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“YOU CARRY MOTHER EARTH WITHIN YOU” (THICH NHAT HAHN). RE-DISCOVERING OUR EARTHBOUND ROOTS AS A WAY OF LIVING IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

Abstract: One of the assumptions in posthumanities and ecological humanities is that *homo sapiens* is a part of a larger whole of a living system – the Earth,¹ around which, and around which future, a global cross- and trans-disciplinary discussion was initiated by scientists, thinkers and activists in the early 2000s. It was stimulated by the emergence of the notion of the Anthropocene in the Earth sciences proposing that modern *homo sapiens* became a geological force, collectively impacting particular Earth’s ecosystems and the environment, in general. The present article addresses the concept of “Earthbound,” “the terrestrial” as well as earthly, multifaceted, urgent issues and dilemmas of the Anthropocene, both as a notion and our “unstable environmental now” (Mentz, *Break Up the Anthropocene*, 2019), put forth by Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, Francesca Ferrando and Bruno Latour. To discuss the root cause of the Anthropocene problem, I refer to teachings of Thich Nhat Hahn (a Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk, who died in 2022, a peace activist, author of more than 100 books) to offer non-Western ways of reconceptualizing human-nature relationship, rethinking and reshaping relations between humans (earthlings) and the Earth. His non-dualistic concepts of interbeing and “carrying Mother Earth within oneself” may be treated as an alternative to Western thought that operates on dualisms, promotes intellectual knowledge, mechanistic understanding of life processes and separateness between earthlings and the Earth. Nhat Hahn, who was familiar with scientific findings (e.g. quantum theory), advocated for care and respect for

¹ Francesca Ferrando puts it like this: “As a philosophy, the insight Posthumanism brings us is that we are not just living on planet Earth, but are part of it. I like the metaphor by Alan Watts – a Taoist philosopher from England who was especially influenced by Indian and Chinese philosophies – of thinking of humans as apples. Instead of those who take the apples from the tree, he conceptualizes humans as the apple, the fruit of the planet. Therefore, as nature ourselves, we must think in intra-relational ways with other species, with the *bios* and the *oikos* – which represents our home and who we are – and of course with technology, of which the importance has been enhanced by the COVID-19 pandemic.” See: F. Ferrando, *An Interview about Posthumanism in a Time of Crisis*, *EuropeNowJournal.org*, 2019, Nov 9, <https://www.europenowjournal.org/2021/11/07/an-interview-about-posthumanism-in-a-time-of-crisis/> (accessed: 12.05.2024).

all living entities composing a complex web of relationships. I turn to his essential writings and interviews to discover everyday practices that can be used and understood as forms of activism triggered in response to the environmental change. I analyze how his teachings contribute to shaping environmental awareness on a planetary scale. In addition, I also focus on the linguistic, symbolic, and metaphoric dimensions of the gendered image of the Earth in his talks and writings. Thich Nhat Hahn's writings and lectures offer a powerful posthumanist message for earthlings living in the Anthropocene as they invite us to redefine the place of ourselves on Earth and re-connect with the planet through our worldly entanglement(s).

Keywords: the Anthropocene, the Earth/earth, Thich Nhat Hahn, posthumanism, Earthbound, the terrestrial

Before You Read (Instead of Introduction)

What images/representations of the Earth are you familiar with?

Do you conceive of yourself as a human being that lives on / inhabits planet Earth? What are the main traits of your identity? Is there any space for “earthliness” or “worldliness” in your identity zone? How would adding the “soil component” to your identity change the way you perceive yourself and your relationship with earth?

What kind of extreme circumstances would force us to re-discover our earthbound roots and reclaim our identity as earthlings? Perhaps confrontation with other dwellers of the universe could be the most unfortunate situation to identify ourselves as inhabitants of Earth (as the main protagonist of Edgar Rice Burroughs novel did while being kept in prison on Mars: [...] “my name is John Carter, and I claim Virginia, one of the United States of America, Earth, as my home.”²)

Bruno Latour observes that:

Science fiction often uses the term “Earthlings,” but that would be too evocative of Star Trek, and in any case it would designate the whole of the human species considered from another planet, on the occasion of an “encounter of the third kind” with little green men. Can we speak of “Gaians?” That would be too weird. Call them “country bumpkins?” That would be too pejorative. I prefer the term “Earthbound.”³

(How)/Would you react to an interpellation: “Hey you, Earthling?” or even “Hey you, “Earthbound?” What does it mean to you to be an “Earthling” and “Earthbound?” Is this a lived experience for you or just an abstract concept?

² E.R. Burroughs, *A Princess of Mars*, The Project Gutenberg eBook of A Princess of Mars, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/62/pg62-images.html> (accessed: 2.10.2024).

³ B. Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, transl. C. Porter, Polity, Cambridge 2017, p. 248.

The Anthropocene, or “the Earth Is Out of Joint”

From a geochronologic perspective we still live in the Holocene, the label that was given to an epoch that constituted the last 11,700 years of Earth’s history. What follows, and what is our current overplowed reality, has been named Anthropocene epoch or the Anthropocene.⁴ Zalasiewicz et al. claim that “the base of the Anthropocene as a chronostratigraphic unit is recognizable only by anthropogenic indicators in the stratigraphic record that are nearly globally synchronous.”⁵ To prove global synchronicity, scientists look for “appropriate age indicators” including: “radiometric dating [...] artifacts, specific persistent organic pollutants, modern plastic polymers, industrially sourced fly-ash, bomb-sourced radionuclides, or the preserved remains of invasive species introduced by human activity.”⁶

