

Care without Repair: Fungal Labour and the Limits of Restoration

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Abstract: Classical sociological accounts have examined efforts to banish disgust and decay from polite society, and post-anthropocentric theories have urged attentiveness to the agencies of nonhumans. This article draws from both streams to propose that attending to the nonhuman labour of decomposition through fungi reveals decay's indispensability for multispecies flourishing. By foregrounding decomposition as both nourishment and world-making, the article expands prevailing understandings of labour, value, and care beyond the productivist and preservationist assumptions that structure human-centred ethics. It further shows how repair, frequently cast as inherently benevolent, can sometimes stabilise violent continuities and legitimise ongoing forms of harm. In contrast, the fungal illuminates possibilities for *care without repair*: an ethical nonaction that accompanies decay rather than forecloses it because it recognises breakdown as a condition for multispecies livability.

Zusammenfassung: Klassische soziologische Ansätze haben untersucht, wie Ekel und Verfall aus der zivilisierten Gesellschaft verbannt werden sollten, während post-anthropozentrische Theorien dazu aufrufen, auch der Handlungsfähigkeit des Nicht Menschlichen Aufmerksamkeit zu schenken. Der Artikel greift beide Perspektiven auf und schlägt vor, dass die Auseinandersetzung mit der nichtmenschlichen Arbeit der Zersetzung durch Pilze die Unentbehrlichkeit von Verfall für das Gedeihen von multi-spezies Gemeinschaften sichtbar macht. Der Beitrag rückt Zersetzung als Nährquelle und weltbildenden Prozess ins Zentrum. Er erweitert so gängige produktivistische und erhaltende Verständnisse von Arbeit, Wert und Sorge, die human-zentrierte Ethiken strukturieren. Reparatur, die häufig als inhärent wohlwollend dargestellt wird, kann mitunter gewaltsame Kontinuitäten stabilisieren und fortdauernde Schädigungen legitimieren. Demgegenüber eröffnet das Pilzliche Möglichkeiten einer Sorge ohne Reparatur: ein ethisches Nicht-Handeln, das Verfall begleitet statt zu verhindern, weil dieser als Voraussetzung für multi-spezies Gedeihen anerkannt wird.

Keywords: decay; fungi; care; repair; nonhuman

Introduction

The foul-smelling, the rotting, the putrefying are, within dominant strands of modern thought, taken to be symptoms of neglect, disorder, dirtiness, or moral decline. This sedimented tendency, however, is far from natural or necessary. As Norbert Elias (1978) famously shows, the social norms governing bodily conduct, hygiene, and sensory repulsion have shifted dramatically over centuries in Europe, especially since the Middle Ages. It is through this shifting that Western modernity has been partially constituted: the ‘advance in the threshold of repugnance and the frontier of shame’, in which acts such as secretion and defecation have become increasingly taboo, act as ‘civilizing processes’ (Elias 1978: 86). Culturally, association with the dirty and disgusting marks incivility, signifying a backward or unrefined otherness. The marking also brings into being, and is maintained, by a corresponding conceptual architecture. As Mary Douglas (1984) suggests, neither dirt nor pollution exists in themselves. Instead, ‘ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions’, as well as practices of identifying ‘impose system on an inherently untidy experience’ (Douglas 1984: 4). Understood in this way, dirt is *productive*, delineating the clean from the unclean, and the proper from the improperly ‘out of place’ (Douglas 1984).

Dirt, though, is also *produced*. When things decay, rot, and fall apart, dirt is created through the softening of material boundaries and the dispersing of a former whole. This production that operates through decay is most often not understood as a valuable form of creation. When the site of productive decay is a building, the dilapidation of structures can appear as ‘nature’s revenge’, a punishment for the all-too-human attempt to impose our image upon the world (Simmel 1965: 260). When the site of productive decay is the human body, its leakages and disorderliness ‘may trigger disgust, especially in contemporary Euro-American representations of the Other’ (Seidman 2013: 11). Where decay makes porous the separation between the ‘civilised’ subject, who banishes signs of decay from body and dwelling,

and the unruly Other, marked by a ‘fundamental’ tendency toward disorder and defilement, harm is often inscribed on the bodies rendered dirty (Seidman 2013).

With ‘natural’ objects, decay may be experienced in a more ethically neutral register, as the inevitable unravelling that Ghassan Hage (2021: 1) describes as the inherent tendency of things to fall apart. The ‘imaginary of decay’ he identifies includes not only the spectacular devastation of large-scale ruination but also slower and smaller forms of deterioration. Decay, on Hage’s telling, is heterogeneous, inviting us to think decay in the plural, with varied temporalities, agents, and meanings. Some are welcomed, others resisted; some unfold with violent rapidity, others creep almost imperceptibly.

