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What's left of the wild now that Nature is dead? Reflections on the limits of representation

Marc Higgin

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De la représentation de la crise à la crise de la représentation

Esthétique et politique de l'Anthropocène

Textes réunis et édités par
Hélène Schmutz

*DE LA REPRÉSENTATION DE LA CRISE
À LA CRISE DE LA REPRÉSENTATION*

ESTHÉTIQUE ET POLITIQUE DE L'ANTHROPOCÈNE

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HÉLÈNE SCHMUTZ



**LABORATOIRE LANGAGES, LITTÉRATURES, SOCIÉTÉS,
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WHAT'S LEFT OF THE WILD ?

SOME THOUGHTS ON WHAT ESCAPES THOUGHT

MARC HIGGIN

UNIVERSITÉ GRENOBLE ALPES - PACTE

Que reste-t-il du sauvage maintenant que la Nature est morte? Cette question, posée dans un petit temps entre les marées lors d'une conférence organisée autour des sciences humaines de l'environnement, détient déjà une réponse partielle aux questions plus larges qui animent cette collection : est-ce que la prise de conscience croissante des multiples crises environnementales que nous traversons a conduit à des crises dans la façon dont nous représenter et penser l'environnement? Ces crises de représentation ont-elles changé notre rapport à l'environnement? Ce chapitre essaie de sauver quelque chose du sauvage, de notre idée du sauvage, qui pourrait aider à reconfigurer nos relations avec un monde en crise.

À première vue, le sauvage est une idée aussi compromise que la Nature, aussi complice de l'histoire des sociétés européennes et de leurs relations profondément destructrices face à d'autres sociétés et environnements. À la suite des travaux de William Cronon, ce chapitre résiste à l'appel du wilderness, du sauvage emblématique, afin de prêter attention aux « wrong natures » qui nous entourent. Le sauvage ici – dans les jardins, les voies ferrées, les trottoirs – indique une autonomie et une altérité qui demeurent sous l'indifférence de l'appropriation quotidienne de ces lieux par les gens. Ce ne sont pas seulement les humains qui se font un monde : les animaux, les plantes, les champignons, les bactéries travaillent pour créer des lieux de vie écologiques et, ce faisant, transformer le monde pour tous. Ce chapitre raconte l'histoire d'une 'intervention' lors d'une conférence sur la matérialité qui s'est tenue à Munich en 2017, réfléchissant sur sa tentative de rendre notre sentiment d'appartenance étrange, de perturber l'anthropocentrisme qui le qualifie habituellement comme un intérieur, contre lequel le sauvage à l'extérieur pourrait être jugé.

Man is man only on his surface.// Lift off the skin, dissect; here the machinery begins. And soon you lose your bearings in an inexplicable substance, foreign to all you know and yet the basic stuff of the man you are dissecting.// It's the same thing with your desires, your feelings, and your thought. The

familiarity and the human aspects of these things vanish on examination. And when, after lifting off the skin of language, I try to look beneath it, what I see bewilders me¹.

What is left of the wild now that Nature is dead? This question, asked in the lull between the tides at a conference convened around the environmental humanities, already holds a partial response to the wider questions animating this collection: has the growing awareness of the manifold environmental crises we are undergoing led to crises in how we represent and think about the environment? Have these crises of representation changed the way we relate to the environment? This chapter tries to salvage something from the wild, from our idea of the wild, that might help re-configure our relations with a world in crisis.

The death throes of Nature

Engulfed by the multiple and entangled environmental crises that are the hallmark of the anthropocene – the ‘weirding’ of the climate, the massive loss of biodiversity, the contamination of ecosystems by waste, to name but three of the most pressing – the consequences of human activities are now seen to be threatening the very existence of nature. Or at least that portion of nature that, we are belatedly understanding, is needed to support human life. Within this threat lies is another: that our idea of Nature – as the part of life on this planet independent and autonomous from human lives and actions – has been overtaken by the facts on the ground and is now redundant. The naming of our current epoch as the anthropocene testifies to the dawning realisation that human activity now ‘rivals some of the great forces of Nature in its impact on the functioning of the Earth system’². The destinies of Society and Nature, so long held apart, are now entangled for all to see. But who do we talk about when talk about the *anthropos*? And who is this ‘we’ doing the talking?