The new geological time unit is marked by collective human activities affecting the Earth’s systems or “the whole life on Earth”⁷ to a degree that *homo sapiens* became a geological force. Francesca Ferrando accentuates human beings’ non-exceptional speciesness as “one species among many,”⁸ yet paradoxically its devilish uniqueness lies in the fact that our, mostly terra-wounding, impact demonstrates the interconnectedness and interdependence of all terrans, humans and non-humans: animals, plants, machines, and things. To Rosi Braidotti, anthropogenic changes grasped by the term of the Anthropocene – the “bio-genetic age” and the “historical moment” – „can also help us re-think the basic tenets of our interaction with both human and non-human agents on a planetary scale.”⁹

As far as the name “Anthropocene” is concerned, Donna Haraway pays attention to the suffix “-cene,” which for her means “a time of a thick present.” She specifies that:

it is the time of the recent, the time of now. So the suffix cene doesn’t mean a visual scene, it’s rather a temporal term. It’s about a thickness of now. So the Anthropocene was proposed for the thickness of the now in which human beings become a planetary transformative force of a dominant kind.¹⁰

⁴ The name has Greek roots, derived from *anthrōpos* “human being” and *kainos* “new,” translated as the „recent age of man.” According to a growing number of scientists, this epoch emerged along with the “Great Acceleration” and proliferation of atomic bombs in the mid-twentieth century.

⁵ J. Zalasiewicz et al., *The Anthropocene: Comparing Its Meaning in Geology (Chronostratigraphy) with Conceptual Approaches Arising in Other Disciplines*, “Earth’s Future” 2021, Vol. 9 (3), p. 5.

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ R. Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2013, p. 16.

⁸ F. Ferrando, *To Be or Not To Be Enhanced? Just Ask the Moon – In Posthuman Terms* [in:] F. Jotterand, M. Ienca (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of the Ethics of Human Enhancement*, Routledge, New York 2023, p. 32.

⁹ R. Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, op. cit., pp. 5–6.

¹⁰ D. Haraway, *Transcript: Donna Haraway “Staying with the Trouble”*, Forthewild.com, 2019, <https://forthewild.world/podcast-transcripts/donna-haraway-on-staying-with-the-trouble-131/> (accessed: 10.03.2024).

It has been observed that the notion of the Anthropocene is as important as Darwin's theory was in the late nineteenth century.¹¹ It was 2000 when a Nobel-prize winning atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen and limnologist Eugene F. Stoermer proposed to introduce a new chronostratigraphic unit, the *Anthropocene*. In 2002 Crutzen wrote an article for *Nature* under a meaningful title "Geology of Mankind," which began the era of proliferation of the Anthropocene concept not only in the Earth sciences, but also in humanities, social sciences, and art. Anthropocene is not just a label for an interval in geologic time. It is also a cultural phenomenon which scientist representing various and different sciences gravitate towards. Glenn Albrecht captured a cultural nature of this concept by stating that "a meme that is in widespread use in recent times is that of the Anthropocene."¹² Posthumanist thinkers and practitioners have been particularly interested with the idea that "human activities have become predominant drivers of modifications to the stratigraphic record, making it clearly distinct from the Holocene,"¹³ which results not only in an interdisciplinary but also in a cross- and trans-disciplinary discussions, on Earth's and earthlings' future, transgressing the geological definition of the Anthropocene epoch. The common denominator of such discussions that could be compared to a planetary project of saving life on Earth is "to find those ways of living well as Earthlings in a thick present," as Haraway puts it.¹⁴

Bruno Latour provocatively states that: "the Humans living in the epoch of the Holocene are in conflict with the Earthbound of the Anthropocene"¹⁵ to make a distinction between two opposing attitudes to the world: „taking the Earth” as human beings do and being “taken by it.” The latter is Earthbound peoples' onto-ethical attitude, a recognition of being connected with one's own territory and materiality of earth/the Earth and worldly matters related to it, and thus willingness and readiness to confront challenges of the present epoch. Drawing from Latour, the concept of Ter-rans and Earthbound was brought forward by Donna Haraway, to refer to “earthly” and “terrestrial.” She also encourages earthlings to identify oneself as Earthbound to take action and stay with ongoing trouble(s) of our troubled times.¹⁶

The Anthropocene is perpetually working on its toxic and traumatizing legacy affecting all earthlings, both human and non-human. Albrecht claims that “The era of

¹¹ See: W. Steffen, J. Grinevald, P. Crutzen, J. McNeill, *The Anthropocene: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives*, "Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society" 2011, Vol. 369 (1938), pp. 842–867.

¹² G. Albrecht, *Solastalgia in the Anthropocene and the Ghedeist in the Symbiocene*, Glennalbrecht.com, 2017, <https://glennaalbrecht.com/2017/07/22/solastalgia-in-the-anthropocene-and-the-ghedeist-in-the-symbiocene/> (accessed: 13.04.2024).

¹³ J. Zalasiewicz et al., *The Anthropocene...*, op. cit., p. 1.

¹⁴ D. Haraway, *Transcript: Donna Haraway...*, op. cit.

¹⁵ B. Latour, *Facing Gaia...*, op. cit., p. 248.

¹⁶ See: D. Haraway, *Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene*, E-flux.com, 2016, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/75/67125/tentacular-thinking-anthropocene-capitalocene-chthulucene/> (accessed: 22.05.2024).

solastalgia is upon us right now.”¹⁷ The term “solastalgia” was coined by him in 2003 as he searched for a word in English that could capture a specific form of melancholia – “the emplaced and existential melancholia produced by the lived experience of negatively perceived transformation of a loved home environment.”¹⁸ Albrecht ties the existential feeling of solastalgia to the state of biophysical environment.¹⁹ According to Albrecht, a person feels lack of solace and has a sense of desolation connected to the fact that one’s own beloved place or land have negatively changed, i.e. they observe loss of vegetation in the region or loss of one’s own farmhouse garden. Therefore, it pertains to large-scale landscape change as well as to smaller-scale events.²⁰ Human-induced negative metamorphosis of earth/Earth has unpleasant repercussions for *homo sapiens* and for individuals, demonstrating how terra-transformations influence their mental and emotional condition.