Georges Bataille offers yet another perspective on decay. Rather than treating it as an inevitability or as an unfortunate deviation from hygienic ideals, he exalts the very disruption of the fantasy of the ‘orderly’. For Bataille, decay is neither separable from living nor should we want it to be, writing in a line he fictitiously attributes to Marx, ‘Decay is the laboratory of life’ (Bataille 1985: 32). The dirty and repellent do not hover at the margins of life, instead with his ‘allegiance to filth and the heterogeneous,’ Bataille insists putrefaction is neither aberrant nor accidental but expresses a mode of vitality itself, acting as an active force which can loosen fixed forms and enable social transformation (Falasca-Zamponi 2011: 125). Like the flowers that, have ‘risen from the stench of the manure pile,’ extending its growth from roots embedded in shit, nourished by rot, drawing vitality from what has been cast off and now decays, the new and better for society can only arise from, and be sustained by, the repulsive putrefaction of low matter (Bataille 1985: 12).

In so arguing, Bataille’s decay appears as an embryonic form of the post-anthropocentric thinking that unsettles the presumption that the human is the singular locus of agency (Keeling/Lehman 2018, Latour 2005, Alaimo 2010, Braidotti 2013, Bennett 2010, Haraway 2016). As an arena of inquiry and experimentation, post-anthropocentrism critiques ‘the humanist

ideal of “Man” as the universal representative of the human’ by ‘criticiz[ing] species hierarchy and advance[ing] bio-centred egalitarianism’ in which the ‘human’ is neither sovereign nor separable from the more-than-human world (Braidotti/Hlavanjova 2004: 1). Within such a framework, humans are not displaced, nor are they rendered ethically or politically irrelevant. Rather, the category of the human is re-situated within an expanded field of agencies, processes, and modes of mattering.

Read through this post-anthropocentric frame, Bataille’s celebration of disgusting processes as excessively lively helps to make visible the inherently *productive character of decay*. Wood does not automatically rot; instead, fungal hyphae infiltrate its fibers, secreting enzymes that digest lignin and cellulose, opening cavities where insects, bacteria, and moisture can further work their transformations. Milk does not sour all by itself; instead, colonies of lactic acid bacteria metabolise its sugars, altering its chemistry through their fermentative labour. Stone does not crumble apropos of nothing; instead, mosses, lichens, acids, and weathering slowly leach minerals, widening microscopic fissures until they yield to wind, water, and time. Said otherwise, when attentive to more-than-human agencies, things do not simply fall apart. Rotting wood, souring milk, and eroded rocks no longer appear as passive residues but instead become legible as dense sites of action made possible by nonhuman labours. Moreover, rather than mere sites of ruination, they emerge as locations of spoilage *and* transformation, where the often slow, overlooked, and maligned activities of nonhumans dominate the scene. Thinking decay as productive and with a post-anthropocentric orientation, then, recalibrates what counts as active, vital, or consequential. However, precisely because decay is so rarely understood in these terms, this article foregrounds its generative and beneficial dimensions. It treats decay – here understood as the material transformation through which objects from metal to milk break down – not merely as the unwanted aftermath of a useful life but also as a process animated by the productive activity of nonhuman actants. And it suggests

that attending to decomposition – the metabolic work through which organic matter is actively undone – can reorient human relations to the more-than-human world.

To make available this shift from an ‘anti-decay’ to at least ‘decay-neutral’, this article rethinks decay as a more-than-human figuration, a conceptual device for apprehending the relational configurations through which humans and nonhumans co-constitute new worlds via processes of breakdown. For Elias, ‘figurations’ name the dynamic webs of interdependence that bind people together, continually evolving as interactions and power relations shift. As post-anthropocentrist Donna Haraway insists, these figurations are performative arrangements ‘both imaginary and material’ (2004: 1). Decay as a more-than-human figuration allows this article to ask: If the civilising processes Norbert Elias describes render rot shameful, and if the dirt Mary Douglas analyses sustains cultural taxonomies of purity and pollution, what happens to our thinking, and what more might be demanded from our practice, when we linger with decay rather than turn from it? What becomes possible when decomposition is approached as a form of more-than-human labour? What happens to our sedimented responses when composing is recognized as occurring through decomposing? And how might such an approach recalibrate our ethical impulses to repair what José Esteban Muñoz (2009) has called our ‘broken-down world’? Such a reorientation carries implications for humans as well as for the wider more-than-human world that this article traces. It has done so first by *refiguring decay*, unsettling its moral implications and rethinking its material modes. It does so next by turning to mushrooms as nonhuman actants whose labours bring the *livability made possible through decay* into sharp relief, countering conceptual landscapes that too readily frame falling apart as failure. Fungi emerge here not only as subjects of study but also as collaborators who make visible the multispecies communities cared for through breaking matter down. To recognise fungi as co-figurers does not merely resist their reduction to metaphor or reorient sociological

inquiry toward the nonhuman; it also allows fungal labourers to reshape how we understand work and production. Finally, the article suggests that fungi illuminate a mode of care grounded not in restoration but in decomposition. By attending to fungal metabolisms rather than the more easily identifiable forms of reparative care, the final section suggests that decay disturbs repair-centred ethics, proposing a ‘care-without-repair’, that, at times, can be the more ethical response to breaking down in the Anthropocene.

