

Relations

BEYOND ANTHROPOCENTRISM

13.1

JUNE 2025

Horizons beyond Sentientism

Edited by Francesco Allegri

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Beyond Ethical Visibility*

Rethinking Marine Life as Epistemic Figures in Posthumanism

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7358/rela-2025-01-kara>

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how marine organisms can be reconsidered as epistemic figures within posthumanist thought. While posthumanism has advanced significant critiques of anthropocentrism, it has often privileged terrestrial animals and land-based metaphors in its rethinking of human-nonhuman relations. By contrast, many oceanic lifeforms – such as corals and “Pinna nobilis” – have remained epistemologically marginalized, ethically invisible, and conceptually under-theorized. This paper challenges the dominant frameworks that overlook marine beings whose bodies, temporalities, and ecological functions do not easily lend themselves to anthropomorphic identification. Drawing on feminist materialisms, critical posthumanist theories, and marine humanities, the article proposes an expanded oceanic posthumanism that foregrounds the ontological opacity, multispecies entanglements, and sensory alterities of sea creatures. Rather than treating marine life as passive matter or solely conservation targets, this study positions them as methodological provocations, inviting alternative imaginaries and forms of knowledge beyond terrestrial and ocular-centric paradigms.

Keywords: blue humanities; coral reef; epistemic figures; ethical visibility; marine life; marine posthumanism; nonhuman ethics; octopus; posthumanism; subaquatic posthumanism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Posthumanism has profoundly destabilized the humanist legacy that privileged human exceptionalism, bounded subjectivity, and terrestrial

* I extend my profound gratitude to Professor Funda Gençoğlu, whose intellectual generosity has been a true compass for my academic journey. The foundational ideas of this manuscript surfaced during our insightful office dialogues, taking root and thriving within the invigorating and boundless marine depths of her mentorship.

centrality (Gençoğlu 2021). Yet despite its multispecies turn and critical engagement with more-than-human worlds, posthumanist thought has largely remained grounded in land-based imaginaries. Animals such as wolves, apes, insects, and dogs have populated its ethical terrains, while terrestrial ecosystems serve as its primary metaphoric and material contexts (Braidotti 2013). In contrast, marine life has remained peripheral figuratively submerged within posthumanist epistemology. Oceanic beings that lack mammalian resemblance or affective accessibility – such as jellyfish, octopuses, deep-sea creatures, and bivalves like *Pinna nobilis* – are rarely theorized beyond conservationist or biological paradigms (Alaimo 2016).

This article challenges that lacuna. It argues that marine organisms, precisely in their strangeness, opacity, and non-allegorical presence, are essential figures for developing what might be called a marine posthumanism. This is not merely a thematic shift from land to sea, but a conceptual reorientation that demands attention to other forms of embodiment, temporality, sensation, and relation. Drawing on the critical insights of feminist new materialism (Alaimo 2010), affect theory (Grosz 2004), marine materialism (Neimanis 2017), and oceanic epistemologies, the article explores how specific marine beings defy human comprehension, empathy, and ethical identification and why this defiance matters.

Rather than framing marine life as passive ecological subjects or allegories for human concerns, this study approaches beings such as octopuses, jellyfish, deep-sea creatures, *Pinna nobilis*, and coral reefs as epistemic figures that unsettle terrestrial assumptions about intelligence, agency, and relationality. Each organism reveals a different aspect of posthuman potentiality: the octopus destabilizes unified cognition and corporeal fixity (Godfrey-Smith 2016); jellyfish confound sensation and time through their ghostlike materialities; deep-sea species expose the limits of visibility and narrative (Helmreich 2009); while *Pinna nobilis* and coral colonies resist the logic of individuality and duration altogether.

Through these figures, the article poses a central provocation: What does it mean to engage with life forms that resist being seen, known, or cared for through familiar ethical frames? Can posthumanism reconfigure its own methods to attend to beings who are neither sentient nor spectacular, but nevertheless politically and ontologically significant? The ocean, in this sense, is not only a habitat but a method a site that demands speculative, disoriented, and submerged ways of thinking.

In articulating these questions, this article contributes to blue humanities, posthuman ethics, and critical ocean studies, while simultaneously offering a critique of posthumanism's own visual and affective

economies. It advocates for a submerged posthumanism that neither re-centres the human through marine metaphors, nor aestheticizes oceanic otherness, but instead listens – slowly, cautiously – to the inhuman rhythms of sea life.