In addition, Albrecht claims that people experience somaterratic and psychoterratic syndromes and diseases.²¹ They both reflect the connection between the state of the earth (-terratic) and mental (psycho-) and bodily (soma-) health. In case of psychoterratic illness it is a weakening of human mental health caused by a negative relationship to home environment, which involves loss of identity, loss of an endemic sense of place and a decline in well-being. Somaterratic disease manifests in bodily reactions to negative changes, to the biophysical conditions of life such as heat stress from anthropogenic global warming or the direct toxic pollution of the environment. Albrecht’s research shows that on a planetary scale humans react emotionally, psychically and somatically to ongoing “terravastation”²² – the present devastated state the Earth is in (a word composed of “terra” and “devastation”). Non-European epistemologies and non-Western philosophies like Buddhism, especially “engaged Buddhism,” accentuate that terravastation is the result of de-bonding and dis-connecting from the Earth.²³

Apart from scientific analyses of the current condition of human tellurian home, the third planet from the sun, non-Western approaches are offered, among which

¹⁷ G. Albrecht, *The Age of Solastalgia*, “The Conversation,” 2012, <https://theconversation.com/the-age-of-solastalgia-833/> (accessed: 2.05.2024).

¹⁸ G. Albrecht, *Psychoterratic Conditions in a Scientific and Technological World* [in:] P. Kahn, P. Hasbach (eds.), *Ecopsychology: Science, Totems, and the Technological Species*, MIT Press, Cambridge 2012, p. 248.

¹⁹ G. Albrecht, *Earth Emotions: New Words for a New World*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 2019, p. 39.

²⁰ G. Albrecht et al., *Solastalgia: The Distress Caused by Environmental Change*, “Australasian Psychiatry” 2007, Vol. 15 (1), p. 96.

²¹ See: *ibidem*, pp. 95–98.

²² My own neologism.

²³ Studies show that especially indigenous people are prone to experience climate-related sorrow as those who established close relations with their homelands, also in a spiritual sense. See: L.P. Galway, T. Beery, K. Jones-Casey, K. Tasala, *Mapping the Solastalgia Literature: A Scoping Review Study*, “International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health” 2019, Vol. 16 (15), pp. 26–62.

teachings and philosophy of Thich Nhat Hahn is worthwhile. As Ewa Domańska observes, the new paradigm emerging from ecological humanities is not only characterized by its trans- and cross-disciplinarity, which means merging the humanities and social sciences with life sciences, but also by opening the field to indigenous, non-European, non-western ways of knowing.²⁴ With this regard, the operating principle within ecological humanities is to build bridges, merge, integrate and make connections between natural sciences and humanities, Eastern, Western and native knowledges. This article demonstrates that it is not only cooperation between disciplines across sciences that is necessary to understand how human and non-human elements are intertwined at perceptible and quantum levels but also that it is essential and pivotal to incorporate Eastern knowledge and philosophy to build an integrative, complementary and holistic knowledge, eco-epistemology and relational ontology.

In the State of Oblivion to Our Common Earthbound Existence

In a 2012 *Guardian* interview Nhat Hahn focuses on two significant aspects of contemporary human existence.²⁵ He stresses the fact that humans have become addicted to consumerism due to the lack of meaning and connection in peoples' lives. Yet, most fundamentally they are disconnected from the Earth/earth, which results in ignorance or denial that as a species they are inflicting stress on the planet. Disconnection from the planet and from "the terrestrial" (constantly present) within oneself, as well as living in a state of oblivion to one's earthrootedness, have repercussions in a planetary perceptible form of terravastation. According to Nhat Hahn's intuition, experience, perception, and conceptualization: "You Carry Mother Earth Within You," meaning that humans originate from the Earth and thus "the terratic" is carried within any human being (non-human beings are not excluded from this operating earthly principle). The conviction of interpenetration and interconnection between the two is fundamental to his philosophy of non-duality and inter-being.

Although the Earth has limited surface, to embrace it fully, is to go beyond its physicality, to move beyond human limited perception – beyond the Kantian view of the world which presents it as divisible surface. Thich Nhat Hahn suggests that a greater intellectual knowledge of the impact of human destructive behaviour is not enough to make a meaningful change. What is necessary is a reconnection with Earth and a personal insight into the inter-being of everything in the universe. Domańska sees the importance of "the conviction, that «everything connects to everything else»,

²⁴ E. Domańska, *Ecological Humanities*, transl. B. Gilewska, "Teksty Drugie" 2015, Vol. 1, pp. 192–193.

²⁵ T. Nhat Hahn, *Beyond Environment: Falling Back in Love with Mother Earth*, "The Guardian" 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/sense-sacred-sustainable-business-buddhist/> (accessed: 13.04.2024).

shared both by the traditional ecological knowledges, and by quantum physics, to which, by the way, we owe the notion of entanglement.”²⁶

As suggested by Nhat Hahn, people should also transgress and transform another mental limitation, namely that the Earth is our environment, and we are something separate from it. In an interview for “The Ecologist” he cautions against cultivating the thought of separateness:

We have been talking about the environment as if it is something different from us, but we are the environment. The non-human elements are our environment, but we are the environment of non-human elements, so we are one with the environment. We are the environment. We are the earth and the earth has the capacity to restore balance and sometimes many species have to disappear for the balance restored. Maybe the flood, maybe the heat, maybe the air.²⁷

His posthumanist approach is visible in his Eastern, Buddhist approach, without gaining knowledge of specific notions derived from posthumanism or environmental humanities. It determines his different practices of meditation aimed at (re)connection with the Earth and practices of taking care of “the terrestrial” within oneself. The thinking and the doing interpenetrate each other as if he was given instructions by a tellurian force on how to perform; as if he intuitively rejected the main principle of the Anthropocene, namely – by common species genealogy – to join “human forces” that turn them *en masse* into a geological agent bringing terravastation or even forms of ecocide as well as destruction and forms of violence to organic and non-organic forms existing on the planet.

