

Editorial: Courses of Nature

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If the humanities are built around the idea of the human, they rest on a foundation of ideas about nature. In the disciplinary divisions that order modern knowledge, the natural world - its physical laws and nonhuman materialities, its textures and structures and processes – have long been considered the realm of science, as declared by the name of the world’s most famous academic journal: *Nature*. The humanities, meanwhile, have mainly been about everything that nature supposedly is not. Language, culture, politics, art, history, philosophy – these are the things that have been made to mark the humanness of the human, setting us apart from the rest of the living world. Nature, in this framework, can mean many things: it is the raw material of society and culture, inert matter to be transformed by human hands and brains; it is an object of knowledge, to be placed under a microscope and converted into laws and equations and data; it is a threat to be quelled by technology and modernity; it is a symbol for something other than itself, a catalyst for human emotion, a secular stand-in for god.

Today, at the same moment as humans are confronted with the accelerating threat of planetary destruction, the separation of ‘us’ from ‘it’ seems to be crumbling, and the relationship between the human and the nonhuman – between nature and culture – becomes an increasingly critical question. Despite these apparent divisions, nature has certainly always been present in the humanities: our disciplines have approached the natural world in terms of how it is turned into meaning, its representations woven throughout art, literature, and philosophy, its status shaped by the political and aesthetic currents of each historical moment. This issue of *Junctions* asks what place nature has in the humanities today, what place the human has in nature, and whether it makes sense to separate the two. We are interested in how our disciplines might address nature not only as metaphor, symbol or aesthetic, but as a material and political question of survival.

This introduction will trace a path through some of the meanings that have accumulated around the word *nature*, as well as some of its offshoots and outgrowths: wilderness, environment, climate, ecology or geology. It will reflect on some of the new natures that seem today to be emerging (or perhaps reflowering after a long hibernation, or evolving into new morphologies). These courses of nature interrogate what we mean by the ‘human’, a concept closely involved with questions of identity, agency and power. What does it mean to reinstall the *anthropos* at

the centre of planetary agency, and simultaneously to recognize our fundamental dependence on nonhuman forces?

‘NOTHING BUT US’

For a long time, nature’s place in the humanities was as an object of suspicion. The natural, after all, has often been mobilized in the service of power. The natural has served as a foundation or a bulwark for colonial exploitation and scientific racism; for gendered violence and the heteronormative family; for unequal divisions of labour and land. The business of the humanities has been, in large part, a practice of de-naturalizing: laying bare the historical processes, representational conventions, and cultural contingencies that produce what seems to be given. From early feminist critiques of gender roles to queer theory’s attack on the ‘natural’ status of reproductive heterosexual desire to postcolonial work on racial hierarchies of primitivism and civilization, the critique of power has been intimately tied to a critique of nature’s politicized status. Such politicization is not only found in ideas about ‘human nature’, but also in representations, attitudes and approaches to nonhuman nature: wild animals, rugged landscapes and exoticized climates have all been recruited in projects of power and control. As Bruno Latour writes, ‘politics does not fall neatly on one side of a divide and nature on the other. From the time the term ‘politics’ was invented, every type of politics has been defined by its relation to nature’ (2004: 1).

Such a critique was necessary against a discourse, long dominant and still strong, in which ‘nature’ signified both *the way things are* and *the way things should be* - a static structure of hierarchies and systems, as inevitable and unchangeable as the weather. But lately the weather does not seem so unchangeable after all.

From its onset, knowledge of climate change was tangled up with questions of representation and meaning, with the unstable division between human and nonhuman. In 1989, in one of the first books to articulate the gravity of global warming for a popular audience, author and activist Bill McKibben drew a direct connection between the physical destruction of nature and its imaginative degradation:

An idea, a relationship, can go extinct, just like an animal or a plant. The idea in this case is ‘nature’, the separate and wild province, the world apart from man [...] It is too early to tell exactly how much harder the wind will blow, how much hotter the sun will shine. But the *meaning* of the wind, the sun, the rain – of nature – has

already changed. Yes, the wind still blows – but no longer from some other sphere, some inhuman place. (1989: 48)

Climate change, for McKibben, transforms not only the material world we inhabit, but also our cognitive relationship to it. *The End of Nature* argued that human activity had decimated not only particular species and ecosystems but the autonomy of nature itself, and with it everything that the concept signified for humans: ‘We have deprived nature of its independence, and that is fatal to its meaning. Nature's independence is its meaning; without it, there is nothing but us’ (1989: 54). There is something paradoxical about this story: the very moment that nature collapses into humanity is the same moment humanity confronts its existential dependence on nature. The moment there is ‘nothing but us’ is the same moment we become conscious of a future in which there is anything but us – a planet where ‘we’ no longer exist and ‘nature’s independence’ is restored.