2. OCEAN AS METHOD: THINKING WITH FLUID EPISTEMOLOGIES

The ocean is not only the milieu in which these species reside but also the medium through which this article constructs its posthumanist critique. Thinking-with the ocean means thinking with porosity, mutability, and depth, terms that destabilize the fixed categories of Western epistemology and ethics (Helmreich 2009; Neimanis 2017). Oceanic thinking foregrounds the relational, the interstitial, and the distributed over the bounded and autonomous, offering a fluid alternative to the terrestrial metaphors that often dominate both ecological and philosophical discourse.

Posthumanist methodologies that draw on aquatic materiality emphasize opacity rather than transparency, flow rather than fixity, and suspension rather than progression (Alaimo 2010; DeLoughrey 2019). The ocean here is both a space of epistemological difficulty and ontological potential, resisting capture yet demanding engagement. This article adopts the ocean not only as a thematic concern but also as a methodological posture, embracing its resistance to clarity, its deep time rhythms, and its capacity to disturb human conceptual dominance.

3. DEPARTING FROM TERRESTRIAL BIAS: TOWARD A SUACQUATC POSTHUMANISM

Posthumanist thought has been predominantly shaped through terrestrial metaphors and land-based animal figures (wolves, elephants, primates, and insects) through which critiques of anthropocentrism and speciesism are articulated (Despret 2004; Braidotti 2013). While valuable, this emphasis often recycles inherited structures of empathy, cognition, and proximity, offering only a partial decentring of the human. Even when nonhuman agency is recognized, it is often modulated through familiarity, visibility, and affective resonance.

Animals that can be gazed upon, touched, or anthropomorphized tend to dominate the discourse. This paper argues that such terrestrial posthumanism's, while subversive in intent, are limited in scope. A shift toward subaquatic posthumanism necessitates engagement with life-forms that exist beyond terrestrial legibility organisms that are opaque, radically embodied, and inaccessible to normative ethical frameworks. Marine species such as octopuses, deep-sea creatures, and bivalves resist representation and destabilize human taxonomies, rendering them methodologically potent.

Moreover, the ocean itself functions as an epistemological abyss, a realm that absorbs, dissolves, and reconfigures knowledge (Helmreich 2009). While terrestrial posthumanism often seeks connection through familiarity or affective alignment, subaquatic posthumanism embraces estrangement, inaccessibility, and ontological unsettlement. This approach is not about deepening empathy, but about recalibrating how we think about relation, agency, and life beyond the metrics of visibility and likeness.

In this sense, the paper does not merely supplement terrestrial posthumanist thought, but redirects its methodological commitments, embracing marine life as active co-producers of theory and as figures that call for posthumanist speculation untethered from the gravitational pull of the land.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: OCEANIC EPISTEMIC FIGURES AND SUBMERGED POSTHUMANISM

Posthumanism, especially in its feminist, materialist, and affective strands, has insisted on decentering the human subject not only as epistemic authority but also as ethical horizon (Barad 2007; Braidotti 2019). However, despite these conceptual breakthroughs, posthumanist scholarship has tended to favour what Astrida Neimanis (2017) calls landlocked imaginaries, frameworks still tethered to surface-level anthropocentric relations, visual metaphors, and mammalian models of subjectivity. In such accounts, animals that trigger empathy, mirror cognition, or invite allegorical identification often to become the primary figures of nonhuman agency. Sea life, in contrast, has remained difficult to think with: fluid, amorphous, and opaque, it resists incorporation into familiar ethical or philosophical grammars.

This article proposes a submerged posthumanism that is not merely about shifting representational focus from land to sea but about embrac-

ing the ocean as an epistemological disturbance, a medium through which subjectivity, temporality, and agency are reconfigured. Building on Karen Barad's (2007) notion of intra-action, Stacy Alaimo's (2010) trans-corporeality, and idea of the impossible ethic, marine beings are approached not as passive referents but as active agents of conceptual transformation. The sea is not merely a setting for posthumanist thought, it is its provocation.

