” (181). And, like Alaimo, my question would be about what it is to be this particular human imagining what it means to be a thing. Yet it seems as though even to ask these sorts of questions requires a further context or situation: what is it like to be this particular human imagining what is it like to imagine what it must be like for that thing to do that activity, with these other things? It is important that, in order

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9 Prehension need not be equivalent with experience. Indeed, while I do not argue for it here, I think prehension, and the ontological, can be construed in more encompassing terms, of which experience is a subset. And objects can be a much more expansive and variegated category than the one that describes a category of non-sentient, individuated things, ready for stockpiling.
for the human voice not to be the only thing we hear, the human being which “speaks” needs to express some sense of self-awareness *qua* prehender. What happens when this move is self-conscious, more attentive to things as co-emergent *with* oneself, or to things as co-emergent insofar as I can tell from over here? Might I open spaces in which to notice my own prehensive tendencies, *qua* human and *qua* situated ontologist, which engage with others in particular ways?

The tone and approach of such questions find deep resonances with the work of those doing or *practicing* phenomenology. Indeed, as I mentioned above, the phenomenological need for an ontological double-consciousness emerges precisely from the recognition that I can imagine what it means to be a thing, but that doing so is actually *me* wondering what it is like to be a *human being* (*anthropos*) imagining what it means to be a thing. What appears to Harman to be an artificial or lamentable insertion of human consciousness *into* ontology—the product of a mind dedicated to dealing with appearances—can be a safeguard against poor, that is epistemically inaccurate, practice. The distinction between human prehension and worldly engagement emerges precisely because of the force of the thing, which pushes back against my capacity to imagine what it is like to be it. I know that I haven’t ever got things quite right, and that I am misunderstood. Our *mutual*prehensions force any emergence of ontological double-consciousness, which can throw into relief one’s own self-emergence/presence, one’s status as part of a relation of doing-with and of becoming-with.

While Alaimo is wary of the move to align all manner of things with being-object, I am interested in the possible spaces this opens. Rather than taking objects as comprising “a warehouse of inert things we wish to pile up for later use” (Alaimo 178), an ontology at which, like Alaimo, I “bristle” (179), it is possible to lay a foundation for thinking of objects as sites of prehensive capacities, affective engagements and expressions, and as co-historical with other things. In most forms of feminist philosophical method, but also in most contemporary critical phenomenologies, there is a strong suspicion of claims to self-enclosed autonomy, and of forgetfulness about embodied knowing and being. To me, the appeal of objects is in their concreteness and specificity, their absence of generality, their immediate material-discursive relatedness, and their being inherently genealogical. In a peculiar way, then, the all-too-traditional category of “objects” provides an unexpected space for unorthodox ontologies. In contesting OOO versions of de-hierarchized ontologies, attending to the ways human consciousness is a prehensive feature of *human* objects can re-establish intellectual space for situatedness and responsibility. Moreover, noticing how objects are treated, mistreated, and understood by human beings is often instructive in critical assessments of the object/subject, nature/culture
distinctions,\textsuperscript{10} as well as in analyses of marginalization, particularly of human objectification.\textsuperscript{11}

Companion objects, as I understand them here, are sites of what Nancy Tuana calls an ontology of “viscous porosity,” a refusal of nature/culture, world/word distinctions:

> Attention to the porosity of interactions helps to undermine the notion that distinctions, as important as they might be in particular contexts, signify a natural or unchanging boundary, of a natural kind … “viscosity” [is] … a more helpful image than “fluidity,” which is too likely to promote a notion of open possibilities and to overlook sites of resistance and opposition … (193-194)

Yet, as I have been suggesting, while human beings as companion objects may not remain at the centre of human attention, they need to remain part of a concern about response-ability. Again, phenomenology in fact reveals what is not easily discarded: a deep recognition of something human at the centre of human prehensions. Refusing to train one’s attention onto human things alone does not change one’s form of attention as human. Quoting Tuana,