Rethought as a more-than-human figuration, decay appears as no longer wholly harming, othering, or repellent. Yet neither is it reliably *beneficent*. To bring to the fore a refigured decay cannot be to deny the tragedy of many modes of destruction, to insist that falling apart must be uniformly celebrated, or to claim that all decompositions are essentially productive. Decay is unquestionably harmful in many of its immediately recognisable forms. For precisely this reason, it has earned its familiar stigma. And yet refusing to probe its other dimensions concedes too much, leaving processes necessary for multispecies thriving unexplored. While decay is neither innately redemptive nor uniformly condemnable, *it can provide for flourishing*. Those possibilities are explored here.

1. The Work of Decay: Fungal Production and Labour

Decay evokes the sensory experiences of rotting fruit collapsing in on itself, corroding metal flaking into rust, or milk souring into acrid curds. Decay is tactile, olfactory, visceral, with a presence often provoking revulsion. It is also a fundamental mode of material change. It marks the moment when form begins to fray, soften, and collapse, when the boundaries that once held a thing together give way. For the biological, decay unfolds through decomposition, through the active metabolising of organic matter by microbes, fungi, worms, and other decomposers.

Among these decomposers, mushrooms¹ occupy an expansive place in the cultural imaginary, distilling perceptions about decay and the promise of transformation into a readily identifiable form. In their familiarity, fungi are particularly helpful co-figurers, their presence drawing the eye to spaces active with the dirty work of decomposing.

The civilising logic Elias describes, however, works to sequester such processes from view, treating decomposition as something to be banished from public life and sanitised from the senses. Mushrooms refuse this exile. They signal disgust and disease, but also culinary delight. The death cap can kill, and an image of *Hydnellum peckii* makes it easy to see how it earned its moniker ‘bleeding tooth fungus’, but the truffle is a coveted luxury, the morel and chanterelle seasonal delicacies, and the white button mushroom a humble culinary staple. This uncertainty, where the same organisms evoke revulsion and desire, does not suggest a refiguring of decay should prompt a transcendence of the disgusting or render rot aspirational. Rather, it offers a material grounding from which to explore the multiple valences of decay through its capacity to disturb, nourish, reduce, and produce.

Productive Decomposition

While mushrooms are eaten, they also eat, consuming the flesh and fiber of others. Closer to the animal than the vegetal, fungi do not make their food from sunlight. Instead, fungal hunger consumes detritus and, through chemical and enzymatic processes, breaks it down into its molecular constituents. These broken-down bits are consumed, nourishing themselves *and others*. Fungal nourishing extends widely: plants, for instance, ‘have relied on fungi for nutrition and defense for as long as there have been plants. Animals, too, depend on fungi’ (Sheldrake 2020).

1 ‘Mushroom’ names only the fruiting body of a far larger mycological architecture whose hyphae run underground or inside other bodies, while fungi refers to the entire organism (Sheldrake 2020). However, while biologically incorrect, in this article I will use mushroom and fungi interchangeably to align better with the public imaginary.

drake 2020: 7). Decay, often anthropocentrically figured through the spoiling of food and loss of objects, through the fungal, is refigured. *Fungi make evident a form of decay as a production* through which decomposers both reduce some bodies while also providing for others.

To emphasise the productive capacities of decay is not to enact a neoliberal sleight of hand in which every decline becomes recast as an opportunity for growth. Some fungi are parasitic, while many forms of breakdown disproportionately harm the most vulnerable, human or otherwise. Other declines are valuable precisely because they undo productivity (Croteau 2026). Yet to surrender the productive dimensions of decay to neoliberal imaginaries both obscures the multispecies generativity that accompanies many decompositional processes and restricts ‘productivity’ to the narrow domain of capitalistic growth. Decay is not always productive, but sometimes it is, and sometimes that productivity can be cultivated for multispecies flourishing. The question, then, is what changes occur to our understandings when decomposition is recognised as both reducing and producing?

Invisible Labours of Decay

Asking how decomposition reduces and produces compels a rethinking of decay as both an *active process* undertaken by nonhumans and a *form of labour*. To name fungal decomposition as labour is to shift our understanding of work itself as it asks us to consider an alternative genealogy of labour in which decomposers, like fungi, are the workers, and where labour is not only the construction of a thing but also includes the deliberate unmaking of something.

However, read through dominant accounts of labour (most notably those inherited from Marxist political economy), decomposition appears as the antithesis of work. As Marx suggests:

‘In the labour process, therefore, man’s activity, via the instruments of labour, effects an alteration in the object of labour which was intended from the outset. The process is extinguished in the product’ (Marx 1990: 284).

