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Introduction: (Mis)Reading Nature

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(Mis)Reading Nature

Editorial team

There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings. The town lay in the midst of a checkerboard of prosperous farms, with fields of grain and hillsides of orchards where, in spring, white clouds of bloom drifted above the green fields. In autumn, oak and maple and birch set up a blaze of color that flamed and flickered across a backdrop of pines. Then foxes barked in the hills and deer silently crossed the fields, half hidden in the mists of the fall mornings.¹

“A Fable for Tomorrow,” the opening chapter of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), conjures up an image of “nature” as bountiful and idyllic, reminiscent of what one might find in a David Attenborough nature documentary. In both, the narrative takes a dark turn: “A strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change . . . Everywhere was a shadow of death . . . No witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth in this stricken world. The people had done it themselves.”² Advocating for increased pesticide control to mitigate the detrimental impact of chemicals on the environment, Carson combines strengths of literary narrative and scientific research in an interdisciplinary work of environmentalist nonfiction “that crosses the borders of philosophy and poetry, science and morality, high and low culture, sentiment and practicality.”³

¹ Carson, *Silent Spring*, 1.

² *Id.*, 2-3.

³ Foote, “Narrative of ‘Silent Spring,’” 741-42.

Silent Spring propelled the development of the field of environmental humanities and simultaneously inspired a broader audience to pay attention to environmental issues.⁴ In the sixty years since Carson's plea for a serious consideration of humanity's impact on its surroundings was published, the need for critical approaches to environmentalism has only become more urgent. In a world ravaged by environmental degradation, climate change and countless other crises threatening natural life, critically assessing notions of nature is both an existential need and a moral obligation.

As the yearly reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reliably grow more and more concerning, and as droughts and other extreme weather events threaten the lives of millions all over the world—but especially in the Global South—the notion of environmental crisis has become a central concern to policymakers and scientists, thinkers and activists, and the public at large. Climate anxiety⁵ is a response to the disasters that have struck in the past, to those that are currently taking place, and to those that will be unavoidable if carbon emissions are not quickly brought under control. It is a condition that spans past, present and future.

In the twenty-first century, the Anthropocene has emerged as a key concept to address temporality and the climate crisis. As Paul J. Crutzen defines it, the Anthropocene is a “human-dominated geological epoch” characterised by an enormous quantity of anthropogenic carbon dioxide emitted in the atmosphere since the Industrial Revolution.⁶ To understand humans as geological agents, one needs to grapple with spatio-temporal scales that cannot be experienced by an individual. The unimaginably long-term impact of humanity's actions on the environment—from the invention of the steam engine and the switch from water-powered to fossil fuel-powered manufacturing to modern governments delaying the development of green infrastructures and prioritising shorter-term

⁴ Emmett, *The Environmental Humanities*, 3; Foote, “Narrative of ‘Silent Spring,’” 745.

⁵ In 2021, a large-scale survey showed that about 60% of young adults all over the world are either “extremely” or “very” worried about climate change, and only 5% of them report no concerns at all. See Thompson, “Young People's Climate Anxiety,” 605.

⁶ Crutzen, quoted in Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History*, 33.

goals instead—will define life on Earth for millennia to come and bring about radical changes to its biosphere. As Chakrabarty points out, this collision of historical events and the geological timescale brings about a collapse of the distinction between “human” and “natural” history.⁷ Thinking about humans as social, economic or cultural agents is the task of traditional historiography while thinking about humans as biological entities is one of the tasks of environmental history.⁸ When making sense of the Anthropocene, however, one can only think of these two domains as intertwined: humans have only become a geological force on account of specific technological and socio-economic developments.⁹ Humans (and human history) can no longer be imagined as mostly separate from the environment; the last three centuries have gradually (on the individual timescale) yet very quickly (on the geological timescale) established the human species as a natural force.

The problematisation of the concept of nature in modern scholarship testifies to the impossibility of conclusively defining this concept. Feeling separate from and yet part of the natural world, humans drastically transform the environment and simultaneously are shaped by it. To signify nature as an entity outside oneself is to draw a border around it and thus transform it. To admit that nature is pervasively present is to allow one to be transformed by it. This special issue of LEAP explores the complex interrelatedness of humans and “nature” and our inherently limited understanding of both. The contributors acknowledge the unavoidable risk that any attempt to “read” nature brings. As nature evades narrow categorisation, to read it is potentially to misread it. To understand is potentially to misunderstand.

Central to the contributors’ rethinking of the notions of human and nature is a reconsideration of nature as a possible object of knowledge. As the media scholars Wickberg and Gärdebo state, “a redefined human-Earth relationship starts from the insight that the environment is not a fixed object awaiting discovery but something that is continuously produced, intellectually and

⁷ Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History*, 26.

⁸ *Id.*, 30.