In this framing, epistemic figures are not symbols or representations, but materially situated beings whose mode of existence unsettles and reconfigures dominant categories of thought. The octopus becomes an epistemic figure of distributed intelligence and plastic embodiment; the jellyfish, one of temporal disjunction and non-affectable life; *Pinna nobilis*, one of colonial vulnerability and collective dwelling; and coral reefs, of symbiotic time and fragile interdependence. These beings are not theorized through their similarity to the human, but through their estrangement from human-centered schemas of subjecthood and survival.

Moreover, the sea demands a methodological disorientation, an epistemology that accepts uncertainty, partiality, and the failure to fully know or represent. Here, Donna Haraway's (2016) call to stay with the trouble finds new resonance in oceanic contexts: marine life does not present itself for easy theorization or ethical incorporation. Oceanic posthumanism must attend to bodies we cannot touch, voices we cannot hear, relations we cannot feel. This form of engagement is not about empathetic extension, but about developing speculative accountability, a mode of thinking that neither projects nor retreats from alterity.

By foregrounding marine beings as epistemic ruptures rather than ethical companions, this article contributes to an emerging body of literature that critiques posthumanism's latent visualise and anthropomorphic comfort. It asserts that oceanic life (especially the overlooked, the unfamiliar, the unreadable) can serve as catalysts for new conceptual practices that decanter vision, touch, and affect as dominant modes of posthuman recognition.

In doing so, it aligns with what Stefan Helmreich (2009) has called alien oceanography, a framework that does not merely study marine life, but lets it reshape our modes of inquiry. The ocean becomes a theoretical collaborator, not a thematic object. To think posthumanism from the sea is to surrender to depths that defy capture, to relations that unsettle the very foundation of ethical subjectivity, and to lives that elude representational recuperation.

5. LOCATING EPISTEMIC FIGURES: WHY THESE SPECIES?

The selection of specific marine species in this study, namely octopuses, jellyfish, deep-sea creatures, *Pinna nobilis*, and coral reefs, is not an arbitrary act of zoological interest, but a deliberate methodological and epistemological move. These organisms are not merely objects of ethical attention or ecological concern; they function as posthumanist figures that complicate the humanist tradition of legible, sympathetic, and cognitively familiar nonhuman others.

Posthumanist thinkers such as Braidotti (2013), Alaimo (2010), and Neimanis (2017) have long emphasized the importance of challenging anthropocentric hierarchies by shifting attention toward the opaque, the inhuman, and the environmentally entangled. However, much of the posthumanist discourse, particularly within animal studies, has revolved around terrestrial animals that possess mammalian qualities: elephants, wolves, primates, and domestic pets that invite affective identification and moral sympathy (Despret 2004). This terrestrial bias is a limitation that this paper seeks to counteract.

Marine species like octopuses and jellyfish defy cognitive and sensory projections, they are neither easily legible nor readily anthropomorphized. Deep-sea creatures, inhabiting zones beyond visual and acoustic perception, represent the limits of human knowledge production and sensory privilege. *Pinna nobilis*, a fragile, endangered bivalve, and coral reefs, as decaying ecosystems, are not simply passive victims of climate change but material figures that embody vulnerability, interdependence, and spectral ecological futures (Tsing 2015; Haraway 2016). By attending to these beings not as metaphors but as epistemic figures, this paper argues for a mode of thinking-with marine life that destabilizes the visual-ethical axis of traditional environmentalism and offers alternative posthumanist imaginaries.

5.1. *Thinking with the octopus: distributed cognition and embodied estrangement*

The octopus has emerged as a recurring figure in both posthumanist and animal studies literature due to its radically alien intelligence, morphological flexibility, and sensorimotor complexity. Unlike mammals or vertebrates typically used to theorize nonhuman agency, the octopus resists anthropomorphic incorporation. It is neither domesticated nor

easily legible through faciality, empathy, or kinship-based ethics (Godfrey-Smith 2016). Its body, composed of a decentralized neural network where two-thirds of neurons reside in its arms, offers a material challenge to conventional cognitive models premised on centralized, cranial intelligence (Hanlon and Messenger 2018).

In the context of submerged posthumanism, the octopus becomes more than a curious anomaly, it is an epistemic disturbance. Rosi Braidotti's (2013) emphasis on nomadic subjectivity finds a radical instantiation in the octopus's bodily autonomy and fluid territoriality. Each arm, capable of semi-independent sensing and decision-making, undermines not only human-centric cognition but also the unity of the subject itself. As Vinciane Despret (2004) argues, animals do not simply have bodies, they are their bodies in situated, performative, and contextually responsive ways. The octopus, in this sense, performs a distributed self that cannot be mapped onto classical Cartesian or even phenomenological accounts of the body.

