Nature: Less Pleasant, Less Pretty and Significantly Smellier than Often Thought: Interview with Dr Isabel Hoving

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INTERVIEW

Nature: Less Pleasant, Less Pretty and Significantly Smellier than Often Thought

Nathalie Muffels and Angel Perazzetta

To academic all-rounder Dr Isabel Hoving, who has recently retired from her position as Associate Professor at the Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society (LUCAS), working at a university goes beyond holding a particular function or tallying publication numbers. "Critical thinking," she says, "is not just a job that you do, but it's a very emotional, intense exploration of what it means to be human." Hoving's work is characterised by the theme of diversity, and she has long striven to create meaningful connections between the theoretical fields of interculturality, race, gender, sexuality and environmental critique. In her research, she does not limit herself to one medium, exploring the narratives and immersive experiences evoked both by literature and video games. For Hoving, storytelling is about weaving together voices, communities and connections. In addition to teaching and research, her career has included a variety of other pursuits: she writes crossover philosophical fantasy literature, she developed the game studies minor at Leiden University, and as the first Diversity Officer at Leiden University (and the very first academic Diversity Officer in the Netherlands), she actively worked to connect the too-often isolated domains of academic critical reflection and university policymaking. Just before she was to round off her 44-year teaching career—on what was officially her last day, to be exact—we sat down with Isabel for a conversation on the ways in which research in the humanities can comment on, problematise and offer new approaches to thinking about the environmental crisis.

In your publications over the years, your focus has shifted slightly, moving from postcolonial theory, Caribbean literature, globalisation and interculturality to the environmental humanities. How did this development come about in your research?

Coming from postcolonial studies, I noticed a blind spot there. That was not my own discovery, of course: a lot of people that were working in postcolonial studies were slowly moving into environmental humanities and starting to talk about climate change and the Anthropocene. That fascinated me. In postcolonial studies, we have mostly focused on human relations, society, power relations and cultural issues. But what we didn't focus on, as humanities scholars, was that colonisation was very much about the appropriation and exploitation of the environment as well. Colonisation was really destructive for many environments. New kinds of ecosystems were created in colonized territories, because the land was only seen as a site for production, within a global economic system—which is completely reductive, of course. The destruction of the environment, in many cases, went hand-in-hand with the disappearance of local cultures, whose relationships with the land were disrupted.

The destruction of the environment is not just the disappearance of local culture, but it is especially very directly related to issues like poverty and hunger—very concrete things that have nothing to do with symbolic dimensions. These dynamics weren't always so present in the eyes of so many postcolonial scholars in the humanities, especially not metropolitan scholars. That blind spot was what drew me in, and now we can understand that process of environmental destruction in colonised territories as an early example of what is now happening on a global scale: the climate crisis itself. In the colonial project, everything is connected: material and environmental dimensions are tied together with the disappearance of cultures and the exploitation of colonised people.

But there's also another, more philosophical aspect there, related to a posthumanist approach. Before, postcolonial studies focused on the postcolonial subject and led its investigations by prioritising identity issues. Therefore, it was on the one hand a psychological approach, while on the other hand power issues were

analysed too, because there has always been a strong Marxist background in postcolonial studies. But now it has become apparent that, perhaps, these approaches are no longer adequate to analyse the state the world is in now, in the postcolonial era, an era of globalisation, which some argue is better described as *neo*colonial, rather than *post*colonial.

Why do you think this is an important development?

We need to think about a new way to theorise human identity, as Dipesh Chakrabarty argued in 2012.[1] It is in this context that the notion of the Anthropocene popped up. An individualist and psychological approach cannot singlehandedly analyse the (destructive) presence of humanity in the world. Instead, you have to see humanity as a geological force that is shaping and influencing the climate, and in this, the functioning of the global system. This line of thinking became more prominent in the 2010s, but we still see it today. The newspapers are filled with it, warning that perhaps we cannot save the planet, that we will not make it.

