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What Is the Matter with Water? An Interview with Rosanne van der Voet

Rik J. Janssen, co-authored with Nicolas Turner

The roots of the humanities lie in the Renaissance curriculum of the *studia humanitatis*, literally the ‘study of humanity.’ The human, therefore, is centered in many humanities disciplinary practices and methodologies, including across fields as diverse as literature, law, and history. In our current moment of environmental crisis, however, this assumption about the centrality of the human to the humanities faces challenges, including from the writer and lecturer Rosanne van der Voet. Having recently completed her PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Sheffield in the United Kingdom, Rosanne is now a Lecturer in Urban Studies and Environmental Humanities at Leiden University. Rosanne’s work focuses on making nonhuman experiences of the oceanic environmental crisis visible by employing creative-critical writing techniques grounded in ecocriticism and the blue humanities.

Rosanne, who grew up in The Hague, has been fascinated by the coast and sea since childhood. In her PhD project, “Tentacular Textuality and Anthropocenic Seas: A Medusa Poetics” (defended in 2023), she explored new writing techniques to anchor marine animals’ perspectives on and experiences of the oceanic crisis. She uses the ‘otherness’ of jellyfish and the jellyfish life cycle as a literary structuring device to make the experiences of marine animals tangible. Rosanne also holds an MA in Literature, Landscape, and Environment from Bath Spa University (2017) and a BA in European Studies: Literature and Culture from the University of Amsterdam (2016). By incorporating personal experiences and narratives into her work, Rosanne aims to make the global challenges we face more personally relatable and, therefore, more

tangible and emotionally resonant. Using experimental writing techniques that fuse critical and creative elements allows Rosanne to offer a new perspective on the environmental crisis, one that moves away from a human-centric approach and deploys the tools of literature to connect scientific insights with the imagination.

Rosanne's goal of making the complexity of the environmental crisis tangible offers new ways to explore the central theme of this year's LEAP: matter and materiality. Her work's interdisciplinary and creative approach also embodies LEAP's broader goal to be a space for exploring the humanities in all its forms. The interview below, conducted in the spring of 2024, represents my own creative approach to the traditional interview format, with my interpretations of Rosanne's thoughts conveyed in the third person and put into three loose groupings: concepts, the Netherlands, and the future. While Rosanne reviewed these interpretations, all errors are, of course, my own.

Concepts

Matter and materiality—the theme of this year's LEAP—are essential aspects of Rosanne's research, which builds on insights from new materialism and material ecocriticism. These fields emerge from the conviction that for too long, the role of materiality was lacking in Western philosophical thought as the Enlightenment centered a notion of 'reason' that cemented the idea of human exceptionalism and neglected the role of bodily experience in the development of theoretical formations.

With her own bodily and material experience as a starting point, Rosanne aims to materialize (i.e., make material) the complexity of the environmental crisis through narrative. In the context of global environmental emergency, we can no longer afford to pretend that humanity is cut off from material processes; we are now being made aware of the increasingly disrupted material processes of which we have always been part. By exposing these material links between human activity and environmental impact, Rosanne's work makes the crisis more tangible. In particular, raising awareness of the material connections between humanity and nature will have a key role in driving a response to this moment of environmental emergency. For Rosanne, it is therefore an ethical

imperative to return to matter and break down the false binaries that underpin the environmental crisis.

Exploring how a creative and experimental writing process can represent nonhuman experiences is central to Rosanne's research. European modernity emphasizes human superiority, omitting nonhuman perspectives and perpetuating a strict dichotomy between nature and culture. To break down this dichotomy, Rosanne works to respect the 'otherness' of animals by acknowledging the complexity and unknowability of nonhuman experience while, at the same time, centering the nonhuman perspective. In doing so, she explores the potential and the limits of human language, acknowledging the gap between representation and bodily nonhuman experience. In this context, Rosanne's writing process itself functions for her as a first step away from anthropocentrism and towards a dialogue with other beings.

The notion of 'tangibility' helps underpin Rosanne's centering of nonhuman experience. For Rosanne, "the concept of tangibility refers to literary representation, entailing an embodied, emotional, local, and concrete sense of a global problem." This is where the complexity of environmental crises comes into play. There is not one single form this crisis takes but a range of overlapping crises driven by human behavior. One of Rosanne's most significant challenges is exploring these various expressions of crisis and connecting them to the broad, global crisis of which they form part. Currently humanity can seem overwhelmed by the scale and complexity of the crisis, lingering in inaction or ineffective, insufficient measures. This failure to act shows that the environmental crisis is also a crisis of the imagination, suggesting that facts and statistics alone are insufficient to change behavior. In addition, we need a new story about our human selves and our relationship to our wider nonhuman context, connecting the global and the local as well as the factual and the emotional.

The Netherlands

Traditionally, the low-lying position of the Netherlands has set the Dutch in constant competition with the sea and water. In this context, water was often depicted as an enemy to society, illustrated by metaphors such as the Waterwolf—the image of a hungry wolf

devouring the land. Water management measures associated with this frame of thought are aimed at keeping the water out; for example, building dikes and seawalls, and reclaiming land. This approach has also created a specific narrative about Dutch national identity in relation to water. There is a sense that the Dutch will be able to resolve any issues around rising sea levels and climate change with technological fixes. This approach risks lingering in a sense of power and arrogance about Dutch expertise while leaving unchallenged an underlying narrative of humanity's domination of nature, which the environmental crisis has shown to be increasingly problematic.