Moreover, the octopus resists the temporal and affective coordinates through which nonhuman animals are often integrated into ethical thought. It is not cute, loyal, or expressive in ways that evoke compassion. As Patricia MacCormack (2012) notes, posthuman ethics must be cautious of affective shortcuts that merely extend human moral frameworks to animals based on likeness. The octopus, with its camouflage, protean movement, and largely solitary life, withdraws from such projections. Its alterity is not a failure of recognition but a condition of thought.

Octopuses also resist visibility in a more literal sense. Their bodies merge into rock, coral, or sediment, suggesting an ontological opacity that speaks to the limits of representational politics. Marine beings often occupy forms and modes of being that defy anthropocentric registers of affect and meaning. The octopus's shape-shifting camouflage is thus not only a survival mechanism but an epistemological refusal, an embodied critique of the visualise that dominates both ethics and epistemology in human thought.

Furthermore, the octopus invites a rethinking of communication and relation. Unlike cetaceans, which have been valorised for their vocalizations and sociality, octopuses communicate through colour, gesture, and texture, forms of signalling that bypass logos and echo what Erin Manning (2009) calls pre-acceleration in affective movement. This non-symbolic, affective semiosis complicates assumptions about language, meaning, and interspecies relationality, challenging us to imagine modes of relation that are not rooted in mutual recognition or emotional mirroring.

Ultimately, to think with the octopus is to engage with a form of life that offers no stable ground for moral incorporation or cognitive identification. Its intelligence is not like ours, and its body is not legible in familiar semiotic terms. But precisely in this radical difference lies its epistemic potential. The octopus disturbs our taxonomies, aesthetic sensibilities, and ethical intuitions, demanding a posthumanism that is neither consolatory nor universalizing. It forces a thinking that begins not with the human as normative measure but with the dissolution of such a measure in the depths of material alterity.

In this sense, the octopus stands not as an object of empathy but as a conceptual irritant, a being that does not simply extend posthumanist arguments but twists them into unfamiliar shapes. It is a site of conceptual friction, calling for an ethical imagination that does not rely on recognition but is willing to dwell in the discomfort of not-knowing.

5.2. *Dwelling in the drift: jellyfish, suspended temporality, and the ethics of indifference*

Jellyfish, soft-bodied, gelatinous, and structurally simple, are among the most ancient multicellular organisms on the planet, predating the dinosaur by hundreds of millions of years. Despite their evolutionary endurance, they have long been considered non-entities in dominant epistemologies: passive, brainless, and devoid of agency. Yet it is precisely this dispositional opacity, their lifeways of drifting, stinging, and suspending, that makes jellyfish compelling epistemic figures for posthumanist critique. Their existence challenges deeply rooted associations between consciousness, agency, and value, inviting a radical rethinking of what it means to matter (Barad 2007) in marine ontologies.

Jellyfish bodies resist the instrumental rationality that governs both scientific observation and ethical inclusion. They are difficult to measure, uncooperative to experimental control, and often described in terms of excess: too many, too alien, too fragile. As Stacy Alaimo (2010) notes, creatures like jellyfish disturb the neat boundaries between human and environment by enacting forms of agency that are neither intentional nor recognizable in human terms. Their locomotion, achieved by pulsing their bell-like bodies, relies not on directional control, but on rhythm, buoyancy, and surrender to oceanic currents. They are not navigators but drifters, evoking what Astrida Neimanis (2017) calls watery thinking: a

mode of embodied cognition that privileges porosity over control, immersion over mastery.

Jellyfish also destabilize temporalities. Their lifecycles include both sessile (polyp) and mobile (medusa) phases, as well as asexual and sexual reproduction, a refusal of linear, reproductive futurism that queers' assumptions about life trajectories (Haraway 2016). The so-called immortal jellyfish (*Turritopsis dohrnii*), capable of reverting to earlier life stages, further collapses human notions of life and death, aging and progress. In this sense, jellyfish embody a temporal suspension that disorients anthropocentric assumptions about finitude, development, and teleological value. As Irigaray (1993) writes, feminine corporeality, fluid, cyclical, and unbounded, has long been repressed in favour of rigid, masculinist metaphysics. Jellyfish materialize an aquatic version of this critique, not through symbolic representation but through their very ontogenesis.

