ANARCHIC HOPE: PEATBOGS, COMMUNITY AND SURVIVAL

JOANNE MATTHEWS

Fig 1, Sphagnum (sphagnum flexuosum) surrounded by heather (Calluna vulgaris) and bog haircap (polytrchum strictum), photo by the author

INTRODUCTION

In recent history, Sphagnum (fig 1.) peatlands have been marginalised areas of land, seen as dangerous and unpredictable. When we look closely, they can teach us about living in community and survival, tools that humans need for adapting to climate breakdown. Bogs present us with a landscape that is unpredictable and everchanging, even as one walks through them, trying not to sink or trip over one is forced into the present. This offers fertile ground to learn about adaptation, embracing precarity and attentiveness in the face of the falsehood of capitalist certainty (Tsing 2015).

With this exploration I will be referring to peatbogs made from Sphagnum moss, situated in Northern Europe (Ireland, England, Scotland and Denmark). Throughout this essay I will argue that peatbogs, and Sphagnum moss, have been marginalised throughout culture and history. Following this I will present the importance of collaboration in community pulling together examples from peatbogs, literature and anarchistic writing. All the while making a case for anarchism as a tool for survival in the face of climate collapse. I will continue with strategies for survival that exist in peatbogs and how we can learn from them. This essay will mainly use writing from science, ecology, literary fiction and anarchism.

This case study is underpinned by ideas from contemporary writers such as Anna Tsing and Heather Swanson, with an understanding that endless economic progress is a myth and we must lean into precarity to survive (Tsing 2015). We are blinkered and need to widen our

net to listen to stories of monsters (Swanson 2017) such as the demonised bog. The demonisation of bogs can be equated with the demonisation of anarchism in popular culture. These forms of life are a threat to society, misunderstood and difficult to control.

This essay takes the view that to begin to fully embrace multispecies assemblages we must realise how the marginalisation of the more than human world, bogs specifically, has happened, and how we must organise as humans in anarchistic communalism in order to live with other species (Price 2019). I will argue that we need to adapt the age-old political philosophy of anarchism, a philosophy that accepts that humans make mistakes and that there is no bright and pain free future ahead (Ross 2019). We need to embrace our fallibility, be curious instead of afraid and disorientate ourselves as we take a leap into the unknown (Tsing 2017). I will draw comparisons and inspiration between peatbogs and anarchistic human societies in theoretical writing and literature. The aim is to create starting points for what these communities could look like using bogs as their inspiration.

WHAT ARE PEATLANDS?

Peatlands, also called mires or bogs, are extensively defined as they shift in shape and ecology from one to the next, adapting to their geography, developing entanglements with other species (Tsing 2015). Peatlands can be defined as ecosystems consisting of decomposing organic material dominated by moss and water (Vitt 2008). Existing mostly in the Northern Hemisphere, forming around 11,000 years ago, these areas of land are sinks for carbon, however their ability for carbon capture has greatly depleted with human existence on the earth (Vitt 2008).

Peatlands are dominated by Sphagnum moss and exist in a state of perpetual growth and decomposition, with Peat forming around 1mm per year (Craft 2016). Part of the bryophyte family which also includes lichens and liverworts, Sphagnum is a small plant that can hold up to 20 times it's body weight in water, which is stored in the plant cells and in the grouping of the plants called hummocks (Irish Peatland Conservation Council 2019). Direct conservation has been lacking for the bryophyte family, with these small plants only being protected by chance when wider habitats, such as broadleaf woodlands, have been regenerated (Rothero 2003).

In places such as the Flow Country in Caithness, Scotland these landscapes are abundant with an array of species including Hen Harriers, dragonfly larva, cotton grass and the humans who walk and currently tend to the land (Flows to the Future 2019).

MARGINALISATION

The myth of progress is dominant in our society, exponential, unnecessary growth and just out of reach perfection keep us tunnelling towards such growth (Hine & Kingsnorth 2009). This damages all species as capitalist ventures extract resources until they are no longer profitable and then abandons them (Tsing 2015). The alienation of peatlands through culture and Anglo-colonisation has put them in the realm of what Anna Tsing (2015) writes about as seemingly empty spaces, when you slow down and pay attention you can see that they are an assemblage of life working together in symbiosis.

Bogs are used negatively in our everyday language, terms such as “bogged-down” meaning to be hindering progress or “wet blanket” used to describe someone spoiling the party or fun (Graham 2012). Or simply the word “bog” to describe the place where one defecates. As my research will show bogs have been demonised by the narratives about them as a result of othering by colonisation and literature. Stories shape the way that humans understand the world and when we listen only through our humanistic lenses, we can’t hear everything (Bennett 2010).