So this is the kind of thinking that is so relevant, and that is getting more attention only now, which is a little bit late. Well, that's not true. Because, of course, this kind of thinking was there already decades ago, especially in the work of scholars in the Global South. So, although this kind of thinking started gaining steam some decades ago, it wasn't prominent until recently. At first there was no connection with the political world, and it did not inspire the same sense of urgency it does today. A lot has changed.

The blind spot that was there has been very risky, and perhaps we should have been able to see that earlier. We should have at least listened to those who saw that earlier. In hindsight, we should have connected to other scholars from other disciplines at an earlier stage.

And, instead, when did this connection really start happening?

A lot of people were doing it already, of course. In the Caribbean, people have long been writing about what has been happening to the

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[1] Chakrabarty, "Postcolonial Studies," 1–18.

environment, because it was so visible there—it was impossible to ignore it. It's the metropolitan scholars that didn't really see it so much. I would say that the publication of Chakrabarty's essay was really kind of momentous for me. When I was working on my PhD, my field was Caribbean literature. While doing my research I noticed that there was so much writing about nature, the environment and gardens. I felt there was something deeper there—that these images were not simply there to portray a kind of

"I think that the term nature has been abused for a lot of purposes."

local setting, let alone an "exotic" setting. They were connected to identity issues, to poverty and also to culture. And these references played an incredibly important role in rethinking a lot of issues that have to do with colonialism, and to rethink gender, definitions of gender identity and racial identity.

To most people, the word "nature" calls up images plucked from documentaries, such as forests, trees, coral reefs and so on; this is quite different from the perspective you sketched out just now. In which ways do you wish the idea of nature could be problematised or challenged for a broader public?

In the first place, I think that the term nature has been abused for a lot of purposes. It is used to naturalise a lot of ideologies shaping the assumptions that we have about what the world should look like. And I think it's very illuminating to see how the word "nature" (and the idea of the "natural" in general) is abused to defend some very narrow, ideologically determined ideas about gender, sexuality and race. Very often, in mainstream discourses, you find the idea that there are certain natural sexual behaviours. However, these so-called natural sexual behaviours *just so* happen to coincide with a very, narrow, metropolitan, Euro-American idea of what sexual behaviour should be in our patriarchal and heteronormative, capitalist and neoliberal society. Our culture has a very clear idea of what natural sexual behaviour should be: it should be monogamous, it should involve a man and a woman of approximately the same age, and they should be able to procreate together. That is, supposedly, what is

healthy and normal. The purpose of sexuality, supposedly, is propagation, and in a healthy environment reproduction is prioritised.

It is, of course, absolute nonsense to say that this has anything to do with what's happening in nature! There are so many studies that show how wonderfully varied sexual, affective and parenting behaviour is in animals. It is mind-blowing—animals are up to all kinds of things, and there's no "logic" to it. A lot of what they do couldn't possibly be described as heterosexual, or homosexual for that matter. Plants, too, have been described by scientists relying on a heteronormative discourse, but plants are in fact mostly hermaphroditic. So you can't say there are male and female plants. Our human terms just fall short, because they are based on a certain ideology that goes way back and was influenced by, for example, religion and the capitalist system. This ideology has nothing to do with what sexuality actually is, in all its real-life variety.

Queer environmentalism is the field that takes a look at these kinds of ideologies, and one of the most important insights it has to offer is that, ultimately, life is no more important than death and rot. Our ideas of nature include things like the sunset, a beautiful landscape and colourful flowers. Rot seems like it should not be a part of nature. But if you don't have rot, you cannot support life. Nature isn't pleasant, and it isn't pretty, as Timothy Morton says. There's a lot of mud and insects and decay and smelly stuff going on.

Do you think part of the reason people don't want to accept climate change is that it would mean accepting a discourse about nature that is not ideologically preferred?