In lumping all human communities into a common humanity, the concept of the anthropocene renders invisible the hugely disparate contributions different societies have played in these unfolding crises, and within particular societies, the differing responsibilities of particular institutions and collectives have played³. As a proposed alternative, the

1 P. VALÉRY, *Collected Works of Paul Valery, Volume 14: Analects*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2015, p. 134.

2 see, for example, P. CRUTZEN & W. STEFFEN, «How long have we been in the Anthropocene era? », *Climatic Change*, 61(3), p. 251-257.

3 A. MALM and A. HORNBORG, «The geology of mankind? A critique of the Anthropocene narrative», *The Anthropocene Review*, 1(1), 2014, p.62-69. Argue for the very specific role of capitalism in driving the global transformations. J. MOORE,

capitalocene points a finger at a specific, historically situated societal regime orientated towards the accumulation of capital responsible for the vast majority of 'human' impact of the geo – and bio-sphere. This regime is busy re-shaping the world in its image, profoundly transforming the registers of what Félix Guattari⁴ has called the three ecologies: namely those of the environment, of social relations, and of human subjectivity. We'll come back to this image in a moment.

The impact of environmental crises – from pollution to rising seas – is not spread evenly across humanity but hit the poorest communities first and hardest, as made clear in IPCC reports⁵. As writers within the environmental justice and political ecology movements have long noted⁶, the direct and indirect 'externalities' of industry tend to fall on those without the resources – money, connections, know-how – to contest and reformulate them as either private or public nuisance, or even to mitigate their worst consequences. As such, environmental and social crises often conjugate together.

Just as there is no common 'we' in terms of being responsible for, or undergoing the impacts of, the current ecological crises, the very idea of Nature is not universal but socially, historically constructed. To trace the barest of sketches, in the 'West', at least since the Enlightenment, orthodox thought and action has defined society and environment as distinct domains of existence. As Bruno Latour argues, we 'Moderns' are beholden to an unwritten, unspoken 'Constitution,' 'a kind of semi-official political-metaphysical common sense founded on the strict opposition of Society and Nature'⁷ (1991; see also Descola 2010). The sciences reflect this cleavage, with distinct ontologies, epistemologies and methods for investigating the human and nonhuman world. The social and human sciences have defined 'the human' and 'society' in ways that have taken the

«The Capitalocene, Part I: On the nature and origins of our ecological crisis», *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 44(3), 2017, p. 594-630, makes the argument for naming of the present epoch as the *capitalocene*. See also D. HARAWAY, «Anthropocene, capitalocene, plantationocene, chthulucene: Making kin», *Environmental humanities*, 6(1), 2015, p. 159-165.

4 F. GUATTARI, *The Three Ecologies*, London, Athlone Press, 2001.

5 voir https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2018/02/ipcc_wg3_ar5_full.pdf.

6 see, for example, R. BULLARD & J. LEWIS, *Environmental justice and communities of color*, San Francisco, Vista Books, 1996; D. SCHLOSBERG, *Defining Environmental Justice: Theories, Movements, and Nature*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007; F. JARRIGE & T. LEROUX, *La contamination du monde. Une histoire des pollutions à l'âge industriel*, Paris, Le Seuil, 2017.

7 B. LATOUR, «An attempt at a "compositionist manifesto"», *New literary history*, 41(3), 2010, p. 471-490. See also P. DESCOLA, *Beyond nature and culture*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2013.

nonhuman world for granted: the backdrop to human life rather than an integral and constitutive part of it. The natural sciences gave themselves the task of understanding the world ‘in-itself’ beyond the distorting lens of human culture. It is this Nature whose death has been heralded by voices on both sides of the divide; some lamenting, some celebrating.