The English swept across Scotland and Ireland claiming and colonising land with their capitalist agenda in the 18th and 19th centuries. Policies which prioritised agriculture and profit for the British Empire were put in place as was the promotion of the idea of beautiful, pristine nature (Gladwin 2014). Bogs were demonised and seen as uncultivated, unbeautiful, so were drained for agriculture. This largescale industrialisation of bogs UK-wide has led to uncoverable ecological damage with only 33% of blanket bogs in Ireland being cited as having the potential to be conserved (Oldfield 1987). Continued bog drainage and commercial tree planting has led to considerable damage to Sphagnum, a central part of the bog ecosystem which is very slow to recover. Indeed, even the Bryologist, who studies mosses, taking the holistic approach to biology, is a rarity and in Scotland, the lack of Bryologists has led to severe gaps in specialised knowledge of this type of plant (Rothero 2003).

Literature has played its part in the narrative around bogs as scary and dangerous places such as the slimy bog witches and kings who steal away young children in Hans Christian Anderson tales (Meredith, 2002). Most notably the Bog Gothic pioneered by the likes of Bram Stoker in his novel *The Snakes Pass* where he uses these “carpets of death” as a symbol of the rejection of modernity whilst simultaneously demonising them (Gladwin 2014).

However, we mustn’t forget that there are some real dangers in bogs for humans and other animals, the many carnivorous plants that thrive in healthy peatlands entice and eat their prey such as the Sundew that blocks the victims throat, strangling it to death (Meredith 2002). Human hands and walking sticks have been found as the remains of walkers being pulled under unawares (Meredith 2002). What this teaches us is that these landscapes demand respect and a curiosity, we must lean into the danger if we are to learn from them (Swanson 2017). The monstrous bog has been instrumental in helping the world for thousands of years by soaking up carbon. However, the monster has been the human all along (Swanson 2017) and as CO_2 levels rise, we face the consequences with run-away climate change.

The marginalisation of bogs has parallels to the marginalisation of self-organising anarchist communities. In the neoliberal mainstream anarchism has a reputation for being chaotic with every person wanting their individual freedom (Ross 2019). As with peatlands, when you look closely you can see that real anarchistic organising takes the shape of solidarity networks, collective funds and non-hierarchical decision making (Chomsky 2013). The pre-colonised Irish people and bog landscape were simultaneously demonised as untamed, when the opposite was true as indigenous people worked with the bogs, only burning small amounts of peat to heat their homes (Gladwin 2014).

COMMUNITY

As one bog differs from the next, they become difficult to define, the adaptable behaviour of the mire offers hope for anarchist futures. Anarchism too has wide definitions; its fallibilities and strengths are that it has no hard and fast rules other than decentralisation and a practice of collective freedom (Davis 2019). As imagined by the likes of Marge Piercy in *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), the central character travels to another time-space where matriarchal societies neighbour one another, each with their own characteristics suited to their locality and needs. In order to escape the globalised control of capitalism, self-organised communities with devolved politics must be created. As with the variations of bogs and mires, a variation of anarcho-communities makes them more difficult to control.

Communities need to have room for different types of people, looking at the formation of Bog Hummocks these can hold 50,000 Sphagnum in 1msq tightly packed together, but some Sphagnum prefer to live on the periphery of the mass however, still connected to the community (Irish Peatland Conservation Council 2019). These flourishing hummocks are a visual example (see fig 2) of an anarchistic model for living. A group of strong individuals who are bound together for strength in numbers (Davis 2019).

Low down, hidden in the boundary layer moss communities slowly and intricately create families with intimacy and care (Kimmerer 2013). When untouched by human destruction these families go on living through thousands of years, self-regulated and in perpetual renewal, self-contained, Sphagnum lives for around five years before decomposing into the peatland below.

The misunderstanding of bog landscapes is an example of a culture of fearing ‘the other’ in popular society. To begin to overcome this and form communities, we must begin by looking at ourselves and all the others that exist on our own bodies, we are covered in foreign entities (Bennett 2010). We are already living in community, changing and adapting with the micro-organisms that live in and on us. (Gilbert 2017).

A life support to other species, scientists have counted over 32,000 microscopic life forms surrounding just one Sphagnum pool, the moss community creates vibrant life in an otherwise nutrient poor acidic soil (Irish Peatland Conservation Council 2019). Working against the narratives of progress the dangerous figure of the bog unsettles the idea of an individualistic society by providing space for symbiosis (Swanson 2017).