> We can, and often need, to make distinctions between [nature and culture, world and word], but it is crucial not to see these distinctions as “natural kinds” or to read them as reflecting a dualism. Adequate distinctions can be made, even distinctions between “nature” and “culture,” but they are made for a particular purpose and at a particular time. In other words, we do not simply ‘read’ such distinctions from nature, but take epistemic responsibility for the distinctions we employ. (192; original italics)

Still, especially in work that is not part of the phenomenological tradition, like Tuana’s, it is important that “our” distinctions, “our” prehensions, are not just (the products of) appearances; they are responsive to that which is really not-us. That is why it is important to seek sites of mutual prehension, asking what they can tell us about orienting ourselves towards being companion object, practicing human being in that way. Co-emergence of human ways of being with other things is not something that only feminist science studies scholars attend to; it is part of the even longer-standing history of Euro-American/Western philosophical traditions, even—if

\textsuperscript{10} These analyses also dovetail with questions about what Whitehead has called “the bifurcation of nature;” the strict ontological distinction in thought between primary and secondary qualities, between things in the world and our experiences of them (Whitehead, The Concept of Nature, 30).

\textsuperscript{11} For a consideration of sexual objectification as potentially instructive for, and missing from, object-oriented ontology, see Mudde (“Being”).
IV. “Something’s doing”: artifacts, poiēsis, and sympoeisis

Ancient Greek thinkers can be useful in thinking about prehension and practice, in part because of the material orientation of their philosophical concerns, but also because their primary ontological orientation did not imagine the realm of human being as somehow “outside” of the world. They perhaps precede the philosophy of access. Even for Plato, human being is “intermediate” (as in Symposium), capable of accessing the Forms, yet rooted in the material world. It is in Aristotle’s work, however, that I find a resource for thinking about mutual prehension. In his early account of technē—art or craft, he distinguishes objects of human production (artifacts) from natural objects by examining the sources of change (the causes) of different sorts of things (Aristotle, Physics Book II). He posits that unlike natural objects, which unfold themselves, change from a source that is internal to themselves—a seed becomes a mighty oak tree, artifactual objects, the products of technē, become what they are only by human intervention—wood becomes a table under the guidance of a woodworker. Artifactual objects emerge from the imposition of human reason, idea, capacity, judgment, and skill—technē—onto the world and onto matter. Yet artifacts are also an expression of what the non-human world will allow. Those who tinker, craft, and make, are technologically engaged; technological engagement in this sense describes, I think, a category of mutual prehension.

Despite Harman’s (and Haraway’s) specific misgivings about Heidegger, his essay on technology is helpful here in thinking not just about what technology is but about how it is related to ontology, to mutual enlivening. Heidegger’s are ways of revealing presence, or of making what is present present in particular ways. Thus, to rehearse the point, Heidegger argues that the ancient Greeks saw both technē and physis under the genus of poiēsis, of something akin to poetry. Poiēsis is a kind of revelation in the sense of “bringing-forth” (Heidegger 13). Such bringing-forth is thus, as Aristotle’s analysis suggests, something for which any craftsperson is only co-responsible. While the potter, for instance, brings forth a bowl, she is only one of the causes which “occasion” it (13): the properties of clay, the heat of the kiln, and the form of a hollowed out receptacle which human hands are able to form, are all co-responsible for the appearance of the bowl, each enlivening and limiting the other, bringing out certain features and curtailing others.

It is in this part of (Heidegger’s reading of) Aristotle that I find strange and strong resonances with feminist science studies. Feminist science scholars have long challenged the philosophy of access in work that
shows how much technological *poiēsis* is part of modern and contemporary science. Karen Barad’s thinking about apparatuses, emerging from her training as a theoretical physicist, is a case in point. Following Niels Bohr, Barad argues that human beings are in and engage with the world not by interaction, but by what Barad calls “intra-action:” “the mutual constitution of objects and agencies of observation within phenomena” (197). Intra-action *produces* a distinction between objects and agencies of observation through the use of an apparatus (e.g., a question, an experimental apparatus, a technology, an organizational system, ontological distinctions).  