That's a very interesting question. And there are so many sides to it. First, yes, a lot of people indeed have a lot of trouble coming to terms with the destruction of the environment. This is not surprising, anyway. They don't really want to think about the fact that they might be affected. What you have is a kind of exaggerated response: "the apocalypse is upon us!" Those kinds of imaginations seem apocalyptical and very extreme, but they are also very reassuring. In many disaster films and novels, everything is

destroyed. The world as we know it disappears. A common response to this scenario is to reason that, once everything is destroyed, the world is better off, because Mother Nature is certainly able to survive without us.

There's a gender dimension to this: we are like wicked children, and Mother Nature will take care of our messes. She will clean up everything again. And then we'll be pristine and our misdeeds will not have happened. I think this apocalyptic imagination is a disgusting and immature attempt to evade responsibility. If Mother Nature takes over, then your guilt is no longer there. These kinds of imaginations are what I think we should criticise, because the reality is that there will be no clean, neat ending to everything. No, we will live on and on with the atrocious effects of what we're doing now.

"Whatever happens to our surroundings also happens to us, because we are in open connection to the world. The world is entering through our pores incessantly."

The other thing that I wanted to say is that there are different kinds of destruction. Rot and decay and death are very important parts of life. If you want to live your life, you have to deal with them and acknowledge them as part of the cycle of life. And it's important to realise that that's inevitable, and that it's also a good thing. It's important that you should try to understand what mortality and decay mean, both your own and those of the people around you.

But what you're asking about is something else. And this kind of human-caused destruction is not inevitable—it need not be a part of the cycle of life. Anna Volkmar just published her dissertation on how human beings deal with nuclear waste,[2] because that's one of the wicked problems, of course. Many people see nuclear energy as a very good solution to the climate crisis. But radioactive waste is a huge problem, one that stays dangerous for millennia—it doesn't just go away. This is the kind of decay and destruction that is the most difficult to accept, because it's not part of what we can deal with. These threats don't exist on the same time scale as human lifespans.

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[2] Volkmar, *Art and Nuclear Power.*

In this context, I think it is important to take responsibility, to *stay with the trouble,*[3] as Volkmar says in the wake of Donna Haraway, to face the huge danger that was created. That's a huge challenge for the humanities, because all of the imaginations that are currently available are somehow insufficient—they don't do the job. We have to do better.

What concepts do you think could help develop more responsible imaginations?

The kind of imagination that we are stuck with—and which has been very reassuring—is the idea that we, as human beings, are somehow outside of nature. Nature is seen as scenery, as something you visit in your spare time, on holiday or on a hike. I think we have to find a different way to imagine humanity. We are intertwined with everything, whether we call it nature, the environment, or—as the Caribbean scholar and writer Édouard Glissant calls it—surroundings.[4] At the end of the day, that's the place where we live, and that's the space that we are part of. Whatever happens to our surroundings also happens to us, because we are in open connection to the world. The world is entering through our pores incessantly. *Viscous porosity* is a wonderful term that I read in an essay about Hurricane Katrina by Nancy Tuana.[5] It highlights how we have a continuous openness to the world and everything it contains, whether that be toxic fumes, microplastics, electromagnetic radiation, or even bodily emissions. We are porous to each other. We are part of whatever is in our surroundings. It will find its way into our bodies. I think that this line of thought, explored by people

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[3] Philosopher and ecofeminism theorist Donna Haraway coined the phrase "staying with the trouble" in her book of the same name (2016) to reimagine our relationship with the future and the future of Earth. She proposes to move past the epoch of the Anthropocene towards the Chthulucene, a new epoch that offers a "timeplace for learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth" (2). According to Haraway, "[s]taying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings" (1).

[4] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation,* 151.

[5] Tuana, "Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina," 188–213.

like Nancy Tuana, Lorraine Code and Donna Haraway, is incredibly powerful. It's a way to grope for a new imagination. Can you imagine what stories, films and video games playing with this idea would be like? Instead of the happy, unproblematic narrative of picturesque nature, they could grapple with a nature that is toxic but also beautiful—in a weird, dark, queer sense.

