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Introduction

Rethinking the idea of nature

AURELIE CHONE, ISABELLE HAJEK & PHILIPPE HAMMAN

The prospect of humankind's destruction is nowadays focusing the attention of political and economic decision-makers as well as researchers in a wide range of disciplines. Rethinking the relations between nature and culture and, beyond it, the very idea of nature has then become unavoidable. This book is revisiting the way environmental issues can be apprehended through new epistemologies and new forms of investigation. Our intention is to put emphasis on the disciplines that are emerging when connecting ecology with different specific standpoints and to highlight the circulation of knowledge across national and cultural spaces, within the Western world and through comparisons with other cultural spaces. A widely diversified range of topics is considered in order to challenge the established relations both in representations and social practices between nature and society. In regards to environmental issues, we want to update the conversation about nature, in bringing to the fore the interconnection of knowledge produced by a series of new fields of inquiry able to redesign the traditional theoretical frames. On the one hand, the confrontation of facts and values and, on the other, the willingness to take into account the historical processes through which human activities have transformed nature are giving rise to renewed questionings about the relationships between nature and humankind.

The crisis of the idea of nature

This book has developed out of a double insight. First, Western societies have been founded on the divide between 'nature' and 'culture'. Gaining 'mastery over nature' appears to have been a recurring preoccupation, harking back to the words of the *Holy Bible*: 'God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground"' (*Genesis*, 1: 28). On the other hand, the wide-ranging environmental changes now affecting the planet, as well as the deep-seated contradictions governing the relationship between human societies and nature, are today well-established realities, drawing all the more attention as the human origin of the changes has been revealed, raising at times particularly fierce debates. Let us take climate change and its effects, from extreme weather events to ecological catastrophes, such as droughts, heatwaves, floods, hurricanes, tsunamis and so on. While some so-called 'climate sceptics' argue that there is nothing unusual to today's global warming when compared with previous ages, most scientists believe that the fulfilment of humans' ambition to master nature is producing dramatic changes on a global scale, even ushering in a new era, the 'Anthropocene', in which the biosphere is shaped by human activity (Lynas, 2011), and producing an 'anthropized'/artificial nature, set within a technological society. All ecosystems have been modified and the idea that there remain places 'untouched by man' is a myth. Furthermore – and this is now a widely shared idea – some apparent wilderness areas are actually sites of former civilizations (Dudley, 2012). The nature/culture divide, often thought to be self-evident, therefore appears not to have a universal bearing (as shown by a newly evidenced 'ecology of relations': Descola, 2013 [2005]). It rather points to the effects of a culturally-situated ethnocentrism: the way in which beings and things are commonly classified is but a cultural construct, which makes it impossible to truly grasp the many relations between human beings, animals, plants and minerals. We wish to disentangle this complex network of interconnections and to peer into hidden places.

Our starting point is the widely shared idea that the concept of nature is today undergoing a 'crisis', or has even now come to its 'end' (Larrère & Larrère, 2003 [1997]; Vogel, 2015); in 1989 Bill McKibben had already argued that the survival of the globe is dependent on a radical shift in the way we relate to nature. This complex and unprecedented situation in the history of humankind, and the effects of the deconstruction of the nature/culture divide, raise a few questions: how does new

perception of everything that is unthought and overlooked in this ethnocentric opposition affect the production and the global circulation of knowledge? How can we rethink nature beyond the traditional oppositions subject/object, nature/culture, and try to understand the plurality of the relations linking humans and non-humans (Latour, 1988)?

To tackle these questions, while avoiding the twin pitfalls of relativism and essentialism, we propose to rethink the idea of nature through a double comparative angle:

- First, to recognize the limitations of strictly scientific and technical approaches to nature, which rely on the guiding principles of the Enlightenment that spread throughout Europe in the 18th century and granted primacy to instrumental rationality, progress and development, and to emphasize the importance of the symbolic, social, cultural and political dimensions of the issues raised by human societies' relationship with nature.
- Then, to build upon the polysemy of the idea of nature, as it was developed in Western cultural histories of modernity throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, to show how this idea is now redefining traditional frameworks and academic disciplines and producing new fields of inquiry and new practices.

Scholars have pointed out that ecological theories are often based on the conflict between pessimism and faith in human and scientific progress, which can often be linked to a binary opposition between Romanticism and the modern conceptions brought in by the Enlightenment, or between external nature (the phenomenal world) and the internal nature of things (the thing in itself). In that respect, the present volume precisely insists on the multilayered meanings of the concept of nature, by showing that these oppositions do not always stand: their polarity can indeed help us understand that what society holds as desirable merely corresponds to a to-some-degree 'artificialized' nature (Larrère & Larrère, 2003 [1997]).