The use of an apparatus is a deeply material way for one part of phenomena to ask another part of phenomena a question, to see how the world will respond (to itself). For Barad, as for Bohr, apparatuses do not mediate or represent an objective world to subjective knowers; they do not just “detect differences” already there (Barad 231). But neither do they, as Bohr puts, it *create* “physical attributes of objects by measurement” (5). Rather, they create specific conditions for some part of reality to exhibit some of its attributes and not others. This is how “subjective,” prehensive agencies can be “materially embodied in the apparatus” (Barad 143): through the conditions they help to create. Barad writes, following Haraway, that “[o]bjectivity, instead of being about offering an undistorted mirror image of the world, is about accountability to marks on bodies, and responsibility to the entanglements of which we are a part” (Dolphijn, et al.).

In her paper comparing OOO and feminist science studies, Rebekah Sheldon notes that two decades of critical feminist science studies scholarship “have made it possible to say ‘There’s happening doing’ and to indicate by that the agency of human and nonhuman bodies, organic and nonorganic vitalities, discourse and the specific material apparatuses those discourses are” (214). Citing N. Katherine Hayles’ call for “practice based research” and Erin Manning’s SenseLab as attending to those complex agencies, Sheldon suggests a theoretical practice of attuning oneself to what Plato calls the *chora*—the site of emergence of matter and form, the vitality that permeates and allows for emergence. Sheldon’s “choratic reading” alerts us to spaces between, among, and permeating objects in which, quoting Brian Massumi quoting William James, “something’s doing” (Sheldon 214). Sheldon asks what happens if we begin to turn such choratic attention towards ourselves, if we begin to read our scholarship as artifact, emergent with its producers and its audience (217-218).

Whereas Sheldon’s choratic reading emphasizes the more fluid, less perceptible moments of agential emergence, my appeal to *poiēsis* and to

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12 For an instructive interface between Harman and Barad, see Harman (“Agential”).
technē emphasizes the more perceptible moments of emergence, the “viscous porosity” of human and nonhuman, organic and nonorganic things. Such emphases are of course contextual; I can think of sites and moments when the choratic would indeed be more fruitful that the poietic. They may also indicate variously situated companion objects—Sheldon, if I may, and me—who are nonetheless becoming with similar stuff. Perhaps we have theoretical preferences and genealogies that express our prehensive tendencies, our modes of ontological responsiveness.

Emphasizing the poetic is one mode of emphasizing lively making-or doing-with, becoming-with, as well as the inherent resistances of mutual responsiveness. One way to think of oneself as companion object, as the “happening doing” of human being qua prehender, is to think of the ways human activities are poetic, but also of the ways that human beings are poetic. To be sure, this way of thinking, along with the traditional philosophical ways of understanding technē and poiēsis, is susceptible to falling back to traditional assumptions about intention, voluntarism, the agency of human consciousness as controller, as “in charge,” and it is essential to guard against that tendency as a path of least resistance. Instead, thinking poiēsis with the chora reveals human beings as poetic not only in our intentional doings, but in all of our doings. As organisms, we are artifactual, which is to say not-self-made; we are human things, which involves a particular confluence of human and nonhuman, organic and nonorganic; we have become-with. What human beings are is not a matter of what we intend so much as it is revealed in our prehensions and in the ways other things prehend us, even in the absence of intention. On this view, as Stacy Alaimo suggests, “[t]o analyze, theorize, critique, create, revolt, and transform as someone whose corporeality cannot be distinct from biopolitical systems and biochemical processes is to think as the stuff of the world” (Exposed 185; my emphasis).