You mentioned video games, a medium you are very passionate about. How do you think video games can contribute to the issues we have been discussing?

I am proud to say that I have designed the video games minor here at Leiden University. It's unique because it's the only Dutch programme approaching the medium from a cultural analysis perspective. I think we really have to deal with this medium, because it is so effective at creating very intense experiences. Video games speak to the condition of the twenty-first century in a way that no other medium can. They are a digital medium and we live in a digital age. This medium helps us to think through what it means to live in a digital society and to be digital subjects ourselves. More and more, we are living on the screen and through the screen. So video games offer valuable insights into questions like "who am I—not just as a person sitting in front of the screen, but also as someone who interacts *with* the screen?" Video games evoke feelings of power but also create space to roleplay with all aspects of one's identity: you can place yourself in apocalyptic environments, for example, but also play out environmentalists' scripts, dealing with nature (surroundings or the environment) in different ways.

Besides, video games are a wonderful medium to critically reflect on what it means to be critical. It's a very self-reflective medium: so many games reflect on what the medium of games actually is, just like novels and films are always partly exploring their own media.

This relates to what I said earlier about being part of the environment. Yes, we have to understand what it means to be in an open, viscous connection with an environment that we see as natural. But we also need to understand what it means to be in an open connection with a technological environment—and this is what

video games allow us to do. These two levels are not disconnected: they are part of the same posthuman way of thinking, asking questions about what subjectivity means and what being connected with the broader technological *and* natural world means.

As we established, nature is sometimes unpleasant. It is not "other" than human beings, and it is queerer and weirder than we often imagine. Going forward, what do you think might be a fruitful way to think about what nature essentially is?

As I mentioned earlier, we tend to think of nature as a place. But I think it's much more productive to think about nature as a certain type of process. Nature grows and develops itself at different paces and at different scales, both spatially and temporally. The processes that you find in human society, or in technology, happen on a different timescale. In this sense, nature is not a space outside of technology. Nature is just another temporal or spatial process than technology is. If you want to think through what it means to be a human being in our surroundings, you have to realise that these surroundings don't consist of spatially different spheres, but of processes that all follow their own logic. So there's a diversity, a plurality of processes; plants are part of it, bacteria are part of it, but technology is part of it, too. And if you look at all these systems, you could analyse them as systems of information transfer. That is a way to describe bodies—plant bodies, the soil, animal bodies, but also computers and technology. Those are all systems of information transfer. There is no basic difference between one and the other. So we need to think about nature (or the environment, or surroundings) as an intertwining of everything that can be analysed as different systems of information transfer. Nature is not something that is completely outside human nature or technology.

This is a posthumanist approach. And it's very interesting to realise that the way we think about ourselves as human beings is defined by the technology of our age, as Frans van Lunteren showed.[6] In the eighteenth century, we thought about ourselves as clockwork. In the nineteenth century, when the steam engine was

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[6] Van Lunteren, "Clocks to Computers," 762–776.

the dominant technology, we started to think about ourselves as steam engines—take Freud and his idea that emotions are suppressed and need a way out. By relying on dominant technologies as explanatory mechanisms, you inevitably come up with theories that will sound outdated at a later time. All of this stuff about information transfer will sound ridiculous a hundred years from now, if we live to see it.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity. Tom Breedveld kindly assisted in the preparation of the interview.

In honour of Isabel Hoving's academic achievements, this interview is accompanied by a supplementary video in which our conversation continues. Taking a more personal turn, we ask her to briefly reflect on her academic career as she looks ahead to retirement. To watch the video, please visit the YouTube channel Leiden University—Faculty of Humanities. *The video was created by Nathalie Muffels, Angel Perazzetta and Tom Breedveld in collaboration with Thomas Vorisek (Expertise Centre for Online Learning), who kindly handled filming and editing.*

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