For other scholars, though, the ‘end of nature’ was hardly a new phenomenon. In his influential essay ‘The Trouble with Wilderness’, environmental historian William Cronon argues that the idea of the natural world as a ‘separate and wild province’ and an ‘inhuman place,’ as McKibben put it (1989: 48), is itself a human product. At a time when mainstream environmentalism was still in thrall to the mission of preservation, pleading that small corners of the planet be roped off and protected from the footprints of modernity, Cronon insisted that an effective environmental politics must loosen its embrace of the wilderness ideal. Wilderness, the paradigm of a pristinely humanless realm, is ‘quite profoundly a human creation - indeed, the creation of very particular human cultures at very particular moments in human history’ (1995: 69). It is also a creation whose imaginative power is tied inextricably to the anxiety of its disappearance. The ‘idea’ whose loss McKibben mourns, for Cronon, is not a universal story of Man and Nature, but specific and political, tied to American national mythologies of ‘the sublime and the frontier’ (72), tangled up with colonization, religion, masculinity and class. Nature again becomes the object of suspicion, a leafy camouflage for politics and power, as wilderness is accused of representing a ‘flight from history’ (79).

The project of uncovering nature’s place in ideological structures and nation-building processes remains an important one, and it is by no means an exclusively American phenomenon. In this issue, Daniel Hendrikse’s article explores a very differently politicized narrative of nature. Contrary to the American wilderness ideal, in the German Democratic Republic, ‘industry and nature were integrated into one entity’ – a story of mutual progress that aimed both to solve

man's alienation from nature' and to 'move the realms of society and nature together towards the future.' Instead of nature as a pre-civilized world beyond history, here it became part of history's progressive onward march.

In such analyses of how nature has been mythologized for political ends, the alterity and agency of nature itself always hovers under the surface. Cronon does not evade the existence of 'something irreducibly nonhuman, something profoundly Other than yourself,' granting that '[w]ilderness is made of that too' (1995: 70). His argument is not that the whole world is a human construction, but rather, that we must cease to see nature as something *out there* and learn to better notice nonhuman presence in our everyday spaces, dwelling with the wild in the domestic. While Hendrikse's paper makes clear that combining rather than separating 'man' and 'nature' does not guarantee an environmentally responsible politics, the promise of that combination seems nonetheless to be resurfacing. Humanities scholars are increasingly turning towards ideas of entanglement, ecology and cohabitation to make sense of what it means to be human and what it means to be natural today.

THE (POST)HUMANITIES IN A MULTISPECIES WORLD

The idea of the posthuman is most immediately associated with technology – what we tend to posit as the opposite of nature. Think of the posthuman and you think first of the cyborg, the artificial intelligence, the endless remaking of the human body with medicine and data and global communication networks and all the other prostheses we use to dramatically extend the capacities of our fragile animal existence. But increasingly it is the animal part that keeps surfacing into theory and thought. Even Donna Haraway's famous cyborg, the first emblematic figure of the posthuman, born of war machines and microchips in 1985, was a creature of the earth: it marked 'precisely where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed. Far from signaling a walling off of people from other living beings, cyborgs signal disturbingly and pleurably tight coupling' (1991 [1985]: 152). The evolution of Haraway's own thought reflects a broader shift in interest from technologies to animalities. From the cyborg she turned to primates, asking how 'material and symbolic threads interweave in the fabric of late twentieth-century nature' (1989: 1), then to the domestic figure of her dog, theorizing the meanings of 'companion species' for human identity and the 'significant otherness' that animal intimacies can embody (2003). More recently, she has been developing ideas of 'tentacular thinking' and the complexity of multispecies cohabitation (2016). As a pioneer of the science-humanities frontier in theorizing nature, Haraway's influence unsurprisingly lingers throughout

this issue. As well as a review of her latest publication, *Staying with the Trouble*, two of the other articles in this issue can be mapped onto her creaturely trajectory. Jessica Sanfilippo delves into primate culture from a different angle, reading a literary representation of human-animal kinship via a socio-psychological conceptualization of cross-cultural childhood; her analysis expands the meaning of ‘culture’ to include nonhuman participants. Tamalone van den Eijnden, meanwhile, takes up the tentacular, and we move from the familiarity of the domestic and nearly-human to the alien otherness of the deep sea. Both of these articles are concerned less with ‘nature’ as an abstract, all-encompassing concept than with specificity of particular creatures in particular spaces, and how ‘we’ – whatever that signifies - might relate to them differently.