The very materiality of objects produced with, in, and by human life reveals human ways of knowing and being—artifacts are sites marked by human ways of life. We, too, are artifacts, human objects. We could recognize ourselves as companion objects, those that prehend in situated, human ways. The shapes of our lives are the products of other people, and many forms of doing phenomenology draw out precisely this feature of human being by noticing and theorizing the (social) ontological structures that ground these artifactual features. But so, too, are human beings marked by other things. Such beings live embodied histories of becoming-with—materials, objects, organisms, technologies—that are, in Bourdieu’s words, “internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history” (56). As Haraway insists, human being and earthly being emerge through, using M. Beth Dempster’s term, “sympoiesis,” or making-with (Staying 58). Orienting oneself towards sympoiesis reveals, as she puts it, that “[n]othing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing … earthlings
are never alone” (58). How we think about the objects we are and are becoming-with is therefore no small matter.

All of this talk about matter and technology might seem to suggest a departure from the phenomenological. But answering the question of how to allow or notice one’s own emergence—what has happened, what “happening doing” one is engaged in qua companion object—Involves something akin to doing phenomenology. Doing phenomenology by attending to concrete phenomenal (prehensive) and material engagements, mutual enlivings and restrictions can allow human beings to be present with “what there is,” or with what there is insofar-as-I-can-tell, and insofar as sympoiesis has brought-forth me and my companion objects, co-constituted within phenomenal flesh. It allows space for noticing oneself retrospectively, as having emerged from those engagements. In this way, a model appears not predominantly in work about phenomenology, but in the ways materiality, entwinement, relation, bringing-forth, intra-imbrication, consciousness, and being are rigorously, aptly, and queerly addressed by scholars and makers working in (broadly construed) phenomenologies of embodiment and environment as well as in feminist work on science and technology. It also appears in literature and in human discussions of our practices and practical knowledge—our knowledge of and of how to be with sand and tar, magnesium and cloth, dogs and their toys, dust and moonlight.

V. Practicing human being

It matters—in the concrete, physical sense—who or what has experiences with and makes ontological claims about objects, under what conditions, and with what sort of previous knowledge/experience. It matters, in other words, who or what is prehending, and there is ample space for taking up embodied consciousness as prehensive, as part of a de-hierarchized terrain of objects. In this paper, I have been drawing both on the phenomenological and the Harawayan approaches in broad terms, laying some groundwork for a theory of companion objects. I hold in the background the possibility of extending Haraway’s “companion species” to include companion objects and, at the same time, of extending to non-human things in the world the status of phenomenological “others,” with whom, and by whom, knower-prehenders are situated.

Yet, in keeping with both of these approaches, as soon as I begin to assume an ontology in which anthropocentrism is undermined, in which the human being is not ontologically primary but companion, and in which human prehensions do not ground the existence of things, I find that my central question becomes an ethically implicated one: “how ought I to be?” For this ontological shift from anthropocentrism to consciousness as a “special case of experience” is surely a call for a shift in how I, and we, practice philosophy, metaphysics, ontology. But perhaps more importantly,
it calls for a shift in what and how I take myself and the shape of my life to be, how I “move through the world” (Shotwell 101), how I practice as a human being. A fruitful way of coming at the possibility of living such a terrain is to shift from considerations of doxa to considerations of praxis—as Hayles and Manning do. Taking up the shift towards prehension as a central capacity among objects to affect and be affected by one another (as in Harman’s example of dust and moonlight), along with the dehierarchizing of the human being over other beings, calls me to assume embodied consciousness not just as a knowing-being, but more expansively as a prehending-doing, as a materially and concretely affecting worldly flesh.

The task is to enact ways of positioning oneself to take human being seriously while making anthropocentrism uneasy. As many feminist theorists contend, potentially liberatory possibilities for world-making are engaged or emerge when this shift occurs. We notice what queer forms of object—human and otherwise—emerge when the phenomenology of being-, knowing-, and doing-with is reframed to disqualify human-centered ontologies. Yet this requires, I have been arguing, a sense of one’s own prehensive tendencies—as companion object, as “viscous porosity”—in particular responsive situations. Being in or doing ontological companionship requires some sense of where mutual prehensions begin.

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