Further, he claims that the purpose of being is to awaken from the illusion of our separateness. Remaining in the cell of anthropocentric, dualistic thinking strengthens what Alan Watts termed as “the hallucination of being a skin-encapsulated ego.”²⁸ Watts, himself a staunch popularizer of Eastern thought in the West, proposed a term “organism-environment.” He claims that the environment and organisms compose a unified field of behaviour in the sense that: “The environment does not push the organism around and the organism does not push the environment around. They are two aspects, or poles of the same process.”²⁹ He claimed that they go and act together; it is a mutual process. In Watt’s opinion human beings “gowith”³⁰ the environment (a planetary perspective) and the rest of the universe (a cosmic perspective). In one of the lectures he delivered at American universities throughout the sixties (when thinkers like him were beginning to raise human ecological consciousness), he stated: “As

²⁶ E. Domańska, *Ecological Humanities*, transl. B. Gilewska, “Teksty Drugie” 2015, Vol. 1, p. 204.

²⁷ T. Nhat Hahn, *Thich Nhat Hanh: In 100 Years There May Be No More Humans on Planet Earth*, The Ecologist.org, 2012, <https://theecologist.org/2012/mar/22/thich-nhat-hanh-100-years-there-may-be-no-more-humans-planet-earth/> (accessed: 12.04.2024).

²⁸ A. Watts, *Eastern Wisdom, Modern Life: Collected Talks: 1960–1969*, New World Library, Novato, CA 2006, p. 76.

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 78.

³⁰ Alan Watt’s original spelling.

is well known, we are now in the process of destroying our environment as a result of an attempt to conquer it and master it. We believe that our environment is something other than ourselves and in assuming that, we make a great mistake, we are paying the price.”³¹ Since Watts warned against hostile and discriminating treatment of the environment or nature (he usually used these words instead of “Earth”), his attitude is in accord with Nhat Hahn’s reflection on human disconnection from the Earth.

We Inter-are with (Mother) Earth – Beyond Conceptual Knowledge with Nhat Hahn

One of the features of Thich Nhat Hahn’s teachings is his awareness of positive ecological and moral implications of spiritual practice. Buddhism could be portrayed as one of the earliest examples of an ethics of relationships and ontology of entanglements. In the Buddhist tradition a concept of interpenetration is to be found.³² Nhat Hahn indicates that the idea of interpenetration is drawn from the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, which is central to a Mahayana Buddhist tradition. In this sutra, the idea that everything contains everything else is illustrated by the jeweled net of Indra,³³ a vision of reality resembling a hologram. He explains the meaning of this cosmologic metaphor: “There are millions of jewels strung together to make the net, and each jewel has many facets. When you look at any facet of any one jewel, you can see all the other jewels reflected in it.”³⁴ The reflections appear *ad infinitum*. In Buddhist tradition Indra’s net is used to illustrate the concept of interpenetration and interconnectedness. Interpenetration “means that the all is in one”³⁵ and that “this is in that” and “that is in this.”³⁶

Nhat Hahn’s develops a non-dualistic idea of interpenetration and interdependence on the example of a human-earth relationship:

You carry Mother Earth within you. She is not outside of you. Mother Earth is not just your environment. In that insight of inter-being, it is possible to have real communication with the

³¹ A. Watts, *Not What Should Be But What Is*, Alanwatts.org, <https://alanwatts.org/transcripts/not-what-should-be-but-what-is/> (accessed: 29.04.2024).

³² See: P. Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1990, pp. 118–120.

³³ Initially, a supreme Hindu god. Eventually the image of Indra’s net was adopted by the Buddhist teachers.

³⁴ T. Nhat Hahn, *Indra’s Net* [in:] idem, *Understanding Our Mind: 50 Verses on Buddhist Psychology*, Parallax Press, Berkeley, CA 2006, pp. 81–82.

³⁵ Ibidem, p. 82.

³⁶ T. Nhat Hahn, *The Sun My Heart: The Companion to the Miracle of Mindfulness*, Parallax Press, Berkeley, CA 2020, p. 61.

Earth, which is the highest form of prayer. In that kind of relationship you have enough love, strength and awakening in order to change your life.³⁷

To “carry within” means to have something within, inside oneself. It differs from “carrying with,” meaning having an object with one or on one’s person, or retaining something abstract, such as an idea or feeling. The Buddhist monk demonstrates an analogy between carrying the DNA of human biological mother in one’s body and carrying the Earth in every cell of one’s body.³⁸ In showing that there is no difference between the Earth and oneself, he suggests that protecting our planet is the same as taking care of oneself.