The underlying assumption here insists that *labour produces outputs and outputs tend to be objects, commodities, or visible products*.

Understandably, when work is primarily the production of outputs, decay is cast as the absence of effort and decomposition as an abeyance of labour – as simply the effects of ‘things falling apart.’ As part of this conception, humans in particular are required to provide ‘constant vigilance and labour to keep things in their place, without which order immediately begins to break down’ (Minnegal et al. 2021: 49). Here, decomposition and entropy collapse into one another as a state of decay appears to spontaneously emerge once humans have abandoned their work of creation or conservation.

Decomposition, though, does not ‘just happen,’ and looking to mushrooms brings this into sharp relief. By actively secreting enzymes, expending metabolic energy, and coordinating vast subterranean networks, fungi can degrade some of the most resistant and dangerous substances on Earth. From stone to TNT to radioactive material, this work of breakdown requires time, force, and sustained engagement with resistant materials (Sheldrake 2020: 184). Rather than an absence of labour, when these materials are broken down it is the outcome.

And yet, the work of decaying often goes unacknowledged, in part because decomposition exemplifies a form of activeness that does not easily align with dominant accounts of agency. Within those accounts, agency is often tethered to intention, deliberation, or purposive action. However, drawing from Bruno Latour’s (2005) actor–network theory and Jane Bennett’s (2010) vital materialism, agency need not be intentional or moral in the Kantian sense. These approaches reject agency as exclusively the domain of intentional human subjects. Instead, they treat agency as distributed across entanglements of human and nonhuman actants, attending to the lively, world-shaping capacities of matter itself. The agency operative through decomposition names the capacity of material processes to make differences that matter through shaping conditions of livability, constraining or enabling futures, or reorganizing relations. Once

decay is understood as an effect-producing activity, deterioration need no longer be dismissed as a lack of activeness, and fungi can be understood as active agents in shaping multispecies worlds through decay. Even so, this activity produces remains difficult to recognise as production, in part because decomposition does not yield finished objects but fragments, openings, and absences, and in part because the work often occurs where we humans cannot or do not want to look. In this too, mushrooms are helpful mentors. Through their decomposing efforts, fungi produce nutrients necessary to both plants and animals, but they also produce *the space* new growth requires to emerge. As Anna Tsing has noted, fungi metabolise what might otherwise persist indefinitely, like dead trees that, without intervention, would stack up in the forest forever (Tsing 2015: 138). By clearing what would otherwise become a dense accumulation of the dead, fungi open the forest floor to light and air-flow, allowing for the germination of new multispecies growth. Humans, too, inhabit these interstices. Like seedlings that root beneath cleared forest floors, we all ‘live and breathe in the space that decomposition leaves behind’ (Sheldrake 2020: 175). Here, the creation of space is not a byproduct of destruction but a form of production in its own right. Decomposition creating the very openings through which new organisms, new imaginaries, and new forms may take hold.

Yet, production often goes unrecognised because much of decomposition occurs out of sight – under soil, in darkness, and those spaces rendered ‘repugnant’ and made invisible through habits of turning away. Said otherwise, the labour and production of decay remains obscured due to what Martin Jay (1993) terms ‘ocularcentrism.’ This privileges vision over other senses, privileges what occurs in places we like to look, and privileges what can be seen – growth, accumulation, obvious output – over the often underground, slow, and reducing work of decomposers. While this tendency, rooted in the Enlightenment notion of vision as the most reliable and authoritative source of knowledge, can be traced back to philosophers like René Descartes and Immanuel

Kant, the emphasis on visibility as a primary mode of knowing can render decomposition as irrelevant and unvaluable (Jay 1993), though, mushrooms are ocularly and culturally visible, making them particularly good at drawing our attention to the work of decomposers. Attentiveness to the nonhuman and to decay, both *broadens what counts as production* (decay and decomposition are included) and simultaneously *destabilises productivist logics* that have long governed it (in which only visible growth and accumulation are deemed valuable).

In many ways, this echoes feminist analyses of reproductive labour in which feminised work is systematically rendered invisible and undervalued. In response, feminist theories of labour have long illuminated the hidden infrastructures of care, maintenance, and reproduction that underwrite economic and social life (Federici 2012, Glenn 1992, Tronto 1993). These critiques expose how the often gendered, racialised, and devalued work of sustaining households, communities, and the economy is essential, even as it remains discounted.

Yet even within this vital feminist project of making work visible, the forms of labour brought into view typically orient toward maintaining, repairing, or reproducing. The decompositional work of fungi reveals something adjacent but distinct – a mode of labour defined not by upkeep but by breakdown. Attending only to the invisibilised work of human labourers is therefore insufficient. As with feminist critiques, the point is not merely that this labour was hidden, but that dominant theories were unaware of the occlusion.