In recent decades, however, there has been a shift in the Dutch water management approach towards more nature-based solutions. Rather than keeping water out, the government is increasingly framing new policies as 'working with nature' and 'building with water.' This demonstrates a political awareness that the old approach is no longer productive and nature-based solutions, such as coastal wetlands and extended natural riverbanks, can contribute to both human safety and biodiversity. Rosanne examines how these new projects begin to tell a different story that erodes the traditional nature-culture binary reflected in earlier measures aimed at separating human and nonhuman realms. The fact that humans are working with nature suggests we are part of nature, necessitating an effort to understand how ecosystems work in order to employ this knowledge for water management purposes. Given that this approach brings the added benefit of increased biodiversity, it may also open the way for a less anthropocentric politics, potentially even a post-anthropocentric politics in which nonhuman interests are conceived as an integral concern.

Through her involvement with ARK Rewilding Nederland, Rosanne is working to bring her research into broader dialogue with this political turn, reaching outside the academy to society at large. ARK promotes nature conservation and restoration and is active in many rewilding projects in the Netherlands, for example through a project that reintroduces tides into the Rhine and Meuse estuaries. This is a valuable nature-based solution that improves flood resilience and river biodiversity, given many plants and animals depend on the interplay between fresh and saltwater. In this context,

Rosanne's current project with ARK focuses on the city of Rotterdam and its future in times of rising sea levels. Although Rotterdam is situated in the Rhine-Meuse delta, it is not commonly associated with nature. This perception is slowly changing with the return of the tides and natural riverbanks on, for example, the island of Brienoord. Together with ARK, Rosanne organizes writing workshops for local residents in Rotterdam on the themes of nature, water, and the future of the city. Locals are asked to share their personal stories about Rotterdam and are invited to imagine a future story of the city in which various new plants and animals have made Rotterdam their home. By exploring a connection between the human and nonhuman inhabitants of the city in these stories, the human community begins a dialogue with nonhuman voices. For any new water management policies to be effective, it is crucial that they be supported and co-created with local communities. Rosanne's workshops aim to provide a space for the conversations that underpin this co-creation.

The Future

Moving forward, Rosanne intends to further examine the intersection of environmental crisis and the city, with a particular focus on developing synergies between the blue humanities and urban studies. In the midst of an accelerating environmental crisis, urbanization is also on the rise globally. For any solutions to be effective, it is therefore imperative to tackle the environmental crisis at the urban level. Rosanne argues that we need more research to understand how cities can become climate-neutral, greener, and more biodiverse. According to Rosanne, to achieve this outcome humanity also needs a new story about cities as complex assemblages of human and nonhuman communities. This is what the humanities and a creative-critical approach can contribute.

To take on this role, however, Rosanne argues that humanities research needs to become less anthropocentric. In particular, she hopes that there will be more consideration of more-than-human perspectives and a move away from the idea of human superiority that prevails in both academia and wider society.

Rosanne ended our conversation with some advice for emerging scholars thinking of taking a more creative approach to

their research. She suggested that the best path is to focus on your interests, whatever they may be. Creative writing has various forms and does not have to be academic per se. Therefore, experimentation is vital. Rosanne suggested that one way to experiment is through automatic writing exercises: designate a specific theme and write on it for a couple of minutes without stopping to pause or edit. While the outcome will probably be a bit chaotic, Rosanne advises that this process can shed light on connections and parallels you may have overlooked at first, which can then become a great starting point for beginning a new piece of writing. Given that much of her work is situated in the coastal context, Rosanne also incorporates fieldwork into her creative practice. For Rosanne, this includes walking along the beach while taking notes and photographing things that inspire her.

For Rosanne, the best way to benefit from these creative writing exercises is to share them with others, such as a select group of friends with whom you share a blog about your fieldwork. Start small, ask your readers for feedback, and experiment with that feedback as you revise your writing. While feedback is useful, Rosanne reminds those starting out not to be too discouraged by skepticism around one's creative methods or own abilities. Before Rosanne started her PhD in creative writing, she did not have any other degrees in the field. While broadening one's disciplinary horizons takes time, it is certainly possible; don't let others make you believe that it is not.

Further Readings:

- Kalinowski, Katharina Maria and Rosanne van der Voet. "Of Jellyfish, Lichen, and Other More-Than-Human Matter: Ecopoetical Writing Research as Transformative Politics." In *Poetry and the Global Climate Crisis: Creative Educational Approaches to Complex Challenges*, edited by Amatoritsero Ede, Sandra Lee Kleppe, and Angela Sorby, 91-106. London: Routledge, 2023.
- Van der Voet, Rosanne. "Experiments in Sandscaping: Liminal Entanglements on the Norfolk and South Holland Coast." *Book 2.0* 11, no. 1 (2021): 95-106.
- . "Flood." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 30, no. 3 (2023): 749-756.
- . "Living as Water." *Ecozon@* 13, no. 2 (2022): 218-228.