Furthermore, jellyfish challenge ethical frameworks premised on visibility, expressiveness, and kin-based proximity. They do not look back at us, nor do they offer interfaces for empathy. In a cultural milieu saturated with animal affect and spectacle, their presence is often marked by unease, annoyance, or ecological alarmism (e.g., jellyfish blooms). This affective discomfort may be productive. As Mel Y. Chen (2012) argues, discomfort with certain bodies often reveals the epistemic scaffolding of normativity, what is recognized as life, intelligence, or worth. To encounter jellyfish is to confront a form of life that is neither assimilable nor narratable. Their opacity is not a lack but a form of ethical presence that refuses consumption.

Marine materialist perspectives have emphasized the role of gelatinous beings in oceanic systems not as marginal anomalies but as central nodes of ecological interaction. Jellyfish are nutrient recyclers, bloom indicators, and prey-predator hybrids whose biological rhythms respond acutely to anthropogenic changes such as warming, acidification, and eutrophication. Thus, they also expose the entanglement of biological and political ecologies. As Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2017) observes, oceans have been systematically flattened in Western thought, as voids, surfaces, or transit zones. Jellyfish refuse this flattening. Their very embodiment recalls the viscosity, danger, and thickness of oceanic being.

Ultimately, jellyfish are not simply exotic figures to be metaphorized. They are ontological provocations. Their refusal to be coherent, readable, or emotionally instrumentalized invites a posthumanism of relinquishment, an ethics that does not require proximity, utility, or similarity. To

think with the jellyfish is to sit with forms of life that are not designed to be understood, and in doing so, to recalibrate our assumptions about relationality, attention, and care.

5.3. *Abyssal ontologies: deep-sea creatures and the limits of epistemological illumination*

The abyssal depths of the ocean harbour life forms whose very existence destabilizes the human sensorium and epistemological orientation. Far from the charismatic mammals that dominate marine discourse, deep-sea organisms such as anglerfish, gulper eels, tube worms, or amphipods reside in conditions of darkness, pressure, and isolation that remain inaccessible to direct human experience. They inhabit environments where sensory norms collapse, metabolism follows geologic temporality, and survival is entwined with chemosynthetic processes. These beings constitute not simply biological anomalies but ontological provocations, figures that resist human modes of intelligibility and relationality.

From a posthumanist standpoint, deep-sea life functions as a rupture in both epistemic and ethical terms. These organisms frustrate the scopical regimes of modern science and the affective tropes of animal ethics alike. They do not cry, perform pain, or mirror mammalian subjectivity; instead, they drift beyond the perimeter of empathic legibility. As Rosi Braidotti (2013) suggests, posthuman subjectivity emerges through becoming-imperceptible, a formulation that here becomes materially literal. Deep-sea creatures dwell not just beneath light but beneath concept, sense, and care. Their very unknowability becomes an ethical injunction, aligned with demand for the right to opacity.

Technoscientific engagements with these creatures, via submersibles, deep-sea trawls, and remotely operated vehicles, do not overcome their epistemic resistance but rather dramatize it. As Helmreich (2009) observes, marine science becomes a speculative endeavour, caught between empirical rigor and narrative invention. In the case of abyssal life, the act of knowing is itself estranged: these creatures are named yet ungraspable, categorized yet ontologically elusive. They reorient the question from what can be known to what must remain unknowable, an epistemological humility that marks the boundaries of posthumanist thought.

Ethically, their radical alterity compels a rethinking of care, not as projection or affective mirroring, but as cohabitation with forms that neither

seek nor return recognition. This is what Kirksey and Helmreich (2010) term “an ethics of interruption”: the capacity to be disoriented, to dwell in discomfort, to relinquish the demand for resonance. Deep-sea creatures interrupt anthropocentric imaginaries of marine stewardship, replacing them with a politics of unknowing and an aesthetics of estrangement.

Moreover, the deep sea is not a void but a sedimented space of power. It contains fiber optic cables, mineral reserves, military surveillance, and waste depositories, making it both infrastructural and sacrificial. DeLoughrey (2017) and Braverman (2019) remind us that the abyss is geopolitically and economically inscribed. To think with deep-sea creatures is thus to confront not only the limits of epistemology but also the material politics of invisibility: whose lives are buried, whose ecologies are rendered disposable.