Amongst those celebrating are those who accuse this idea of Nature of more than simply being outmoded and outrun by events on the ground: instead, they accuse this idea of playing an active role in shaping the profoundly destructive force of capitalist industry and commerce, in which the fantasy of Nature as external to and unmoved by human lives underwrites a constitutional obliviousness to the consequences of one’s way of life on the environment in which it finds itself. The world *as resource* for the rational, profit-maximising homo oeconomicus⁸ at the heart of Liberal cosmology is not exactly synonymous with Nature: if the former is blind to the nonhuman world as anything other than a resource, the latter insists on, and implicitly values, an autonomy that exceeds its use by humans (until now at least). However, they both share the impossibility of thinking the interaction between human ways of life and their environments as a relation in which both are constructed. These are charges that indigenous scholars have long been repeating, along with denouncing the attendant blindness to non-Western ontologies which frame people’s relation with the (non-human) world differently⁹. Zoe Todd¹⁰ argues that these voices have, historically, been quarantined within the confines of non-Western ‘cultures’ by the discipline of anthropology, sidelined while nevertheless providing a deep and often unacknowledged resource for critics of ‘Modernity’ within the West. These critics, Bruno Latour, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Isabelle Stengers, Tim Ingold and Anna Tsing to name a few, argue that the separation of Society and Nature as two separate domains doesn’t reflect how human societies are produced in and with their environments, in which human lives are always negotiated with a multiplicity of nonhuman ‘agencies’. In different ways, these critics call for new forms of thought, new forms of action, new forms of politics, in order to transform our

8 M. SAHLINS, *Stone Age Economics*, Chicago, Aldine Press, 1972.

9 For example, S. HUNT, «Ontologies of Indigeneity: The Politics of Embodying a Concept», *Cultural Geographies* 21(1), 2014, p. 27-32; V. WATTS, «Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency amongst Humans and Non-humans (First Woman and Sky Woman go on a European Tour!)», *DIES: Decolonization, Indigeneity, Education and Society* 2(1), 2013, p.20-34; J. SUNDBERG, «Decolonizing Posthumanist Geographies», *Cultural Geographies* 21 (1), 2013, p. 33-47.

10 Z. TODD, «An Indigenous Feminist’s Take On The Ontological Turn: ‘Ontology’ Is Just Another Word For Colonialism», *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 29 (1), 2016, p. 4-22.

understanding of who 'we' are and the possibilities of inhabiting this world collectively.

So if Nature – as an idea – is dead, or dying, what is left of the wild? At first glance, as an idea, the wild is as compromised, as complicit within the history of the European societies and their profoundly destructive relations with other societies and environments.

The wild I grew up with

I had been following the troop of baboons since dawn. I had found them perched on the cliff where I had left them the evening before, warming themselves with the first rays of sun. We were making our way through unfamiliar hills, travelling east past the bounds of the reserve and into communal grazing land beyond. Scrambling up the massed rocks, I was trying to keep up with them. They were anxious, staying closer together than usual, even Ebola, the former dominant male deposed the year before. All of a sudden, a loud burst of barking and screeching erupted above me. Ebola came into view, barking, chased by an equally angry TB (the current dominant male). All hell broke loose, the females and infants screaming, scrambling in different directions. Suddenly, Ebola looked at me and then headed straight for me. For the first few moments, I wasn't unduly worried, I had nothing to do with the fight, I hadn't stepped on anyone's toes. But as he jumped from rock to rock, hair standing on end and teeth bared, he didn't take his eyes off me: all this sound and fury was now directed at me. TB was just behind him, his anger still on Ebola. They stopped on the rock just above me. I'd become used to the stare, to those teeth, to the barking and short sharp thrust of the hands but that composure was gone. I was completely petrified.

Confused, TB looked from Ebola to me and back again. After a while, he got bored and wandered off while Ebola carried on, his aggression interrupted by quick, nervous glances over his shoulder to see where TB was. That's when it dawned on me that I had been used, a fall guy for Ebola to co-opt in the daily difficulties of managing his own and his infants' place at the margins of this troop. He left after a bit, I continued my scramble up the hill, legs shaking.

This is an extract from my diary (I didn't do field notes back then) written in 2003. I had spent my childhood dreaming of travelling to Africa, to the home of the wild and its totemic animals, and here I was. Recently graduated with a zoology degree, I had jumped at the chance to work as a field assistant on the Tsaobis Baboon project in Namibia, a long-term research station run by Institute of Zoology (London).

I spent my days following the same group of baboons, collecting data on spatial coordinates, group dynamics and foraging behaviour. Quite quickly, I realised I was less interested in the models of baboon behaviour

this data was helping to build than the work collecting it. The growing spreadsheets reflected only very indirectly the fraught business of getting close enough to the animals to be able to see what they were doing. Every day was an apprenticeship; getting to know, often by terrifying means, each baboon's particular sense of the relationship developing between 'us'. It was not just a matter of learning to read the baboons (both as a group and as individuals) but learning to read how they read me. It was this negotiated nature of the (field)work of habituating wild animals to human presence that fascinated me.