Indeed, work in what is sometimes called the posthumanities tend to be resistant to the concept of ‘nature’ even as they delve deep into nonhuman worlds. Echoing earlier critiques of the pristine wilderness ideal, Timothy Morton advocates for a new paradigm of ‘ecology without nature,’ arguing that ‘[p]utting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration’ (2007: 5). And today, much like the mythologized figure of Woman, the thing called Nature often seems dated and absurd, weighed down by the baggage of its long cultural history. In developing a new framework to talk about the materiality and agency of the nonhuman, an ecological vocabulary has proved more popular among humanities scholars than most other scientific *-ologies*. With its foregrounding of interdependence, entanglement and dynamic complexity, its focus on relationships, processes and systems over static objects and classifications, ecology lends itself well to the posthumanist theoretical milieu. The word’s roots in *oikos* bring together the wild and the domestic, interweaving questions of species with questions of space, habitat, home and shelter. A recent volume of essays turns the ecological into a verbal form: ‘Ecology is a doing, emergence more than structure, housemaking more than household’ (Cohen and Duckert 2017: 4). And in the final article of this issue, Aster Hoving puts ecological thought into conversation with feminist new materialisms, performing a mode of reading where ‘all thought is always already ecological and inextricably interconnected with the environment.’

The question of how to open up the humanities beyond the human is far from settled. It is approached differently by posthumanists and critical animal studies scholars, by decolonial theorists and new materialists, by science studies and ecocriticism. Across our disciplines, there is a growing awareness that the multiplicity of life – and the threats it faces - must be included

in our accounts of human meaning-making. But it is not only the organic world of animals, plants and other living creatures that defines contemporary natures; the science of rocks and sediments has begun to play a part in understanding the ground we stand on today.

ENTER THE ANTHROPOCENE

In the twenty-first century, the relationship between humans and nature got a new name. The Anthropocene is the proposed new era in which, as Claire Colebrook writes, ‘man’s effect on the planet will supposedly be discernible as a geological strata readable well after man ceases to be, even if there are no geologists who will be present to undertake this imagined future reading’ (2014: 10). In Anthropocene thought, humans are reconceptualized not only as ecological creatures, embedded in webs of life and exposed to extinction, but also as geological agents, capable of remaking the earth in ways that will outlive us: at the same moment we come to recognize both our shared animality and our unprecedented power.

The Anthropocene originated in science, but it has been taken up with enthusiasm in the humanities. While various working groups of geologists have spent the last decade debating the scientific validity and finer details of the proposed epoch, the word has already spilled irreversibly into the world, infiltrating far-flung crevices of thought. For many scholars, the Anthropocene reconfigures the meanings not only of nature and culture but of time and space. In one of the first theorizations of this shift, Dipesh Chakrabarty notes that knowledge of climate change in the sciences coincided with discussions of globalization in the humanities, and that the two must now be thought in conjunction, a new mode of planetary space that is both social and physical, both economic and climactic (2009). He proposes, too, that the Anthropocene collapses ‘[g]eological time and the chronology of human histories’ (2009: 208) - two previously disconnected scales of temporality, now irrevocably interlinked:

The task of placing, historically, the crisis of climate change thus requires us to bring together intellectual formations that are somewhat in tension with each other: the planetary and the global; deep and recorded histories; species thinking and critiques of capital. (2009: 213)

For Chakrabarty, after many years of philosophical and political challenges to the Enlightenment projects of humanism, modernity and progress, the Anthropocene poses a newly material challenge to those projects. Colebrook gives the concept of climate change a similar sense of gravity, comparing its intellectual consequences to those of the Darwinian revolution

- a historical moment that will alter ‘the very modes of scientific and imaginative thinking,’ requiring ‘new forms of narrative and knowledge’ (2014: 10). The narrative impulse of the Anthropocene has a lot to do with disciplinary boundary-crossing: as Stephanie Lemenager writes, ‘the culture-making gesture of epochal naming collides with the empiricist desire to hitch culture to the stratigraphic record’ (2017: 169). The Anthropocene perfectly packages the paradoxes of the moment: history and geology – Man and Nature – are melded into one; it is a symbiotic, cyborgian word that hovers somewhere between science and fiction. The Anthropocene situates the human subject squarely at the centre of planetary agency, but it also emphasizes the human’s carbon composition, its intrinsic entanglement with the rest of the organic and inorganic world. This anthropos is a figure of anthropocentrism, but also of misanthropy, as the human once again comes to signify everything that nature is not - destructive, dominating, disjointed, the opposite of ecological equilibrium.