Finally, these beings resist ecological aesthetics of beauty and harmony. Their grotesque, alien morphologies elicit neither wonder nor empathy, but estrangement. Yet in their very refusal to become legible symbols, they open the possibility for posthumanist theorizing that is not analogical but ontological. They are not signs of something else, they are what disturbs signification itself.

To theorize with deep-sea life is to relinquish mastery, embrace untranslatability, and dwell in the darkness not as deficit but as epistemic dignity. These creatures do not become ethical because we recognize them, they remain ethical because we cannot.

5.4. *Pinna nobilis and the politics of fragility: localized extinctions and the ethics of relational vulnerability*

Pinna nobilis, commonly known as the noble pen shell, is a large endemic bivalve of the Mediterranean Sea that has recently become emblematic of the silent collapse of marine ecosystems. Once widespread and legally protected under various national and international frameworks, populations of *Pinna nobilis* have undergone dramatic decline due to mass mortality events caused by a protozoan parasite (*Haplosporidium pinnae*) exacerbated by warming waters, pollution, and anthropogenic stressors. As a sessile, filter-feeding organism with minimal human aesthetic appeal and little economic value, *Pinna nobilis* does not benefit from the charismatic species protection logic. Yet its ecological role as a keystone species, providing habitat for over 140 other marine organisms, renders its disappearance a collapse far beyond the individual species.

For posthumanist inquiry, *Pinna nobilis* offers a unique case of what could be termed relational extinction, a process in which the loss of a non-charismatic species silently cascades across interdependent life-forms and affects multispecies infrastructures. Unlike emblematic animals often positioned at the centre of conservation campaigns, *Pinna nobilis* remains largely unrepresented in marine imaginaries. This epistemic marginality is not accidental but reflects what Thom van Dooren (2014) calls violent ignorance, a socially mediated refusal to recognize certain beings as worthy of grief, care, or attention. The ethical implications of such omissions are profound: Who gets to count as grievable life? Who enters the human field of affect and politics? *Pinna nobilis* thus serves as an anchor species for interrogating both the ontologies and exclusions of marine conservation discourse.

Moreover, *Pinna nobilis* inhabits a liminal zone, not only ecologically (between sand and seagrass, land and sea), but politically. Its status as an endemic species renders it subject to regionally fragmented governance structures. While the European Union's Habitats Directive lists it as strictly protected (Annex IV), enforcement remains uneven, and many Mediterranean states lack the monitoring infrastructure or political will to intervene effectively. Here, we encounter a friction between legal inclusion and political indifference, underscoring what Braidotti (2013) describes as the paradox of posthuman vulnerability: a being that is simultaneously hyper-regulated and utterly exposed.

The plight of *Pinna nobilis* also disrupts dominant temporalities of ecological thinking. Its demise has not occurred through a slow, background process but as an abrupt extinction event within a decade. This speed challenges the gradualist assumptions of many conservation models and brings urgency to the ethical question of response-ability (Haraway 2016), how to respond, and with whom, in moments of acute multispecies crisis. The collapse of *Pinna nobilis* populations is not simply an environmental loss but a relational wound, disclosing the fragility of the biotic networks we barely recognize until they fail.

From a posthumanist standpoint, the *Pinna nobilis* case also invites reflection on the aesthetics of marine invisibility. Unlike coral reefs or dolphins, it is not photogenic; unlike jellyfish, it does not proliferate spectacularly in degraded conditions. Instead, its ecological labour occurs in silence, filtering water, stabilizing sediment, nurturing others. Its decline, therefore, is a disappearance of function, not just form. In this sense, *Pinna nobilis* stands as an emblem of what Astrida Neimanis

(2017) calls hydro commons: the submerged entanglements that sustain life yet evade representation.

Finally, *Pinna nobilis* offers a model for rethinking marine ethics not in terms of charismatic affect, but through fragility as method. This involves cantering the capacities of beings to be affected and to affect others, not in heroic terms, but through their sheer embeddedness in more-than-human ecologies. It asks us to move from heroic conservation to care ecologies, from visibility to vulnerability, and from species charisma to interspecies interdependence.