He also comments on human unrecognition that people “inter-are” with the Earth and warns against excessive consumerism by human beings, who live like sleepwalkers, unaware of the fact that they are consuming their home, stripping the Earth bare. This affects Earth’s carrying capacity. Although Nhat Hahn does not use the term “carrying capacity of the Earth,” I would like to refer to it. Carrying capacity is defined as the maximum population size of a species that an area can support without reducing the area’s ability to support the same species in the future. The carrying capacity can be measured for any biological life form. With respect to human species, it needs to be addressed globally... or rather dealt with from a planetary perspective. The carrying capacity of Earth is determined by two major factors: resource availability, including food supplies, and the environment’s capacity to absorb and detoxify wastes. Current research on growing human population aims at establishing how close it is to the limits of carrying capacity of our planet. Terravastation marks, meaning “wounds of the Anthropocene” such as: loss of biodiversity, ocean acidification, deforestation, chemical pollution, ozone depletion, expansion of agriculture, and poverty, are indicative of pushing beyond carrying capacity of the planet and humans’ poor performance in identifying with their terratic home.

Nhat Hahn draws attention to *homo sapiens*’ profound disconnection from the Earth; on disharmonious relationships with it, perpetuated by anthropocentric practices. Since the majority of people experience themselves and their earthly environment as two separate entities-realities, they see the planet in terms of utility leading to its exploitation, passivity causing its oppression, and objectification resulting in its ill-treatment. Non-human beings, wildlife and domesticated animals, are considered resources for human use. They are usually perceived inferior to *homo sapiens* and reduced to resources for human production and consumption. A speciesist attitude towards non-human animals is widespread to such an extent that most humans do not protest against cruelty, inferior treatment of animals and discriminative practices. With regards to a contemporary *homo sapiens*-Earth relationship a parallel with other

³⁷ T. Nhat Hahn, *Beyond Environment: Falling Back in Love with Mother Earth*, “The Guardian” 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/sense-sacred-sustainable-business-buddhist/> (accessed: 13.04.2024).

³⁸ T. Nhat Hahn, *Love Letter to the Earth*, Parallax Press, Berkeley, CA 2013, p. 17.

forms of unjustified discrimination e.g. speciesism, racism or sexism can be drawn. They all rooted in different humanist forms of subjectivity. Depending on the quality of relations, namely human versus animal, men and women vs men and women of colour, men vs women – one side of the opposition is considered as subject, while the other – as object. Therefore, if the Earth is placed on the one side of this opposition, humans take the other pole. I suggest that it is the most fundamental system of two related categories, the binary opposition, that is the foundation of the abovementioned polarities.

Thich Nhat Hahn's concept of human-Earth relationship challenges polar thinking or binary oppositions by performing (and teaching) planetary thinking. As a very conscious earthling, a living organism that appreciates and cultivates his own existence on the Earth, he coined the concept of interbeing. His ideas of co-existence and co-dependence (known as a posthumanist concept of entanglement or web of beings) have been developed and presented in many forms i.e. prose or poems, lectures and talks given to various audiences, not only his followers but also to world leaders.

Nhat Hahn, who established a mindfulness community called the Order of Interbeing,³⁹ also coined the term interbeing⁴⁰ to describe how the seemingly fragmented pieces of reality are linked and mutually dependent. He expressed the Buddhist concept of mutual permeation – the nexus between all things – in a poem entitled “Interbeing.”

The Sun has entered me.
 The Sun has entered me together with the cloud
 and the river.
 I myself have entered the river,
 And I have entered the sun
 With the cloud and the river.
 There has not been a moment
 when we do not interpenetrate.

But before the Sun entered me,
 the sun was in me –
 also the cloud and the river.
 Before I entered the river

³⁹ In 1960s Thich Nhat Hahn founded a spiritual order in Vietnam, the Tiep Hien Order, whose members were obliged to follow Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings, rooted in Buddhist teachings. See: T. Nhat Hahn, *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism*, Full Circle, New Delhi 2003.

⁴⁰ As Nhat Hahn explains, since the translation of “Tien Hien” into English was difficult, he found a term “interbeing” in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, meaning “mutual” and “to be” (a compound word). In a collective effort, he and other members of the community looked for a suitable word to convey the spirit of the order, the spirit of engaged Buddhism: “We have talked about the many in the one and the one containing the many. In one sheet of paper we see everything else, the cloud, the forest, the logger. I am, therefore you are. You are, therefore I am. That is the meaning of the word ‘interbeing.’ We inter-are.” See: T. Nhat Hahn, *Thich Nhat Hanh: Essential Writings*, Orbis Books, New York 2001, p. 149.

I was already in it.
 There has not been a moment
 When we have not *inter-been*.
 Therefore you know
 that as long as you continue to breathe,
 I continue to be in you.⁴¹

In Thich Nhat Hahn's poem all beings are interwoven and they interpenetrate each other: "everything is related to everything else. Everything enters into and is entered into by everything else."⁴² On the example of the sunshine mutually penetrating all earthlings, earthly things and phenomena, the Buddhist monk explains the nondual nature of reality, a model of the universe also proposed by string theories with their holographic principle of "the whole-in-every-part."⁴³

The word to "interpenetrate" comes from Latin *penetrāre*; related to *penitus* – deep down, inner, and *penus* – the interior of a house. For the Buddhist monk, we do not only carry the Earth within us, but also the sun – the star that is the greatest source of light for our planet – the one he mentions in his poem. In his *Love Letter to the Earth*, he compares the sun to father that is ever-present in every being. He address the sun as "Father Sun," highlighting that the sun is present with every cell of human body and in the body of Mother Earth.⁴⁴ It has been scientifically proved that everything we are and everything in the universe and on Earth originated from stardust, and it continually floats through us even today. It directly connects us to the universe, rebuilding human and non-human bodies over and again over our lifetimes.