The 'Nature' inculcated at school and university – as a picture of the world as-it-is, free from the distorting lens of human culture, accessible through careful, objective research – was revealed to me as a fiction. Tidied up within the black box of habituation, translated into data, constructed into models, the lives of these particular baboons made knowable in relation with this particular observer-participant were 'purified' into the universal, and universalising, story of *Papio Ursinus*. It was a useful, persuasive work of fiction when taken as evidence of certain epistemic virtue¹¹ (Candea 2013): the protocols or habituation and data collection were good enough to get reliable information of these baboons' lives, as free as possible from observer bias, good enough at least to construct models reconstructing baboon behaviour as an optimal (or at least viable) strategy in the face of particular ecological (or selective) pressures. But not being able to look away from this work of construction was fatal to a certain strain of common-sense realism I had long swam in. I had reached the limits of the 'Naturalist' cosmology I had been schooled into¹², with its strict delineation of the human and nonhuman worlds. I did not have the tools, concepts or colleagues to take these emerging relations between these animals and myself seriously.

This 'crisis' of representation has been foundational to my development as a researcher, turning me towards the social sciences and the burgeoning field of human-animal studies in geography and anthropology. If Nature stopped making much sense to me as an ordering epistemological frame, the more implicit ideas of the wild I had taken with me to Namibia took some time to be dragged out into the open. There had been a particular, unsettling oddness to finding myself having to negotiate everyday life with these baboons. It was almost but not quite the 'wilderness experience' I had been hoping to immerse myself in. In the wildlife documentaries that had nourished these expectations, the animals did not look back at the viewer, you didn't see the camera crew, the equipment, the jeeps; you didn't

11 See M. CANDEA, «Habituating meerkats and redescribing animal behaviour science», *Theory, Culture & Society*, 30(7-8), 2013, p. 105-128.

12 P. DESCOLA, *Beyond nature and culture*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2013.

see the care that was taken in composing shots in which human presence was rendered invisible, nor the work of editing out any sense of an emerging relation that would compromise the illusion of a pristine 'wild'. Pristine in the sense of a world free from human presence. However, finding myself 'there', the last thing I could forget was my presence. In fact, I had never been so aware of myself as a body, as a body with particular habits and gestures which were rendered visible in the reactions they provoked in the baboons I was spending my time with. Rather than escaping to a world beyond human society, the baboons' gaze made evident the society, the family, the home, I embodied. In their eyes, in the movement and gesture of their bodies, there was an alterity that made itself felt. It was in the effort of relating that another sense of wildness took root: "nothing can ever take away from me the certainty that what we have here is an existence that refuses to be conceptualized"¹³. From baboons, I went on to work on the negotiated geographies of guide dog partnerships, the welfare of farm animals and practices of animal slaughter¹⁴, following the question of how to make space for animals within social theory and methods.

The wild in the garden

William Cronon points out, in his famous essay on the wild, if you "[g]o back 250 years in American and European history ... you do not find nearly so many people wandering around remote corners of the planet looking for what today we would call 'the wilderness experience'"¹⁵. Far from being celebrated as it is in contemporary American and European culture, back then wilderness denoted land that was barren, inhospitable, uncultivated; only through labour could it be redeemed. In this sense, human society began where wilderness ended. Roy Wagner, in *The Invention of Culture*¹⁶, unearths the deep roots that bind Western notions of culture to cultivation, to tilling the soil and rendering it productive. Civilisation – as the 'sum total of achievements, inventions, and discoveries'¹⁷ that define

13 J. DERRIDA, «The animal that therefore I am (more to follow)», *Critical inquiry*, 28(2), 2002, p. 369-418.

14 See M. HIGGIN «Being guided by dogs: towards a negotiated animal geography», In *Crossing Boundaries: Investigating Human-animal Relationships* L. BIRKE (Ed.) Leiden, Brill, 2012, p. 73-88; M. HIGGIN, A. EVANS and M. MIELE, «A good kill: socio-technical organisations of farm animal slaughter», B. CARTER and N. CHARLES (eds), *Human and Other Animals: Critical Perspectives*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, p. 173-194.