Thus, if the authors pay a large attention to contemporary debates on environmental issues, this book goes beyond these considerations by including diverse approaches, which, as a counterpoint to Western perspectives founded on the nature/culture divide, examine their underlying ethical, aesthetic or spiritual principles, call on the perspectives of native peoples or social activists, explore the long-ignored animal point of view, or resort to comparative approaches, analysing North and South, in their urban and rural aspects.

In each of the chapters, the authors endeavour to break down traditional barriers and to show how Western ecological theories have been appropriated and enriched, through concrete examples derived from the social world. While pointing out the tensions that can be detected in the intellectual trajectories delineated, the authors steer clear from abstract presentations by describing examples of field research and by insisting on the processual dimension of the issues at stake, without any desire to provide any rigid framework. They can thus bring out the diverse ways in which nature is imagined and used, even at times suggesting new ways of living together. Readers are thus invited to shift their perspective and open it to other, not necessarily equivalent visions to the future (transition, sustainability, de-growth, ecocide, etc.), leading them to understand how and why the concept of nature is still a useful one.

An ongoing reconfiguration of academic fields

We have chosen to adopt a resolutely combined mode of analysis between philosophy, literature, cultural studies and social sciences, interested in the production, transfer and circulation of knowledge about 'nature' across disciplines and across national and cultural spaces. These subjects are investigated in their temporal and spatial dimensions:

- We trace the evolution of the ways of thinking about nature throughout time, up to the emergence of current new scientific debates, showing how disciplines have envisioned the issues at stake and, conversely, how the issues considered have given rise to new emerging perspectives.

- Our investigation is led on an international scale, in order to highlight the diversity of scientific outlooks, which are informed by cultural aspects.

The goal is to trace genealogies of thinking, hinging around considerations of ecology and environmental studies as a field of investigation and investment, and to account for the ongoing reconfiguration of disciplines, as seen in the quite recent emergence of new interdisciplinary investigations (witness the popularity of the prefix ‘eco-’: ecocriticism, ecofeminism, ecopsychology, ecosociology, ecosophy, ecospirituality, ecotheology, ecotourism and so on), which so far have been little studied together and in their plurality. These recent perspectives are shaping the outlines of what some in the US and in Europe refer to as ‘the environmental humanities’, whose guiding principle is to integrate environmental concerns to the research subject. Online journals have been developing, such as *Resilience. A Journal of the Environmental Humanities*¹, founded in 2012 in the US, *Environmental Humanities*, created by scholars from Canada, Australia, the US and Sweden², or the French website devoted since 2013 to environmental humanities³. The term, however, does not seem to have yet acquired any univocal meaning. The journal *Environmental Humanities* suggests that much when defining its area of investigation:

The journal publishes outstanding interdisciplinary scholarship that draws humanities disciplines into conversation with each other, and with the natural and social sciences, around significant environmental issues. [...] Numerous groups have formed at universities around the world during the past decade under the banner of the ‘environmental’, ‘ecological’ or ‘sustainable’ humanities.

Some prefer to speak of *ecological humanities*, defined by a specialized website⁴ in the following way, which emphasizes the dialogue between Western and non-Western perspectives: ‘The ecological humanities bring together ways of knowing and interacting with the world from the sciences and the humanities, as well as from indigenous and other “non-Western” worldviews, nourishing the connectivities and possibilities that these dialogues produce for people and the more-than-human environment.’ Basing itself on this notional malleability and the underlying interdisciplinary reconfigurations, this textbook contends that, contrary to what is sometimes said, these new formulations and theorizations do not undermine the idea of nature, but rather reassert its very validity and heuristic power. Self-conscious reflections on their own thinking allows the different contributors to go beyond the now traditional calls for systematic, complex and integrated knowledge which have been repeatedly issued since the second half of the 20th century. The contributions gathered in this book, all written by renowned specialists, combine theoretical analysis with empirical examples from various thematic fields and geographic locations. Case studies go beyond national cases and connect them with international debates, covering countries and regions as diverse as the UK, the US, Germany, France and the cultural areas of the South. The types of knowledge produced about nature, their transfer and circulation within and across disciplines is studied in relation to the representations and uses of nature, all the while keeping in mind the actual experience of human and non-human beings living together in an endangered world. By combining the theoretical and empirical aspects of the topic, our aim is to reflect on the way knowledge is inextricably linked to actual cases, thus making more or less irrelevant the dualistic opposition subject-object.