Re-discovering Our Earthbound Roots Through Nhat Hahn's *Love Letter to the Earth*

Everyday speech has concealed the concept of Mother Earth under a veil of other notions. Namely that the earth is either the world or the globe. The "world" denotes an abstract view, often something civilized and non-organic. When the term the "globe" is mentioned, it may denote a geographical name. In many languages they both have masculine connotations whereas only the "Earth" has feminine connotations.⁴⁵

Gendered images and metaphors of earth pervade cultures of this planet. Gendering of the Earth is common and has been historically captured in forms of texts

⁴¹ T. Nhat Hahn, *Call Me by My True Names: The Collected Poems*, Parallax Press, Berkeley, CA 2001, p. 150.

⁴² T. Nhat Hahn, *Indra's Net*, op. cit., p. 82.

⁴³ See: L.P. Thiele, *Indra's Net and the Midas Touch: Living Sustainably in a Connected World*, MIT Press, Cambridge 2011.

⁴⁴ T. Nhat Hahn, *Love Letter...*, op. cit., p. 126.

⁴⁵ In Polish both words: the globe (*glob*) and the world (*świat*) are masculine nouns, while the Earth (*Ziemia*) is a feminine noun. I would find terms like "mother world" or "mother globe" disconnecting me from the Earth as well as not reflecting an ecospiritual view.

of cultures, i.e. paintings, myths, poems, films and popular culture. Early Paleolithic cultures developed the idea that Earth is a Mother, whence all life comes and to which it returns in a continuous cycle of birth, death and rebirth. The Earth was perceived as the great womb out of which all life emerged and eventually returned by analogy to cyclical processes observed in women's bodies. This may be one of the oldest human concepts and accompanying ritual practices. Caves were perceived as entrances to the sacred womb of Mother Earth as is evidenced by female sexual symbols, particularly the vulva, often painted near the entrances of Paleolithic caves. The Earth has been bound with femaleness and women. There are other examples from ancient cultures: Greeks had Earth Mother, or Mother Goddess with two important manifestations – Gaia and Demeter; for Romas she was Tellus or *Terra Mater*. These goddesses representing the divine fertility and nurturing powers of earth were suppressed during the Christianity period and returned in the 18th centuries images and ideas of Mother Goddess, meaning the Earth. The growing interest in this concept is dated to the 19th century.⁴⁶

Our contemporary consumer and popular culture offers new renderings of the mother-earth image, which usually are for sale. Catherine M. Roach writes about eco-paraphernalia – material things that urge to protect the environment – encompassing: T-shirts, bumper-stickers, posters, advertisements, billboards.⁴⁷ “Love Your Mother” environmental button is an example of popcultural imagery presenting the Earth as mother. This picture with a short phrase conveys a simple and clear message that strengthens the representation of planet earth as a woman capable of producing and bringing forth children, earthlings. The hidden assumption from which the slogan springs is that people should love their real mothers. By analogy with human life deriving from a woman or woman's womb, the Earth should be treated as the locus of *life-giving* capability of creation, the place out of which humans come from. The loving care she bestows upon human beings is similar to love given by real mothers to their children. In a reciprocal gesture everyone is advised to respect, cherish and love the earth, mother of all mothers. For some people “Love Your Mother” environmental button may be a reminder that human mothers have a great telluric ancestor, the Earth. Sometimes such eco-paraphernalia can be useful reminders, yet there is nothing profound in them.

Undoubtedly, a profound message is to be found in Thich Nhat Hahn's attitude to the Earth. The Buddhist monk exploits the cultural figure of Mother Earth, which was used in ancient cultures in myths of creation. Many creation myths understand human being as “earthlings.” For example, in the Hebrew creation story where Adamah – made of earth – is the name of the first human. The Mother Earth can stand for creative powers as a metaphor. In many cultures the female principle is connected

⁴⁶ A. O'Reilly, *Encyclopedia of Motherhood*, Sage, London 2010, p. 311.

⁴⁷ C.M. Roach, *Mother/Nature: Popular Culture and Environmental Ethics*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington–Indianapolis 2003, p. 28.

with fecundity, bounty and creativity. Joni Sager claims that: “Earth as Mother, as a sacred and honored female life force, is a powerful icon in non-Christian, nonEuroAmerican, mostly agriculture cosmography.”⁴⁸ The empowerment of the terratic in earthlings is to be found by perceiving Mother Earth as the pervading cosmic force. As a metaphor it conveys not so much the idea of physical motherhood but a worldview in which the creative power of femininity is central. In addition it is a promise of regeneration and rebirth.

Below I quote a long passage from Nhat Hahn’s *Love Letter to the Earth*, the beginning of his conversation with his beloved planet, in which he accentuates that the Earth is being carried in each human being.

I bow my head before you as I look deeply and recognize that you are present in me and that I’m a part of you. I was born from you and you are always present, offering me everything I need for my nourishment and growth. My mother, my father, and all my ancestors are also your children. We breathe your fresh air. We drink your clear water. We eat your nourishing food. Your herbs heal us when we’re sick.

You are the mother of all beings. I call you by the human name Mother and yet I know your mothering nature is more vast and ancient than humankind. We are just one young species of your many children. All the millions of other species who live – or have lived – on Earth are also your children. You aren’t a person, but I know you are not less than a person either. You are a living breathing being in the form of a planet.

Each species has its own language, yet as our Mother you can understand us all. That is why you can hear me today as I open my heart to you and offer you my prayer.

Dear Mother, wherever there is soil, water, rock or air, you are there, nourishing me and giving me life. You are present in every cell of my body. My physical body is your physical body, and just as the sun and stars are present in you, they are also present in me. You are not outside of me and I am not outside of you. You are more than just my environment. You are nothing less than myself.