Far from the passive aftermath of a life, through the mushroom, decay as labour becomes decipherable as a mode through which worlds are (un)made. This is labour that operates beyond the bounds of human intention, visibility, and productivist measures of value, yet upon which all life depends. As such, to understand decay as a form of labour, and mushrooms as labourers, is to begin to inhabit a sociological vocabulary that makes legible the conditions for more livable futures through decay.

2. Staying With Decay: Toward a Care Without Repair

However, this labour is not salvific. While titles such as Paul Stamets's *Mycelium Running: How Mushrooms Can Help Save the World* (2005) celebrate the fungal capacity to purify everything from oil spills to nuclear waste, mushrooms cannot be our saviors. Undeniably powerful remediators, fungi are unique in their ability to metabolise pollutants as varied as glyphosate and cigarette butts (Sheldrake 2020: 184). However, they cannot remediate the structural, political, and economic conditions that are wasting the planet. Said otherwise, there is a gap between fungi's ability to consume harmful compounds and any world-saving capacity, and it is precisely this space – the uneasy interval between making worlds more livable and the impossible fantasy of planetary restoration – that this article seeks to explore.

Rather than saviors, fungi effects might be better understood as an enactment of Donna Haraway's injunction to 'stay with the trouble', a posture that 'requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings' (2016: 1). To argue that mushrooms cannot save the world is not to diminish their astonishing capacities, but to suggest that these capacities invite a mode of thinking beyond the logics of rescue, one which stays with the trouble of falling apart.

Fungi do not restore a fallen tree to what it was; they unmake it, releasing its phosphorus, nitrogen, and other nutrients into the shared circuits of the soil. Albert Frank, who coined the term *symbiosis*, described this relationship as one of 'intimate, reciprocal dependence' (Frank 2005: 274), likening the fungi to a 'wet nurse' (272), enabling 'the entire nourishment of the tree from the soil' (267). Even when fully grown, plants require fungal aid 'against drought, heat, and the myriad stresses that terrestrial life has faced from its beginnings' (Sheldrake 2020: 127). Fungal care of other plants is so ubiquitous that 'today more than ninety percent of all plant species depend on

mycorrhizal fungi' (Sheldrake 2020: 124). Of course, ecosystems are also riddled with less altruistic fungi that weave 'webs based around consuming plants rather than sustaining them' (Sheldrake 2020: 156). And yet, on a different scale, this is still a providing for others precisely because, 'if we could pause decomposition, starting now, the planet would pile up kilometers deep in bodies', rendering it uninhabitable (Sheldrake 2020: 170). In effect, whether providing nutrients, circulating them, or clearing space, fungi are not repairing systems, bodies, or objects; and yet, they are practicing a form of more-than-human care that composes livability through the very work of decomposing.

While it would flatten the rich texture of plant-fungal relations to cast fungi as self-sacrificing agents (they do not behave in strictly mutualistic or parasitic ways), their activities nonetheless enact a form of care, especially when defined as the 'provision of what is necessary for the health, welfare, maintenance, and protection of someone or something' (Eurofound no date). Fungal decomposition does not resemble human philanthropy, yet their metabolic labours nonetheless provide what is necessary for others. To name fungal breakdown as care is not to anthropomorphise or impose human morality onto nonhuman lifeways, nor is it to forget feminist critiques of care's politics, particularly the predatory extraction of undervalued labour from immigrants and people of color. Rather, it is to widen the narrow frame through which care is typically recognised, and to consider what it might mean to locate provisioning in degeneration, sustenance in rot, and a kind of more-than-human protection in the unmaking of form.

Care conceived in this way unsettles both conventional and posthumanist accounts of care. The language through which care is typically recognised when applied to humans and nonhumans presumes the need for 'protection, conservation, and preservation. Action is required to restore or maintain the physical integrity of the threatened object and ensure its survival' (DeSilvey 2017: 3–4). Even with an explicitly posthumanist expansion of care, María Puig de la

Bellacasa frames it in contrast to decay, noting that care's 'lack undoes, allows unraveling' (2017: 1).

The logic is sound when care is equated with repair, and repair is anti-decay. As Patricia Stuelke has suggested, 'repair' is often about 'the extension or safeguarding of capabilities *in danger of decay*' (2021: 25, emphasis J.C.). However, as mushrooms have made evident, providing for others sometimes depends on breaking down what exists rather than preserving it, maintaining the health and well-being of others through dissolution. To think with fungi might then be to rethink the moral economies that bind care to repair, questioning the assumption that to care for a person, place, or world is necessarily to restore or maintain.

This is *care without repair* – care that creates the conditions for others to flourish, even when it entails the dissolution of what once was. This is a care that extends beyond the reflex to equate breakdown with negligence and care with restoration. This is a care which can only be perceived through the decoupling of the work of care from the efforts of material stasis.