The ideal of the anarchist community that is beginning to be imagined in this essay is certainly not thought of with rose-tinted glasses. As with the ecology of the bog, in community conflicts and negotiations will occur. From afar Sphagnum moss can be seen as a monoculture, taking over whole swathes of land and dominate a mire (Vitt, 2008). However, this is a short-sighted view, Sphagnum spreads as from the ground up, rather than in a hierarchy, it grows incredibly slowly allowing for a delicate ecology to thrive including species such as the Pirata piraticus and Lycosa pullata spiders who adapt to the fluctuating temperatures of peatland to lay their eggs (Nørgaard 1951). When peatlands recover from being too dry, they use vascular plants to help them re-establish themselves, the plants become a nursery, an anchor for young Sphagnum (Pouliot 2011). This slow growth of

Sphagnum teaches us that slowing down, making space for others and listening instead of rushing by offers hope in urgency.

Fig 2. Sphagnum moss and bog haircap hummocks in the Black Woods of Rannoch, photo by the author

SURVIVAL AND RESURGENCE

Robin Wall Kimmerer, in her book *Gathering* Moss (2003) tells stories of how amphibious mosses recover strength against setbacks, these were one the first plants to arrive on land 350 million years ago. They adapt to both water and dry land; moss can be dry for lengths of time and revived back to life when they come into contact with water. When moss dries out, it is waiting, it does not grow when it does not have the energy or cell power. But when the rain comes, all moss band together, they cannot rejuvenate alone, they need the power of their community, all roots and shoots clumping together to raise the water level so they can collectively come to life again. This longevity is dependent on the plants' ability to communally live with others, reviving *en masse* when oppressed.

As with the permaculture principle, "the problem is the solution" (Holgrem and Mollison, 1978) we must see the bog's unpredictability not as something to fear and destroy but as a guide for survival. Unpredictability is a truth of life as brilliantly mapped out in Octavia Butlers dystopian novels *The Parable of the Sower* (1993) and the *Parable of the Talents* (1998). The main character Lauren Olamina invents a religion called Earthseed which at its core teaches the truth of change being central to existence. These novels offer for a lesson, to accept change is to accept difference. To survive under individualistic capitalism, we need to recognise how cross-species encounters transform us (Tsing 2015).

The danger of living in community in a collapsing society can be seen in Butlers two parable novels when individuals' pain and suffering are not looked after they become outcasts and aim to destroy the Earthseed community. Such communities then, should exist with communal awareness intertwined and influenced by individual development and vice-versa (Davis 2019). As with bogs being adapted to their locality so too would a multispecies communality be constructed locally, fragile and among all things without forcing will onto them (Le Guin 2017).

Moss offer tools for communal survival, living in the boundary layer, where CO_2 is at its most rich and conditions are most suitable, moss manipulate the air around by thickening and capturing air flow to flourish. The thicker they make themselves the thicker the boundary layer becomes, creating resistance (Kimmerer 2003). The Jutland forest in Denmark has a vast fen that has been vigorously cut away for peat over two thousand years but is still abundant with flowers (Glob 1985). In a constant state of regeneration, peatlands provide a renewal in nutrients which supports many species in regenerating. Human-led models of organising such as sociocracies where leadership shifts over periods of time provide this type of renewal.

In a fast moving and globalised West, we do not have much time to stand and reflect, this damages our cultural preservation (Tsing 2015). I argue that the slow-moving Sphagnum and peat compression is a model for cultural preservation. This has been very literally achieved with the antiseptic nature of the peat bog where human bodies well over 2,000 years have been discovered in Northern Europe, some perfectly preserved with skin and hair. Peat is a rare kind of land that captures moments in time, a museum for plants and animals (Glob 1985). Scottish poet Donald S Murray writes, *Sphagnum moss remembers. It recalls / the touchdown of each lark that tumbles / down upon its surface, the slightness of that weight / recorded in the tendrils of each stem* (Murray 2013).

CONCULSION

The marginalisation of peatlands has been a crucial factor in their demise, through literature they have been othered and portrayed as scary and dangerous places. Additionally, fear has been used as a tool for enabling destruction by Anglo-colonisers to grow profit for the British Empire.

In the face of rapid destruction, Peatlands are beginning a slow recovery as drains are blocked by humans in projects such as Flows to the Future in Northern Scotland. As with community organising, bryophyte conservation has been happening under the radar (Rothero 2003).

With the arts of noticing (Tsing 2017) we can see that these overlooked landscapes are a site for locally adapted, intimate communities that thrive in groups. These masses of land offer a way of being together, models for a multispecies anarchism. This communalism is a way to survive through adaptation and the development of the individual through communalism.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

Aspects of this essay that have fertile ground to be explored further include a multispecies anarachism and what that could look like in the bog context. This would include focussing on a wide range of individual species within peatbog ecology rather than Sphagnum alone, as this would be an interesting way to map the web of connections in a deeper way (Le Guin 2017). I touched on human entanglements within bog ecology, however as this relationship changes over time a more detailed look at how this can flourish as we move forward would be an interesting development. Further developments could also be to look at case studies of anarchistic communities that already exist and to imagine speculative ones to further explore how such places could be expanded to be multispecies communes.

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