5.5. Coral reefs as epistemological figures: spectral ecologies and the aesthetics of collapse

Coral reefs, often described as the rainforests of the sea, occupy a unique place in marine epistemology. Their vibrant visuality, ecological richness, and vulnerability to anthropogenic stressors have rendered them both scientifically instrumental and culturally symbolic. However, this visibility often comes at the cost of epistemic flattening, corals are typically understood either as indicators of climate change or as tourist spectacle, thus reducing their ontological complexity. In posthumanist terms, coral reefs exemplify what Stacy Alaimo (2016) calls trans-corporeality, material zones where human, nonhuman, chemical, and climatological forces intra-act in continuous, dynamic co-constitution.

Corals are not singular beings but multispecies assemblages, holobionts composed of coral polyps and symbiotic zooxanthellae algae, embedded in calcified exoskeletons that both create and depend upon habitat. Their bleaching, caused by rising sea temperatures and acidification, signifies not only physiological stress but a rupture in relational ontologies. When symbiotic algae are expelled, the coral's colour fades, and so does the interspecies relationship that sustains its being. This whitening is both literal and symbolic, embodying what Kathryn Yusoff (2018) terms the colour of extinction: a politics of erasure through climate that renders life increasingly spectral.

The epistemic role of corals in climate science, especially in the discourse of tipping points, illustrates how marine life becomes abstracted into data points, while their lifeworld's remain largely ignored. In this sense, coral reefs are not only ecological indicators but also ethical signposts, asking how we might account for more-than-human suffering in an era of planetary upheaval. As Neimanis (2017) suggests, the ocean is

not merely a stage for crises but a weather-world in itself, where feeling, knowing, and acting unfold through aqueous entanglements.

Coral reefs thus emerge as watery witnesses to the Anthropocene, holding within their polyps the entangled histories of colonial extractivism, tourism economies, and scientific abstraction.

At the same time, corals complicate posthumanist ethics by resisting individualized affect. Unlike whales or octopuses, corals do not elicit empathy through cognition or movement. Their slow death is often invisible, unfolding at temporal scales beyond human perception. Yet it is precisely this spectrality, this disappearing without spectacle, that challenges anthropocentric models of grief and care. The coral's collapse is not a moment but a duration, a slow violence that undermines the very conditions of marine life.

Furthermore, coral reefs function as material memory, layered infrastructures of accumulated time, growth, and decay. As Elizabeth Grosz (2004) argues, matter is not inert but temporalized, holding traces of what has passed and possibilities of what might still come. In this view, coral skeletons are not ruins but archives, registering both the life that was, and the futures foreclosed by thermal stress. Their fragmenting bodies tell of planetary trajectories gone awry, offering an aqueous critique of linear progress narratives.

Finally, coral reefs invite a reconsideration of the visual regimes through which marine life is made legible. Their imageability has rendered them central to climate campaigns, yet this very visibility risks appropriating them as sacrificial icons (Nixon 2011), beings made to die so that others may learn. A posthumanist ethics, by contrast, would move from representation to relationality, from imaging to imagining-with. To think with coral is to slow down, to attune to temporalities that resist urgency and to acknowledge the relational infrastructures upon which even the most seemingly passive marine life depends.

6. SPECULATIVE METHODOLOGIES AND EPISTEMIC FRACTURES IN MARINE POSTHUMANISM

The five case studies explored in this article do not merely offer isolated instances of marine life as exceptional or symbolically rich figures; rather, they collectively constitute a challenge to anthropocentric epistemologies that govern how knowledge is structured, what counts as legible life,

and which forms of relationality are permitted in dominant ethical and scientific paradigms. By engaging with marine creatures across sensory, cognitive, temporal, and ontological planes, the article traces a method of thinking with the sea that resists abstraction, domestication, and instrumentalization.

Each selected organism, octopus, jellyfish, deep-sea creatures, *Pinna nobilis*, and coral reefs, does not merely inhabit the ocean, but functions as an epistemic irritant, a conceptual provocation, and a figural disturbance. These beings are not illustrative case studies, metaphors, or symbols for human conditions. Rather, they unsettle the very frameworks through which posthumanist thought is constituted and articulated. This approach, then, does not seek synthesis or cohesion; it embraces dissonance and opacity as ontological virtues.