15 W. CRONON, «The trouble with wilderness», *Environmental History*, 1(1), 1996, p. 7-28.

16 R. WAGNER, *The Invention of Culture*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1975.

17 *Ibid*, p. 22.

this ability to transform the world in the image of our needs and desires – needs wilderness as the undifferentiated ground against which it can become visible. This dichotomy pre-dates the epistemological break that marked the dawn of ‘modernity’ for Louis Althusser¹⁸. Wilderness cannot be neatly mapped onto the idea of Nature constructed by the emerging sciences of the 18th and 19th centuries; wilderness is not the ‘res extensa’ of Descartes, is not the world of primary qualities – mute, invisible, but localisable and knowable. Wilderness retains the peril of bewilderment, the terror of finding oneself lost, alone, exposed to forces beyond human control¹⁹ (Mcafarlane 2003).

It was this implicit threat at the heart of the wild that was re-purposed and weaponised by the Romantics in their broadsides against the industrialising world and the rational, calculating logics of the laboratory and the market. In poetry, painting, music, in philosophical and political pamphlets, wilderness was transformed from the ‘antithesis to all that was orderly and good [in]to Eden itself’²⁰. Led by the efforts of John Muir and the Sierra Club, the first ‘wildland’ parks in Yosemite and Yellowstone were written into federal legislation in 1864. The wild became territorialized as wilderness areas, celebrated as the epitome of a nature untouched, unspoilt by human activity. Fenced in and policed, terror and bewilderment were domesticated into wonder, wonder monetised by tourism.

[T]he trouble with wilderness is that it quietly expresses and reproduces the very values its devotees seek to reject. The flight from history that is very nearly the core of wilderness represents the false hope of an escape from responsibility, the illusion that we can somehow wipe clean the slate of our past and return to the tabula rasa that supposedly existed before we began to leave our marks on the world²¹.

These parks and their models of management were replicated in Europe and imposed on the rest of world. Tsaobis Wildlife Reserve was first established as private hunting park in the 1920s by Afrikaner colonisers of SouthWest Africa, then became a pegmatite mine, and then, in the 1980s, a private wildlife reserve. It was surrounded by farms and communal grazing land – farmland bought by the government as part of its land reform programme. The baboons I was following in 2003 had been more aware than me of the politics of the land on which they lived, more aware of how their status oscillated from protected wild animal to nuisance animal to be culled

18 B. LATOUR, «An attempt at a “compositionist manifesto”», *op. cit.*, p. 480.

19 R. MACFARLANE, *Mountains of the Mind: A History of a Fascination*, London, Granta 2003.

20 W. CRONON, «The trouble with wilderness», *op. cit.* p. 9.

21 *Ibid*, p. 16.

depending on which side of a fence they found themselves. It took me time to see beyond the images of wilderness I had brought with me, to learn the history of this place, to begin to understand the scars of colonialism and the apartheid regime on the land and its inhabitants, human and nonhuman.

However, Cronon is at pains to rescue something from the idea of the wild. In the Naturalist cosmology of the West, the wild is the site where a certain autonomy and vitality of the (nonhuman) world makes its presence felt. That is, that part of the world that (re)produces itself without any help from humans: other, outside, autonomous.

C'est le petit campagnol que se fraye un chemin à travers les rangées de maïs tirées au cordeau; c'est la bande de chardonnerets élégants qui chaque hiver revient faire une orgie de graines de tournesol dans les mangeoires du jardin; c'est la couleuvre qui dort, paisible, au bord du canal; les pissenlits qui transpercent le bitume; et le faucon qui niche au sommet de Notre-Dame. C'est peut-être aussi une part de nous même, archaïque, vitale²².

Virginie Maris, her recent book, asks us to revisit the wilds of this world and pay attention to those animals, plants and ecosystems that people haven't been domesticated, the soils that haven't been cultivated because they have been set apart or ignored or proven too intractable. Maris articulates three dimensions of this wild nature: its *exteriority* to human society and its activities; its *alterity* to the human-made world; and an *autonomy* that resists its co-option for human use. This emphasis on alterity leads Maris to argue for a revalorisation of nature as these remaining wild spaces, shorn of any naive realism, but that nevertheless functions to define and defend that part of the world which is in the process of disappearing. The foregrounding of alterity is meant to function as a barrier marking the (self-imposed) limits of human knowledge practices, management and economy.

