

Bogland Politics

Damien Hartnett

No matter where one is, no matter how strong the force of errantry, one can hear the mounting desire to “give-on-and-with,” to discover order in chaos or at least to guess its unlikely motivation: to develop this theory that would escape generalizations.ⁱ

The wet boglands of Moine Mhòr National Nature Reserve demonstrate how the convergence of ecological contexts gives rise to biodiversity. This untrammelled landscape exhibits a kind of *bogland politics*—the interplay between land and water, peat and vegetation, that defies rigid categorisation. The flows between different water levels and soil compositions create dynamic interstitial spaces where new growth flourishes. In these unfamiliar territories, new possibilities continuously unfold, inherently free from the hubristic deference and hierarchical biases that often pervade anthropocentric political discourse. The constant flux of moisture, acidity, and nutrient levels in the bog ecosystem incubates a unique environment where specialised plant and animal communities thrive, like key sphagnum mosses and the marsh fritillary (one of Europe’s most endangered butterfly species). This non-linear dynamic, where even slight variations in input can lead to significantly different outcomes, challenges our traditional understanding of ecological boundaries and interactions. In other words, they are not permanent and abundant but precarious and volatile.

The boglands are not governed by the deliberate control of any individual. This unauthorised growth pattern, unregulated expansion, provides a compelling metaphor for impersonal intermingling and an organic fusion of cultures. As with scalar quantities of magnitude, the wetland’s radical dispersion defies the directional expectation of demarcated boundaries. They burgeon in-between spaces, dissolving and reshaping the rigid divisions of neat tradition, embodying a fluid and dynamic interplay between established categories.

The landscape that emerges from rhizomatic propagation is one of heterogeneity not homogenisation. The convergence of unexpected elements generates fecund sites of biodiversity. The resulting ecosystem enables singular-yet-multitudinous new growths attuned to the dynamic environment.

The interplay of environments in the bogland creates fractal patterns, like the repeating shapes that emerge across scales in geometry. As theorist Denise Ferreira da Silva argues, fractal thinkingⁱⁱ provides a model for ethics within complex systems. Like biological rhizomes, cultural identities branch out and fold into one another, self-similar across dimensions yet characterised by difference.

Rather than isolating categorisations, the fractal approach sees pluralism proliferating within recursive loops that avoid dichotomies of either/or and push past reductive polarities, mutating yes/no states in a way that cannot be undone. Just as fractal geometry contours spaces that classical shapes cannot map, fractal ethics attends to emergences in zones obscured by binary codes.

The biodiversity of the bogland prospers through fractal assemblages that propagate novel configurations exceeding predefined parameters. Like the fractal, the wetland’s nodal

network disseminates through rifts cleaved into possibility by piercing binaries, their growth patterns further crack open inward-looking paradigms that seek homogeneity within enclosures as they straggle in a relentless subterranean horizontality.

Rhizomic decentralised pathways lead to spontaneous hybridity. These meandering shoots forge mingling that could not have been anticipated from a distance. Evincing the appearance at the global level of an emergence that could not be possible and the local level of a system's components. A mechanism reflected and exposed in light of the very act of thinking. What materialises is novelty born of divergence.

This burgeoning of difference enacts a quiet-yet-unbroken kind of resistance. It foils the erosion of diversity through its supple, interlaced sprawl. The landscape is thus reconfigured into more variegated contours.

Just as tiny island atolls teem with unique species, the spaces where cultures intersect also become thriving nerve centres of originality. Like the dark glitter of extremophiles living in the harshest conditions, life finds a way to blossom beyond the boundaries where it was believed nothing could live, where it was thought nothing should exist. Through its web, the rhizome constructs an authorless topography open to not-yet-conceived possibilities.

The boglands represent one of the earth's harshest yet most vital habitats. As we have seen, like tidal forest swamps, ecosystems found in tropical and subtropical regions along coastlines, the bogs exist between domains, neither fully land nor water. These interzones not only house rich biodiversity but also store hefty quantities of carbon in their moist peat soil.

In the context of modern post-colonial thought, it's crucial to understand that the prefix 'post' implies that the concept it modifies is already concretised and established. This framing allows us to move beyond the original concept while acknowledging its foundational influence.

Bog conservation is increasingly recognised as an act of climate justice through a post-colonial lens. By protecting the rhizomatic growth patterns—essentially a form of neural network—of these ecosystems and actively engaging with them, we promote both ecological and cultural resilience. These wetlands serve as crucial hubs, much like second brains, where global challenges like carbon emissions and biodiversity loss intersect with the intricate, more-than-human networks that evolve within them. As such, conserving bogs is vital to safeguarding both the environment and the communities that depend on these ecosystems from ecological harm.

Attending to liminal landscapes demonstrates a post-colonial ethics that moves beyond exclusionary either/or categories. The bogland's porous borders enact what Édouard Glissant calls a 'poetics of relation,' merging communities both human and non-human into drifting assemblages.

The approach of *bogland politics* recognises the interconnectedness of all living systems and challenges the traditional colonial perspective that often separated human interests from those of the natural world. By embracing the complexity and fluidity of bog ecosystems, we acknowledge the intricate web of relationships that exist beyond human-centric views. We form a feral pact.

In this vision, *cuidando la tierra*—caring for land—becomes caring for all who dwell within Earth's fractal global-forest. It becomes post-ethical, transcending conventional notions of ethics that often prioritise human concerns over ecological ones. This post-ethical stance recognises that the well-being of humans is inextricably linked to the health of the ecosystems we inhabit.

Moine Mhòr National Nature Reserve is a blueprint for a naturally occurring operating system. Thinking through, with, about, and beyond this land activates ecological thought. As an open, protected, and public space, it serves as a microcosm for deliberating global crises. It offers a platform to reimagine, through the attendant *bogland politics*, identities and solutions beyond restrictive narratives, addressing climate change, inequality, and geopolitical challenges.

By framing bog conservation within this post-colonial, post-ethical context, we invite a more holistic and inclusive approach to environmental stewardship. This perspective encourages us to see bogs not just as carbon sinks or biodiversity hotspots, but as complex, living systems that embody the interconnectedness of all life on Earth. It challenges us to move beyond anthropocentric views of conservation and embrace a post-human ethic that recognises the agency and intrinsic value of all ecological participants. We cannot truly own any land, for our very perception of ownership distorts our relationship with it. Our titles and fences are fever dreams of control, while the ancient land bears our arrogance like a passing storm.

Words and photography by Damien Hartnett

Instagram & Threads: @dhrntt

ⁱ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 183

ⁱⁱ Fractal Thinking, Accessions 2. Accessed February 16, 2024. <https://accessions.org/article2/fractal-thinking/>