We are endeavouring to study the processes of redefinition at work, at different levels:

- On the one hand, existing disciplines are seen to have evolved since the rise of environmental awareness in Western societies in the 1960s: out of the field of ethics has emerged a new one focused on environmental ethics, ecosociology has risen out of sociology, ecopsychology out of psychology, animal history out of history, ecocriticism or epistemocriticism have been formed as parts of literary studies, and so on. On the other hand, interdisciplinary areas of study (ecosophy, ecospirituality, ecofeminism, political ecology, urban ecology, industrial ecology, ethnoecology, sustainability studies, etc.) have been emerging and organizing, giving rise to a new way of thinking

that has been fertilizing other fields. Those two processes are neither consecutive nor exclusive one to the other, and thus cannot be studied apart.

- A second guiding thread of the book proposes to hold in balance a focus on the individual subject (moral principles, values, etc.) and a focus on the collective body (social, political and economic issues, animals and society, Western and non-Western societies, and so on).

It is indeed useful to deconstruct the notion of ‘subject’: the initial conflict between the Enlightenment and Romanticism can be reinterpreted as an opposition between a holist conception of the social world and the desire of the individual to emancipate from the collective body. To which can be added the deconstruction of the Western imperialist subject by postcolonial studies, in particular postcolonial ecocriticism and cultural and literary animal studies, as well as the critique of instrumental rationality through a new emphasis laid on symbolic (ecoformation, for instance) or spiritual (ecospirituality) dimensions.

As the barriers separating academic disciplines are breaking down, so the complexity of the issues related to nature and the environment can be revealed and a critical outlook is emerging, directed at the relationship between cultures and power. Ethnoecology, ecocriticism or animal studies, all focus their gaze on the apprehension of invisible ‘minorities’, deprived of speech politically (the native peoples as well as animals or plants, etc.). The radical break they perform thus not only consists in criticizing previous scientific approaches or disciplinary configurations, but in bringing to light heretofore unquestioned assumptions, if not a whole ideology underpinning Western hegemonic discourse, as explained by Edward Said’s pioneering work in postcolonial studies (Said, 1978, 1993).

A new dialogue between literature, cultural studies and social sciences

This textbook presents itself as a coherent guide aimed as much at scholars and students looking for fine analyses as at citizens, professionals and members of associations willing to know more about the issues at stake. It distinguishes itself at various levels from the existing literature. First of all, it covers environmental humanities research specifically about ‘nature’, identifying various and cross-disciplinary forms of knowledge production and transfer. It not only provides specific and well-founded critiques of several concepts as an end in itself, but opens up perspectives for the circulation of environmental knowledge on a world scale, even as it founds its case on specific processes and fields in order not to remain at the level of general propositions.

Perhaps the book’s most challenging and innovative feature is that it reflects *ongoing controversies and dialogue* between scientists from diverse disciplinary backgrounds and locations, who are all concerned with the environmental humanities, and brings them together in a debate for the first time, to overcome national boundaries about ‘nature’ as a research and a practical field, in order to find a different way to conduct environmental studies. We have gathered together distinguished scholars in Europe and the English-speaking world to initiate such an exchange between different perspectives, at a time when some may be more developed in certain national contexts than in others and when there is now intense circulation in the international academic community. Given their complementary research traditions – the US having a lead in reflections on environmental humanities while there is a long-standing tradition of studies about nature in European social sciences and philosophy – it is particularly fruitful to engage together French/European and American scholars.

A convenient and analytical reference work, this textbook is neither an anthology nor a dictionary by definition limited to short explanatory texts – like, for instance, the recent and convincing *Keywords for Environmental Studies* (Adamson *et al.*, 2016), which presents sixty central terms currently structuring the environmental domain. Nor is it the product of a specific disciplinary investigation, or of a univocal epistemological approach, attempting to combine different forms of knowledge mostly by bringing them together within a historical framework.

We have rather tried to confront different outlooks on ‘nature’. This distinguishes our book from the main existing works about ‘rethinking nature’ which have been published over the past decade. For example, the collective book *Second Nature. Rethinking the Natural through Politics* (Archer *et al.*, 2013) is founded throughout on an approach relying on political science. Other interesting books also clearly belong to a specific disciplinary school, interested in environmental philosophy (see *Rethinking Nature. Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, edited by Foltz & Frodeman (2004; or Hailwood, 2015), or in globalization and its mechanisms from global justice or international law to ecoterrorism, etc., for example, *The Challenges of Globalization: Rethinking Nature, Culture, and Freedom* (Hicks & Shannon, 2007). Even the recent volume *Old World and New World Perspectives in Environmental Philosophy: Transatlantic Conversations* (Drenthen & Keulartz, 2014) favours an approach based on philosophy and not really on the plurality of the relationships between the humanities and social sciences.