On the other hand, Cronon resists the call of the emblematic wild, paying as much attention to the dandelion breaking through tarmac as the stag belling on the hillside. For him, there is a danger in this reification of the wild as the outside, as the elsewhere of an environment already ruined by its human inhabitants. Instead he urges us to seek the wild in what he calls 'wrong natures'; in gardens, pavements, railways sidings. By 'wild', he points to an autonomy and otherness that remains underneath the indifference of people's everyday appropriation of these places. It is not just humans who make a world for themselves: animals, plants, fungi,

22 V. MARIS, *La part sauvage du monde-Penser la nature dans l'Anthropocène*, Paris, Le Seuil, 2018, p. 3.

bacteria all actively work to make ecological living places and in the process transform the world for everyone²³.

Cronon frames the work of paying attention to this autonomy of the world as an ethical imperative: '[l]earning to honor the wild – learning to remember and acknowledge the autonomy of the other – means striving for critical self-consciousness in all of our actions'²⁴. These 'wrong natures' make a mess of the inherited dichotomies of nature/culture, domestic/wild, human/animal, and allow us to think home otherwise. Cronon's reformulation of the wild conjugates autonomy and alterity with relation. For Maris, the danger is that any valorisation ultimately leads to an anthropocentrism, of the world as 'rambunctious garden'²⁵ or as 'earth system' to be managed²⁶. In this way, responsibility becomes a form of stewardship, in which alterity is once again covered over. This paper follows the footsteps of Cronon into the 'wrong natures' that conjugate alterity and relation, whilst heeding the warnings of Maris.

If wildness can stop being (just) out there and start being (also) in here, if it can start being as humane as it is natural, then perhaps we can get on with the unending task of struggling to live rightly in the world – not just in the garden, not just in the wilderness, but in the home that encompasses them both²⁷.

The aim of what follows is render this *home* strange, to unsettle the anthropocentrism that habitually qualifies it as an *inside*, against which the (wild) *outside* might be judged. To do so, I make the deliberate leap from baboons, falcons, even dandelions – that is, living beings whose alterity populate our habitual notions of the wild – to much less obvious embodiments of the wild: the things that fall to the side of busy roads in Aberdeen, Scotland. Here, the autonomy and vitality of the (nonhuman) world that makes its presence felt is not bound up with any sense of alter-subjectivity, moving beyond the debates on agency and intentionality that have plagued the social sciences in their attempt to find place for the nonhuman within social sciences²⁸.

23 A. TSING, *The mushroom at the end of the world: On the possibility of life in capitalist ruins*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.

24 W. CRONON, « The trouble with wilderness », *op. cit.*, p. 20.

25 E. MARRIS, *Rambunctious Garden: Saving Nature in a Post-Wild World*, Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2011.

26 W. STEFFEN *et al.*, « Trajectories of the Earth System in the Anthropocene », *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 115(33), 2018, p. 8252-8259.

27 W. CRONON, « The trouble with wilderness », *op. cit.*, p. 25.

28 see for example J. MURDOCH, « Inhuman/nonhuman/human: actor-network theory and the prospects for a nondualistic and symmetrical perspective on nature and society », *Environment and planning D: Society and Space*, 15(6), p. 731-756.

The wild at my doorstep

I collected water from a puddle on King Street, one of the major roads running through Aberdeen, Scotland, connecting the fishing ports and oil refineries to the north with the harbour and cities to the south. It was the road on which I lived with my partner and two small children. In a plastic bottle in my hold luggage, I carried this puddle water halfway across Europe to Munich, where it was decanted into a humidifier and placed in the corner of the break-out room of a symposium. Next to the humidifier and its small jet of moist air was a label identifying the source to those curious enough to wander over.



Photo 1. King Street, at night after the rush hour. 25,000 vehicles per day (Department of Transport 2017) use this road, connecting the fishing ports and oil refineries to the north with the harbour and cities to the south. Photo by the author.



Photo 2 Portrait of my son with line of toy cars, taken from King Street. We lived on this road for two years; the never-ending parade of cars, buses and lorries was an everyday part of our lives, its atmosphere permeating not just our bodies but our experience and our forms of play. Photo by the author.