Octopuses, as figures of distributed cognition and bodily estrangement, disrupt the Cartesian and even phenomenological subject-object dyad by exemplifying non-centralized intelligence and fluid embodiment. In contrast, jellyfish bring forth the question of affect without address: how can we formulate an ethics that does not require recognition, mirroring, or similarity? Here, the drift becomes a metaphor not for passivity but for an alternative temporality, one that demands the relinquishing of control and mastery.

Deep-sea creatures complicate the desire for epistemological totality by literally withdrawing from light, vision, and surface accessibility. They expose the anthropocentric impulse to render all life visible, knowable, and categorically determined, thus inviting a posthumanist reconsideration of unknowability not as failure but as ontological dignity. *Pinna nobilis*, on the other hand, reorients posthumanist ethics toward localized extinction and fragile entanglement. As a creature whose decline has gone largely unnoticed except by those intimately attuned to its habitat, the *pina* embodies the politics of relational vulnerability, a framework where proximity does not guarantee protection, and visibility does not ensure care.

Coral reefs, as epistemological figures of spectral ecology, present an affective and aesthetic crisis. Their bleaching and collapse are not just environmental but also epistemic events: they interrupt the temporality of environmentalism that seeks to act “in time”. They demand that we think in ruins, with ghosts, in decay. They ask whether posthumanism can be temporalized not only toward futures but also in mourning, latency, and aesthetic incompleteness.

This progression from theory to figure reflects a speculative methodology grounded in situated vignettes, discontinuous ontologies, and non-

anthropocentric ethics. It refuses both the symbolic unification of marine life and the taxonomic flattening of difference. Instead, it mobilizes incoherence, opacity, and estrangement as productive ruptures, cracks through which alternative epistemes can emerge. These figures of marine alterity are not merely objects of inquiry; they are co-theorists, agents in the reconstitution of how we think life, ethics, and planetary futures.

What emerges, then, is a constellation of more-than-human encounters that resist instrumental logic and provoke methodological hesitation. In doing so, this article contributes not only to posthumanist discourse but to the epistemological sensibilities necessary for a politics of cohabitation in a damaged world.

7. CONCLUSION: OCEANIC ESTRANGEMENTS AND THE FUTURE(S) OF POSTHUMANIST THOUGHT

This article has proposed that marine life, when approached not merely as ecological entities but as epistemological and ethical figures, can radically unsettle the assumptions that continue to haunt even the most critical strands of posthumanist thought. From the distributed cognition of the octopus to the spectral collapse of coral reefs, from the abyssal unknowability of deep-sea creatures to the fragile extinction of *Pinna nobilis*, these life forms resist stabilization, representation, and assimilation into a coherent humanist ethic.

Crucially, the sea is not invoked here as a metaphorical frontier for speculative thought, but as a site of ontological interruption, where the grammar of posthumanism is tested, stretched, and occasionally broken. The marine lives examined in this study do not function merely as examples or allegories. They produce theory. They demand that posthumanism not only speak about the nonhuman, but with it, and more radically, allow nonhuman agencies to speak the epistemic conditions of posthumanist inquiry itself.

By foregrounding opacity, estrangement, and affective indifference, this article has challenged the tendency within posthumanist discourse to seek reconciliation, connection, or mutual intelligibility with nonhuman beings. Instead, it has argued for an ethics that can accommodate dissonance, loss, and incommensurability. Such an ethics does not abandon responsibility, it redefines it as something that occurs in the absence of reciprocity, in the space where relation fails or dissolves.

In doing so, the article has also advanced a speculative methodology attuned to the discontinuities and asymmetries that characterize marine life-worlds. It invites a shift away from relational harmony and toward ontological fracture as a productive site of critical thought. It imagines a posthumanism that swims not toward synthesis, but within the turbulences, abysses, and spectrality's of the sea.

Ultimately, this study calls for a reorientation of posthumanist inquiry, one that listens to the ocean not as a passive setting or metaphor, but as a theorizing force. In a time of ecological collapse, species extinction, and epistemic hubris, we must learn not only to care for marine life but to let marine life trouble the way we care, know, and think.

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How to cite this paper: Karlı, Aygün. 2025. "Beyond Ethical Visibility: Rethinking Marine Life as Epistemic Figures in Posthumanism". *Relations. Beyond Anthropocentrism* 13 (1): 45-62. <https://doi.org/10.7358/rela-2025-01-kara>