Repair as a Question

To suggest an ethic of care without repair is discomfiting at best and, at worst, threatens to be read as an alibi for annihilation. However, this discomfort can be instructive. It exposes the sedimented attachments that have long linked care to repair, the familiar way in which the 'reparative is so often exercised in the name of 'good politics' – anti-imperialist politics, antiracist politics, the more amorphous 'doing good' – on behalf of the incarcerated and the dead' (Stuelke 2021: 217). But is reparation inherently benevolent? Is to care necessarily to fix? Is to repair always to help? Understandably in the face of planetary breakdown, our instincts tend toward the reparative. With shorelines eroding and habitats destroyed, mending often becomes a moral imperative, the most legible act of care in the wreckage of the Anthropocene. And certainly, restoration is often good and necessary; however, what might it mean to treat repair not as a solution but as a question. To ask as much is not to suggest

repair should be discarded, only to insist that repair's virtuousness and applicability cannot be assumed.

To repair, the Oxford English Dictionary tells us, is 'an act of restoring an object or structure to good condition by replacing or fixing parts (Oxford University Press no date). To restore a damaged, worn, or faulty thing to good or proper condition assumes a return to a past state, a prior coherence, and a previously desirable 'good' condition. It may not achieve it. It may only patch up, or mend. Nevertheless, the underlying ethic is one driven by the 're-' of return, restore, rebuild, and reestablish. But, to what vision of order, of function, of past coherence could and should we return? Whose conception of 'good condition' is being activated? And who decides what counts as damage, what is worth maintaining? *Restoration is never neutral*. The act of mending is never merely technical, and repair is also always a political sorting in which decisions about which pasts to honour, which injuries to make livable, and which scars to leave undisturbed are meted out.

Undergirded by a logic of return, repair is necessarily rooted in epistemological and ontological assumptions that can be particularly detrimental when expanded to more-than-human figurations. Epistemologically, the reparative mode is one of fixing, and as such, it is 'relentlessly invested in identification with a damaged object' (Stuelke 2021: 25). To repair is first to classify something as broken, to apprehend an object or system through the lens of injury, and to presume that the condition to which it ought to be restored is both knowable and desirable. Within repair logics, forms of harm can persist unchallenged precisely because they are not legible as breaks. What violent continuities does the reparative preserve because they remain intact, or because the fractures they produce are normalised, naturalised, or simply not recognisable as damage at all?

Not always, but sometimes, the reparative can inadvertently stabilise the very conditions that generated harm. Prison reform initiatives that focus on improving conditions, such as cleaner facilities and expanded programming, fail to challenge incarceration itself. Such reparative gestures often extend the life

of carceral systems by making them more tolerable, transforming structural violence into a problem of adjustment rather than abolition. Repair here enables harm to persist under the sign of care.

Ontologically, repair presumes things are repairable. For Louise Carver, the reparative renders ecosystems as machinesque – modular and replaceable (Carver 2022). When environmentalism takes the form of carbon offsetting, habitat banking, and biodiversity compensation, the underlying rationale involves accurately measuring an environmental harm and linking it to a compensatory action through a system of exchange. Aiming to repair harm in quantitative terms, the ‘restoration’ is reflected in formal accounting records (Carver 2022). To render something fixable within prevailing frameworks can be an appeal to repair that, when entangled with existing political and economic architectures, upholds a technocratic-liberal apparatus. To draw attention to this mode of repair is not an argument for untouched or ‘feral’ ecologies, nor is it a call to return to premodern imaginaries. Rather, it is to dwell in the difficulty that to presume ecosystems can be restored, we risk reproducing the belief that they can also be broken so long as we know how to fix them. It is to stay in the discomfort of repair as also deployable to keep intact technocratic, modular, and market-oriented logics.

However, repair is not merely compromised by its proximity to harm; it can also be the very mechanism through which harms are enacted. When tethered to frameworks in which harm is both inevitable and reversible, in which the world can be damaged with limited consequence because it can always be pieced back together, enables an epistemology of ‘go fast and break things’. To believe that what is broken can always be fixed through better design, deeper empathy, or more accurate metrics is to sanction, at least implicitly, some destruction as long as repair follows. Repairability, Stuelke cautions, requires an imaginary in which ‘things are broken and can be fixed with the best of intentions, with a labour of love, with a new way of reading (or a scaling back to an old one)’ (2021: 218). Such an assumption ‘is a category error neither the planet nor any of its inhabitants can

afford’ because it ‘makes harm survivable – but also repeatable’ (Stuelke 2021: 218). Logics of repair threaten a way to make harm bearable, even beautiful, without undoing the conditions that make it necessary. In this way, repair sustains not just what is damaged but the very systems that produce destruction.