In the twenty-first century it is hard to see any naming of *the* human as something other than a totalizing, homogenizing gesture, but it is also difficult to dispense with the concept altogether without renouncing responsibility for what this strange species has done to the world. Jesse Oak Taylor argues that the meaning of that responsibility shifts depending on the date that is chosen to mark the epoch’s beginning, as ‘each subtly redefines both the Anthropocene concept and its eponymous agent’ (2017: 35). There have been various proposals for when the ‘golden spike’ of human activity etched itself irreversibly onto the earth, and Taylor discusses three of the most widely accepted, positing ‘a connection between the globe-as-model and the world remade by that model’ (35). In 1610, the colonization of the Americas – made possible by the invention of globes that modeled ‘the planet as a single unit of navigable space’ - had killed so many people as to cause the first identifiably human-produced change in the global climate. This date ‘makes the Anthropocene an inherently imperial condition, an epoch wrought in death’ (35). In 1784, the steam engine facilitates the advent of industrial modernity, and at the same time, with related scientific advances in geology, it ‘becomes a model for the conception of the earth that it is in the process of transforming... a tool to think with, a model that remade the world both materially and conceptually’ (36-7). Finally, in 1945, the Great Acceleration of emissions and ecological impact coincides with the rise of systems theory, global climate modeling and nuclear weapons, and the Anthropocene becomes a matter of scale and speed. Each of these theories reorients the identity of the Anthropocene’s ‘definitive agent’, which ‘is a conquistador in 1610, an industrialist in 1784, and a posthuman cyborg in 1945’ (40).

This reading takes a step towards recognizing the uneven distribution of the Anthropocene's causes and effects: what counts as 'the human', and the concept of nature mobilized to support that identity, shifts across time and space. Nature is sometimes the Other to be colonized and subdued, sometimes a resource to be mined, sometimes a set of data to be converted into theories and models - and always a site of uncontainable consequences, spiralling and spilling out of the stories we try to squeeze it into. Today the story we are telling increasingly tries to account for those consequences, emphasizing the ways that nature is also something autonomous from and irreducible to 'us', as well as something we are inextricably part of, and something we cannot live without. For our disciplines, this means seeing culture no longer as simply a mirror or a window onto nature, but as a material and conceptual interweaving that is never fully complete.

ARTICLES

This issue of *Junctions* explores the field of nature in the humanities in four articles and three book reviews. The authors do so via a variety of theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches; within the traditional disciplines of history, cultural analysis, literature, philosophy and musicology, we encounter developing cross-disciplinary fields of inquiry, such as critical animal studies (Sanfilippo), ecocriticism (Hoving), utopic music (van Herpt), environmental history (Hendrikse, Houtekamer) and feminist materialism (van den Eijnden, Hörst).

The first article is written by Daniël Hendrikse, who continues the discussion of nature's role in nation-building processes. Hendrikse takes a historical approach, tracing the function of nature in the German concept of *Heimat*. The article analyses how environmental concerns became part of the identity and politics of the German Democratic Republic, and how this ideology of nature came to contrast with the material environmental circumstances.

The next two articles take up the second theme of post-/human perspectives. From the literary angle, Jessica Sanfilippo explores the intersection of animal and human cultures in Karen Joy Fowler's *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* (2013), about two sisters who grow up with a chimpanzee as a third sibling. She uses the sociological concept of Cross-Cultural Kids to analyse the entanglement of human and nonhuman in the identity and representation of the main characters.

Tamalone van den Eijnden, meanwhile, explores posthuman alternatives for thinking ‘with’ rather than ‘about’ nature, using Deleuze and Guattari’s theory to develop the idea of non- and posthuman conceptual personae. Through the work of Willem Flusser and Donna Haraway, who navigate the space between fact and fable, octopodal creatures are positioned as articulations of ‘alien nature’ - a nature which is simultaneously ‘here’ and ‘elsewhere’, unreachable but imaginable.

In the final article of this issue, Aster Hoving brings together insights from ecology and feminist new materialism. Taking cucumbers as a conceptual starting point, Hoving gives us a close reading of Lieke Marsman’s *Het Tegenovergestelde van een Mens* as an (eco-)autotheoretical text. She argues that the novel performs a theoretical discourse in which nature and culture are intertwined and co-constitutive.

In addition to these research articles, three reviewers look at scholarly work on the topic of nature from a wide variety of humanities disciplines. Lisa van Herpt reviews *English Pastoral Music: From Arcadia to Utopia, 1900-1955* by Eric Saylor (2017), shedding light on how the book’s treatment of an overlooked topic touches on environmental issues that remain sharply relevant today. Timo Houtekamer discusses *Methodological Challenges in Nature-Culture and Environmental History Research* (2017), an anthology of articles that provides answers to methodological issues faced by scholars in the field of environmental humanities. Lastly, Doortje Hörst considers Donna Haraway’s *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016), reading the book itself and its online legacy as an example of the symbiotic future Haraway proposes.

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