I promise to keep the awareness alive that you are always in me, and I am always in you. I promise to be aware that your health and well-being is my own health and well-being. I know I need to keep this awareness alive in me for us both to be peaceful, happy, healthy, and strong.

Sometimes I forget. Lost in the confusions and worries of daily life, I forget that my body is your body, and sometimes even forget that I have a body at all. Unaware of the presence of my body and the beautiful planet around me and within me, I’m unable to cherish and celebrate the precious gift of life you have given me. Dear Mother, my deep wish is to wake up to the miracle of life. I promise to train myself to be present for myself, my life, and for you in every moment. I know that my true presence is the best gift I can offer to you, the one I love.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ J. Sager, *Earth Follies: Coming to Feminist Terms with the Global Environmental Crisis*, Routledge, New York 1993, p. 219.

⁴⁹ T. Nhat Hahn, *Love Letter...*, op. cit., pp. 102–104.

In a reciprocal embrace between a human and planet Earth a real sense of belonging may be found. In Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings Earth is humans' and non-humans' first mother and is held sacred in the sense that it is the primordial force out of which all life has come and (inter)connecting all forms of life. This idea has been present not only in spiritual ecology but also in scientific writings. Biologist, Edward O. Wilson, claims that biosphere is a dynamic field in which things are interrelated. He defined a term biophilia as "the innately emotional affiliation of human beings to other human beings or other living organisms."⁵⁰ Kelly Olivier suggests that biophilia may be interpreted as "interspecies love"⁵¹ and calls for "an embodied environmental ethics based on our radical relationality not only with other species but also with the earth that supports us all."⁵² Without the Earth/earth as a knitting entity – The Great Biological Knitter, a material uniting force – The Big Organic Bonder, no interconnection, no interbeing, no interpenetration, earth-binding would be possible.

Since the Earth hitches all species, it would be an act of ecological illiteracy not to recognize the same kind of worldly nature of all Terrans. Being an apologete of multi-species co-existence, Haraway urges us to discover our kinship with other species: "all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense, and it is past time to practice better care of kinds-as-assemblages (not species one at a time). Kin is an assembling sort of word."⁵³ Human beings are just one species among the biodiversity of earthlings. In her writings, Haraway refers to humans as Earthlings or Terrans to accentuate our roots – the telluric grounding – and earthly entanglements that "skin-encapsulated egos" become oblivious to, occupied with their anthropocentric thoughts and lifestyles, practising speciesism on everyday basis. Being critical of "the Anthropocene as a tool, story, or epoch to think with"⁵⁴ and to accentuate the chthonic⁵⁵ power of Earth, Haraway proposes a different term for the Anthropocene, the "Chthulucene." The main shift in discourse on the current reality is to recognize other-than- human terran actors, allow geostories to be told and "stay with the trouble" of our ongoing epoch. In Haraway's Chthulucene: "The order is reknitted: human beings are with and of the Earth, and the biotic and abiotic powers of this Earth are the main story."⁵⁶

⁵⁰ E.O. Wilson, *Biophilia and the Conservation Ethic* [in:] S.R. Kellert, E.O. Wilson (eds.), *The Biophilia Hypothesis*, Island Press, Washington 1993, p. 31.

⁵¹ K. Oliver, *Earth and World: Philosophy after the Apollo Missions*, Columbia University Press, New York 2015, p. 232.

⁵² Ibidem.

⁵³ D. Haraway, *Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin*, "Environmental Humanities" 2015, Vol. 6 (1), p. 162.

⁵⁴ D. Haraway, *Tentacular Thinking...*, op. cit.

⁵⁵ "Chthonic" comes from ancient Greek *khthonios*, "of the earth," and from *khthōn*, "earth."

⁵⁶ D. Haraway, *Tentacular Thinking...*, op. cit.

Learning to Love the Earth

As one of the highest forms of ecological literacy falling back in love with the Earth is to see the most fundamental organic interconnection/entanglement in one's life. According to Buddhist teachings conveyed by Thich Nhat Hahn, the Earth has Buddha nature and so everything that springs from it is of the same nature.⁵⁷ One of the first steps to reconnect with the planet is to recognize it as a living organism, life-giving and life-sustaining, as most mothers are. Through the metaphorical language of connection, the Buddhist monk demonstrates how crucial thinking is in shaping our collective behaviour and individual daily routine.

In an interview with Nhat Hahn for *The Guardian* he argues that even though *homo sapiens* is intelligent but it should learn to love the planet through certain everyday practices of mindfulness:⁵⁸ “When you look at the sun during your walking meditation, the mindfulness of the body helps you to see that the sun is in you; without the sun there is no life at all and suddenly you get in touch with the sun in a different way.”⁵⁹ The Buddhist monk explains how to marry the idea of interbeing with the feeling of interconnection between oneself and the world. He urges us to meditate by which he means to pause, direct attention to “the terrestrial” within oneself and to submerge in it. The result is that within with every breath and every step they take meditating earthlings open up their bodymind to “the worldly,” to re-bind with the Earth. According to him, in a meditative state the “[...] relationship with the earth is so deep, and the earth is in you and this is something not very difficult, much less difficult than philosophy.”⁶⁰ It has been scientifically proved that the ancient practice of meditation, used to self-regulate, train attention and enhance mental well-being, affects brain functioning. It modulates neural activity as it changes brain oscillations, and brain network interactions,⁶¹ which leads to shifting brainwaves, reducing stress and anxiety,⁶² and even generates a feeling of blissful state of interconnectivity.

Current research also proves that meditative practices may be helpful for those who suffer from chronic pain, traumas also eco-trauma, chronic stress (also eco-stress), solastalgia, or somaterratic and psychoterratic diseases. Thich Nhat Hahn

⁵⁷ T. Nhat Hahn, *Love Letter...*, op. cit., p. 18.