⁹ *Id.*, 31.

materially, and that media play a significant role in this production.”¹⁰ While Wickberg and Gärdebo emphasise the role of media in terms of data processing, storage and transmission, the contributors to this issue of LEAP approach debates around “nature,” the environment and environmentalism from the point of view of cultural media studies. Like Carson, who in *Silent Spring* combines literary writing with environmental inquiry, the contributors take an interdisciplinary approach; their analyses bring together photographic studies, neuroaesthetics, cultural studies, literary studies, film studies and philosophy to rethink the relative positionalities of humans and the environment and the specific conceptions of nature that underpin these relationships. Each of the contributions aims to consider the environment by exploring the relationships between nature (or the environment) and humanity (or humanness) from a multitude of perspectives. This interdisciplinary approach gives space to the manifold interpretations of nature, a concept which has proven impossible for the contributors to define conclusively, and illustrates how environmental issues surpass disciplinary borders but also bridge them.

This special issue opens with an article by Maria Romanova-Hynes titled “On Photographing Nature: from Mimesis to Play.” Confronted by the question of whether it is possible to photograph nature, the author sets out to explore through philosophy and her own artistic practice how a photograph can capture phenomena, perception and meaning. Romanova-Hynes discusses the objectification of nature in conventional landscape photography and proposes to reconsider nature photography on the basis of the characteristics of aftermath photography, which compels the spectator to conceive of the interrelationality of humans and the environment in an act of imaginative construction.

While Romanova-Hynes critically reflects on how landscape photography attempts to depict the outdoors, Angel Perazzetta’s contribution focuses on the domestic sphere by analysing the phenomenon of the curated lifestyle. In his article “Fitting Years Worth of Trash into a Jar: Saving the Planet through Curated Consumption,” Perazzetta examines zero-waste and minimalist

¹⁰ Wickberg and Gärdebo, “Humans and the Planetary,” 2.

lifestyle guides, using them to explore the limits—and the roots—of individualist approaches to the climate crisis. The environmentalist narratives he analyses are centred around the private space of the home, but their stated aim is much broader: protecting the Earth from the harms of overconsumption. Perazzetta investigates how this concern with the domestic realm came about, what its consequences are and what alternative responses to the climate crisis might exist.

Scholarship in the environmental humanities seeks to deconstruct and problematise the borders that define the human-nature and culture-biology oppositions. It also embraces a healthy disregard for disciplinary boundaries. Anthony T. Albright's creative travelogue, "Incidents of Mirror-Travel in Emmen: Notes to Self, or, Ghostly Demarcations, Keener Wound," upsets the distinction between the academic and the artistic. Albright traces the historical and cultural roots of sights that are geographically located in the Dutch town of Emmen but which resonate with unexpected places across the ocean. Taking the reader on a fascinating trip through theory, art history, geography and biography, Albright's essay explores what it means to travel without bounds and find places within places.

The next article engages with the animal kingdom. In "Barking, Singing, Quacking: On Human and Nonhuman Language and Those Who Speak (It)," Nathalie Muffels considers animal voices—and the potential lack thereof—in an anthropocentric world. Tracing narratives in theory of language, she investigates how notions of "species" influence and determine interspecies relationships, considering possible answers to the question of why, in her words, "human utterances hold potential for profound meanings, while duck quacks are generally less likely to harbour similar expectations."

In the subsequent contribution, "Shifting Paradigms: The Relationship Between Nature and Humanity in Contemporary Art," Alicja Serafin-Pospiech explores the connection between a paradigm shift in the human-nature relationship and the emergence of nature-focused immersive artworks. The author uses neuroaesthetic methods to analyse contemporary art that rejects the modernist opposition of biology to culture.

This special issue concludes with an interview with Dr Isabel Hoving, a professor at Leiden University who has long been concerned with environmentalism, interculturality and diversity. Nathalie Muffels and Angel Perazzetta ask Hoving about her past scholarship as well as her hopes for the future of the (environmental) humanities. Arguing for the utility of literary and game narratives to critically reflect on nature, the Anthropocene and environmentalism, Hoving rejects the image of nature with which Carson's *Silent Spring* opens. According to Hoving, nature is not pretty, clean or pure—it includes death, rot and decay—and it is not heterosexual either. Nature, she says, is “mind-blowing; animals and plants are up to all kinds of things, and there's no ‘logic’ to it.”

The textual contributions are accompanied by a variety of visual works. A selection of photographs by Will Boase and Joris van den Einden explore the failures of mankind's attempt to dominate nature, foregrounding, respectively, the impossibility of anticipating the future and the difficulties of visualising environmental decay. While absent in Boase's and Van den Eiden's contributions, the human form is the central theme of Mar Fu Qi's work. Her photographs suggest a deep and harmonious relationship between the human body and the vegetal tree, prompting viewers to think about the human species as part of—rather than separate from—the natural world. A sweater knitting pattern designed by Coco Swaan draws simultaneously from the ancient craft of knitting and the futuristic world of literary science fiction. Motifs hinting at industrial manufacturing and pollution emerge through the slow and methodical process of stitching row after row. Much like ecosystems, knitted fabric consists of a series of loops that build off of one another, and any damage to an individual element has the potential to unravel the whole thing.

Varying in nature and embracing different perspectives on nature, the contributions in this issue highlight the crucial role of the humanities in investigating and understanding environmental issues, which can be approached in a myriad of imaginative ways and demand much further exploration.

The 2022 editorial team of LEAP consist of Nathalie Muffels, Angel Perazzetta, Maria Romanova-Hynes, Alicja Serafin-Pospiech

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