By the same token, the present book appears innovative when compared to several handbooks flourishing since the 2000s, such as *A Companion to Environmental Philosophy* (Jamieson, 2001); *A Companion to Environmental Geography* (Castree *et al.*, 2009); or *The Routledge Handbook of Urban Ecology* (Douglas *et al.*, 2015). Indeed, among such handbooks, some volumes, written at the turn of the 21st century, bear the influence of the rising field of environmental studies, like for example the *Handbook of Environmental Sociology* (Dunlap & Michelson, 2002), the *Handbook of Environmental Psychology* (Bechtel & Churchman, 2003), or the more recent *Oxford Handbook of Environmental History* (Isenberg, 2014). Other handbooks adopt cross-disciplinary perspectives, but from 2010 on they have increasingly directed their attention to the forms of public action, like *The Oxford Handbook of Climate Change* (Dryzek *et al.*, 2011), which explicitly seeks to define appropriate forms of action in the face of climate change, or *The Sage Handbook of Environmental Change* (Matthews *et al.*, 2012), or the *Handbook of Global Environmental Politics* (Dauvergne, 2012), which resorts to cross-disciplinary methods in order to link global politics and environmental change. Other subjects involving theoretical and empirical cross-disciplinary research have been the focus of various handbooks: sustainable development, for instance, has inspired the *Handbook of Sustainable Development* (Atkinson *et al.*, 2007) and the *Routledge International Handbook of Sustainable Development* (Redclift & Springett, 2015). The growing interest in ecosystem services shown by many institutions, and their implications for justice and injustice, have been analysed in *The Justices and Injustices of Ecosystem Services* (Sikor, 2014) and the *Routledge Handbook of Ecosystem Services* (Potschin *et al.*, 2016) which integrates natural/social/economic sciences. The idea of ‘nature’, and the circulation and new configurations of knowledge around it, have, however, not been paid a lot of attention. The *Routledge International Handbook of Social and Environmental Change* (Lockie *et al.*, 2014) draws a powerful reflection on the ways to think the co-evolution nature-society but remains confined within the limits of certain academic disciplines (sociology, political science, geography, anthropology) to the exclusion of literary and cultural studies.

There has, admittedly, been an upsurge of interest in more clearly interdisciplinary approaches, but they often take the form of collections of essays, aimed at an audience already familiar with the school of thought that is at work. Books connected to ecocriticism and environmental literary criticism are cases in point, from *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996) to the more recent *Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* (Garrard, 2014), with, in between these two dates, such titles as *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism* (Coupe, 2000), *The ISLE Reader. Ecocriticism, 1993–2003* (Branch & Slovic, 2003) or *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment* (Westling, 2013). Postcolonial environmental humanities have been presented in the same way in *Global Ecologies and the Environmental Humanities: Postcolonial Approaches* (DeLoughrey *et al.*, 2015). As a response to this, we have chosen to favour a resolutely cross-cultural and multi-disciplinary approach, taking into consideration Western and non-Western paradigms, and paying attention to the perspectives of the social sciences as well as of literary and cultural studies.

This reasoning has led us to divide the book into five ‘sequences’, organized around couples of complementary or contending notions, whose link it is our aim to re-examine in the light of the current social situation and the state of academic studies on the subject. First are connected together ‘values and actions’ (Part I), then ‘writings and representations’ (Part II), then, with the help of the previous analyses, the book focuses more particularly on approaches interested in social movements or located at the intersection of academic criticism and social activism (Part III), and on those that challenge contemporary ecological thought, by comparing different areas – urban and rural sites, in particular – and by adopting modes of analysis situated at disciplinary or thematic crossroads. These renewed perspectives are also expressed in the field of ecological economics, which the book then dwells on (Part IV) before extending the discussion to the area of human–animal interactions (Part V).

May our readers now make this textbook their own and in their turn contribute to the conversation
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¹ <http://www.resiliencejournal.org/> (Accessed 27/07/2016).

² <http://environmentalhumanities.org/> (Accessed 27/07/2016) and: <https://www.dukeupress.edu/environmental-humanities> (Accessed 27/07/2016).

³ <http://humanitesenvironnementales.fr/> (Accessed 27/07/2016).

⁴ <http://www.ecologicalhumanities.org/> (Accessed 27/07/2016).