Repair, then, is no inherent good. It has never been. And neither does it always operate within the assumed register of care. As Steven Jackson makes explicit,

‘repair is not always heroic... One thinks here of the remarkable recuperative routines and strategies by which the atrocities of Nazi ambition and the Nazi war machine were normalised and sustained within the production systems and civil society of war-time Germany’ (2014: 233).

While equating repair with care might have seemed uncontroversial, the reparative is not necessarily ‘directed toward noble ends, and may function as much in defense as in resistance to antidemocratic and antihumanist projects’ (Jackson 2014: 233). This is in part because the ‘political (as well as interpretive and aesthetic) investments in repair and reconciliation [are] deeply implicated in colonial, settler colonial, and imperialist histories’ (Stuelke 2021: 11). Absent a reckoning with the sedimented entanglements of power and history to which any return is predicated, repair at best risks becoming a consolatory gesture and at worst operates as a mode of harm itself.

Repair, in these modes, is not care. In these examples, it functions less as a response and more as harm’s extension, rendering damage tolerable, even honourable, without undoing the conditions that make it seem necessary. Or it can operate as alibi, granting permission to continue harming under the guise of future remediation, sustaining not only what is damaged but the very systems that cause damage. Or it may be the case that ‘the impulse to repair helps instantiate something worse’ (Stuelke 2021: 217). In each situation, *repair is not merely compromised by its proximity to harm; it is the very mechanism through which harm endures*. Repair, then, ought to

be made contingent, not assumed suggesting that in a broken and breaking world, responding ethically may require a refusal to repair.

Care Without Repair

To care through a refusal to repair is invariably more tenable in theory than in practice. The demands of everyday life often require forms of caretaking that stabilise, mend, or maintain. Repair will, at many times, be the most ethical or necessary response to material fragility. Sometimes, though, care consists precisely in withholding repair, in allowing objects, structures, or environments to continue their transformations rather than halting them. In doing so, the withholding of upkeep is not synonymous with the withdrawal of a caring attitude toward the things we engage with. Care without repair recognises that caring for something can also take the form of accompanying decay rather than forestalling it.

In choosing not to ‘fix’ decay, Caitlin DeSilvey suggests, ‘we may find that it offers the opportunity to recognize the interpenetration between ourselves and a wider world of beings in a “network of mutual relations”’ (2017: 180). Following DeSilvey’s proposition, this section concludes by arguing that care without repair brings humans differently, and at times more ethically, into more-than-human figuration. While this may take many forms, this article suggests that: 1) Accompanying decay recognises the autonomy, temporalities, and material agencies of nonhumans whose transformations exceed human intention. In doing so, 2) it can become a practice that grants fragility rather than forecloses it, attending to the specificities of relations rather than insisting on preservation. This can take the shape of 3) intentional ‘letting be’, of refusal to maintain or stabilise (DeSilvey 2017: 184), and of 4) epistemic refusals that set limits on extraction and harm. Operationalizing care without repair, in these ways, denaturalises, defamiliarises, and decentres the moral economies that treat repair as the predominant ethical response. In doing so, it opens space to perceive decay, transformation, and unmaking as meaningful modes of care in their

own right.

To care outside repair means dwelling in the uncomfortable ethical consideration that a thing, place, or body decaying can be a form of recognition and attunement to more-than-human figurations. As Greg Kennedy suggests,

‘taking care of a thing in a way that lets it be what it is acknowledges, even if only tacitly, that the thing shares the same essential fragility of our embodied existence . . . What practical taking care acknowledges is the tendency of all physical beings to degrade, decay, to lapse into nothingness’ (2007: 136).

Because ‘entities [are] not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them’ (Bennett 2004: 350), allowing for deterioration can be an act of recognition. Non-repair recognises lives and deaths that are not tethered to human desire, with physical transformations that do not wait for, or necessarily benefit from, human intervention. Non-interference, in this way, honours that more-than-human temporalities and material agencies exceed our custodial ambitions.

The automatic impulse to repair can then be turned into a question. This allows the work of caring and appropriate responses to emerge from the specificities of the encounter. Attending to the particulars, ‘it may be that our sense of responsibility leads us to attend to change and transformation rather than revert to perpetuation and preservation’ (DeSilvey 2017: 184). Precisely because it seems odd and uncomfortable, care without repair resists being universalised. Instead, it *emerges as the most ethical response in relation to specific times, places, things and bodies*. Its value lies in its situatedness, in its refusal to be abstracted from a place and its histories. What care without repair makes possible, then, is not a formula but a re-orientation toward acting (or refusing to act) in response to specific others.