⁵⁸ Mindfulness meditation is explained as the “awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally.” See: J. Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life*, Hyperion, New York 1994, p. 4.

⁵⁹ T. Nhat Hahn, *How a Sense of Sacred Can Help Sustainable Business*, “The Guardian” 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/sense-sacred-sustainable-business-buddhist/> (accessed: 13.04.2024).

⁶⁰ Ibidem.

⁶¹ See: S. Katyal, P. Goldin, *Alpha and Theta Oscillations Are Inversely Related to Progressive Levels of Meditation Depth*, “Neuroscience of Consciousness” 2021, Vol. 7 (1), pp. 1–12.

⁶² P. Verhaeghen, *Presence: How Mindfulness and Meditation Shape Your Brain, Mind, and Life*, Oxford University Press, New York 2017.

translates scientific findings into non-Western knowledge: “If you can feel that Mother Earth is in you, and you are Mother Earth, then you are not any longer afraid to die because the earth is not dying. Like a wave appears and disappears and appears again.”⁶³ Practising recommended meditations may result in psychosomatic healing through a re-connection with the Earth. Nhat Hahn encourages earthlings (who originate in and spring from earth/the Earth) to “go home to Mother Earth”⁶⁴ because through earth humans can restore contact with their material existence. The inter-existential bond between a human being and the Terratic Knitter can be repaired and re-established. Moreover, according to Nhat Hahn the healing is mutual, so the planet benefits from conscious Earthlings meditative practices and new way of thinking, speaking, and walking. Thich Nhat Hanh’s writings and lectures on interbeing and interpenetration are rooted in Buddhist practices of deep appreciation of the profound simplicity of life in the present; the joy of breathing, of walking, of contemplation.

Thich Nhat Hanh’s larger project is to transmit new planetary consciousness rooted in the idea that the Earth is creative, non-discriminative, and nourishing. He grants the Earth moral consideration. He spoke of urgent action on both levels: the individual and the collective. The inter-existential paradigm for the Anthropocene that comes out of Thich Nhat Hanh’s philosophy has posthumanist overtones. It goes beyond humanist notions of subjectivity; it embraces all beings. The notion of inter-being can be treated as a response to anthropocentric cult of the self and consumerism. Its inherent openness is guaranteed by the front of the word – a prefix meaning “between, among,” “mutually, reciprocally.”

Conclusion: What If... Earthlings Made a Planetary Coming Out?

Thich Nhat Hahn concept was used in contemporary visual culture. In Michael Almeyda’s *Hamlet* (2000), the protagonist (Ethan Hawke) watches a video of a Buddhist monk who explains philosophy of interrelatedness:

We have this word to be. But what I propose is... a word to interbe... Because it is not possible to be alone. You need other beings in order to be. Not only do you need father, mother, but also uncle, brother, sister, society... sunshine, river, air, trees, birds, elephants, and... it is impossible to be by yourself, alone. You have to interbe with everyone and everything else. And, therefore, to be means to inter be.

The clip originates in a documentary entitled *Peace Is Every Step: Meditation in Action* (1998). In the abovementioned scene Hamlet is presented in his isolated state in his apartment, alone with different media and monitors. He is very much disconnected from himself and the Earth, too. New York city of 2000 is a typical concrete

⁶³ T. Nhat Hahn, *How a Sense of Sacred Can Help...*, op. cit.

⁶⁴ T. Nhat Hahn, *Love Letter...*, op. cit., p. 44.

jungle that strengthens the feeling of separation from the planet, let alone an insight that humans are one with the environment. The Buddhist monk's simple wisdom is not helpful to Hamlet, whose social and earthly escapism deepens.⁶⁵

John Muir expressed his opinion on the lack of terrestrial bond between humans and the Earth and other species: "Most people are on the world, not in it – have no conscious sympathy or relationship to anything about them – undiffused, separate, and rigidly alone like marbles of polished stone, touching but separate."⁶⁶ Since human alienation from the Earth and non-human earthlings has brought the Anthropocene's marks or wounds to the planet and since many human beings are aware of this fact and debate on the forms of conceptualizing human planetary agency, then Thich Nhat Hahn's global project of reconnection with the Earth, carried out locally by individuals and/or groups, is not mere utopia. He reminds us that apart from being representatives of *homo sapiens* (the thinking man) we can become *homo conscious* (the aware man), an earthling who is aware of the inner-terrestrial component. His Eastern concepts of inter-being and re-binding with the Earth should become pillars of a posthumanist paradigm for the Anthropocene streamed all over the planet along with Haraway's "how-to-save-the-earth" message:

[...] we need to reseed our souls and our home worlds in order to flourish – again or many just for the first time – on a vulnerable planet that is not yet murdered. We need not just reseed but also reinoculating with all the fermenting, fomenting, and nutrient-fixing associates seeds need to thrive. Recuperation is still possible, but only in multispecies Alliance.⁶⁷

Let it be planted in the soils of all Terrans' bodyminds and inspire them to make a planetary coming out: "Yes, I'm Earthbound; I'm an Earthling, too!"

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⁶⁵ When I watched Almereyda's *Hamlet* for the first time, I also missed Nhat Hahn's message.

⁶⁶ J. Muir, *John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir*, Houghton Mifflin Company, The Riverside Press, Cambridge–Boston 1938, p. 320.

⁶⁷ D. Haraway, *Sowing Worlds: A Seed Bag for Terraforming with Earth Others* [in:] M. Grebowicz, H. Merrick (eds.), *Beyond the Cyborg: Adventures with Donna Haraway*, Columbia University Press, New York 2016, p. 117.

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