In practice, DeSilvey takes ‘letting be’ up within architecture and heritage studies, showing that care without repair can be operationalised through ‘the act of “letting be,”’ which, ‘when performed intention-

nally and attentively, can perhaps form the foundation for a posthumanist heritage paradigm' (2017: 184). Rather than shoring up every crumbling wall or stabilising every weathered surface, letting be asks caretakers to attend to what structures are already doing through the slow drift of materials, the erosions and accretions, and the more-than-human agencies acting upon and within them. It reframes heritage not as the preservation of a fixed past through the fixing of matter in the present, but as an ongoing negotiation with memory and sites. In this sense, care without repair becomes a practice of accompaniment through staying with decay as it unfolds, recognising deterioration as part of the site's life rather than its loss, and allowing other forms of livability, meaning, and relation to emerge from processes that preservationist logics would otherwise foreclose (Croteau 2026).

In many ways, care without repair is enacted through refusal. Such refusal may take the form of not acting or declining to maintain, stabilise, or prevent something from falling apart (DeSilvey 2017). But refusal can also operate at the level of knowledge and relating. Following Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, refusal also names

'stances... that place limits on conquest and the colonization of knowledge by marking what is off limits, what is not up for grabs or discussion, what is sacred, and what can't be known' (2014: 225).

Here, care is performed not through the reparative gesture but through setting boundaries, withholding access, or declining participation in practices that enact harm. The need and right for 'overresearched groups to discard some research and support other research on their own terms' (Liboiron/Lepawsky 2022: 146) both requires refusal and makes visible refusal as a mode of caring.

To determine when the most care-full action is the refusal of repair requires a commitment to denaturalise, defamiliarise, and decentre. Because care, repair, and decay are never inherently or universally good qualities, denaturalisation is needed to histo-

rically and culturally situate these practices. When particular social or political arrangements present themselves as 'natural' or 'inevitable', the task is to reveal how the 'natural' is always place-based, contingent, and shaped by the specific conditions that give rise to it. Defamiliarisation challenges the dominant narratives that position restoration as the automatic expression of care, opening space to perceive decay and transformation as potentially meaningful modes of relation. And, in doing so, we can begin to recognise how dominant anti-decay impulses and repair-oriented logics can reproduce violent continuities, sustaining harms that affect humans and more-than-humans alike. Decentring repair as the privileged mode of care allows other forms of relationality, such as those that are closely attentive to fragility and change, to come into focus.

In this way, care without repair reframes ethical responsibility not as the imperative to preserve, but as the ongoing work of responding, with restraint and attentiveness, to those whose lives and endings exceed human custodial ambitions. What emerges is a form of care that does not seek to arrest decay. Rather than offering a prescriptive ethic, care without repair insists that sometimes to remain in relation with more-than-human others as they transform and are unmade is the most caring action.

3. Conclusion

Against naturalised repair ethics, this article has suggested that sometimes the most ethical response in the Anthropocene is an affirmation of the breakdown. It has argued for a sociological reorientation toward decay as an active and generative process of human–nonhuman relational transformation, and, as a consequence, a form of care. In both ecological and cultural registers, and by thinking with fungi, this article has sought to reframe decomposition as far more than things simply falling apart.

Through their decompositional labour, fungi care for others, even though they can neither repair nor reconstitute something to a past state. Their work is slow, transformative, and often invisib-

le, qualities that confound dominant cultural ideals of the immediate, restorative, and visible. They also thrive even where humans see a ‘ruined landscape’, decomposing the dead, the toxic, and the discarded into forms capable of sustaining themselves and other life. With fungi, decomposition emerges as other-than-destruction.

Such a reframing holds implications for sociological understandings of care, repair, and more-than-human figurations. First, it *unsettles the assumption that care necessarily entails restoration*. The reparative paradigm, so often imagined as benevolent and desirable, carries with it sedimented attachments to ideals of coherence, stability, and the preservation of existing structures. While often beneficial, these attachments are not neutral as repair is always a sorting and often ‘fixes’ by returning to a previous state. If care is too tightly bound to repair, we risk perpetuating the very systems and forms of harm that originally necessitated intervention. Second, attention to decomposition challenges the anthropocentric tendencies in sociological and environmental thought. In the modern Western sociological imagination, humans occupy the role of primary agents, the ones who intervene, manage, and fix. Rather than conceiving of humans as the primary ethical actors, a more-than-human sociology rethought through fungi recognises that *humans are beneficiaries of decompositional labours* that they neither initiate nor control, but do rely upon. Third, centring the benefits of decay *enlarges the field of what counts as meaningful action, making space for forms of care and creation that defy dominant narratives of restoration or accumulation*. In doing so, they unsettle the familiar binary of conservation/destruction, offering instead a more intricate ethic that attends to the varied ways life persists, adapts, breaks down, and transforms.

Such an ethic is attuned to the realities of the Anthropocene in which we inhabit a world already marked by loss *and* where our task is not simply to restore what was but to compose what might yet be from the remains. In staying with decay – its horrors, its generousities, its quiet and persistent labours – we can cultivate a sociological imagination capable of en-

gaging with breakdown as essential for multispecies flourishing.

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