The above describes the protocol for an ‘artistic intervention’ I was invited to contribute as part of a symposium convened around the theme of materiality and connectivity in anthropological research²⁹. Alongside more traditional paper formats, the symposium encouraged a number of these interventions experimenting with different forms of juxtaposing things, stories and ideas to think through these the potential of these two concepts within anthropological research.

Day and night, lorries, buses and cars pass, containers ferrying payloads of people, equipment, goods, food, animals to slaughter, fish to market, waste to treatment and landfill. King Street’s smooth, surfaced ground is a vital part of the circulatory system through which the economy of North-East Scotland has grown. However, the focus of the intervention was not with the infrastructure of the road itself. Nor was it with the materiality and modes of connectivity of the objects travelling along it, objects accounted for and given value through exchange, the ‘goods’ that fill everyday life in that part of the world. Instead, my interest was with

29 Connecting Materialities / Material Connectivities, International Symposium at the Center for Advanced Studies, LMU Munich, February 2017. Organised by Philipp Schorch and Martin Saxer.

the externalities, with the things that fall to the side and make up the atmosphere of King Street as a particular place: the noise of the traffic, the air laden with smells, soot and dust, the play of shadows from passing headlights, the brightly lit faces staring out from busses, the flotsam and jetsam that accumulate in its gutters and drains.

Turned to vapour, the puddle water fills the room while people eat and speak. Nearly invisible, this intervention is less representation than re-presentation of the street on which I had lived in close proximity with my family for the two years previously. Its aim was not to paint a picture of King Street in the realist tradition nor illustrate a 'study of' lives lived along its length³⁰. Instead, the remains of one place directly intervened, interposed themselves, in another. Though scarcely noticed, the vapour was nevertheless breathed in by all those in the room, with its cargo of particles left behind by car tyres and engine exhausts, with its teeming microbial life fed by dropped cigarette butts and seagull shit, all absorbed and metabolised by bodies alongside the food and conversation. This intervention *did* something and, as I will elaborate, it is exactly the inconspicuousness of this doing that makes it interesting to think through, opening a space from which to think the wild anew.

The intervention was a homage to the artist Teresa Margolles; in particular, her work 'Air/Aire', an installation into which I inadvertently stumbled on a visit, in 2008, to the 'Emotional Systems' exhibition at the Palazzo Strozzi in Florence, Italy. I pushed through a set of those heavy plastic curtains more at home in a butcher shop or slaughterhouse to find myself alone in a bare, white room. There was a slight earthy quality to the air but nothing out of place in a basement not far from the river. Lacking any other place to land, my attention was drawn to a non-descript machine in the far corner. Wandering over, I read the small label that told me the water in this humidifier had been used to wash the corpses of murder victims at the municipal morgue in Mexico City. My sense of the room flipped on its head, a visceral shock that had me disgusted, disbelieving, unwilling to breathe, laughing, fascinated and deeply saddened, all in quick succession.

The involuntary intimacy of the piece broke all the conventions of representational art, with its still lifes, nudes and landscapes that kept the world at a polite distance. But it also unsettled the detached distance of

30 T. INGOLD, «Anthropology is not ethnography», *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 154, 2008, p. 69-92. Whilst referring specifically to Ingold's distinction between ethnography and anthropology, I am drawing on the much wider critical reflection within the discipline undermining any claim to represent the lives of others in any straightforward, realist sense.

the pathologist³¹ examining the bodies laid out on the slab along with the numbing litany of the news that has given up counting the victims of a (drug) war that has been going on for years. Absent of any hyperbole, the work quietly (re)presents death, murder, a war whose reasons spread far beyond Mexico, implicating us all. Avoiding the figurative, Margolles's installation works through what François Lyotard called the 'figural'³²: a disruptive force that works to interrupt established habits and structures in the realms of both discourse and sense, forcing their transformation. The installation interposed itself between sensuous experience and thought, undermining the sure footing of both. It was this technology of re-presentation I wanted to borrow – both the involuntary intimacy it forced upon its 'viewer' and its means of making this intimacy evident – in order to leverage its visceral power to unsettle anthropological theorising around materiality and connectivity.

As a 'border crossing' between art and anthropology³³, the intervention follows in the footsteps of Alfred Gell and his anthropological (re)definition of art as technology of entrapment³⁴ (Gell 1996). At stake here is less a reading of the 'complex intentionalities' that Gell saw at work in the work of art, than the dispositif that Gell appropriates from the Western art world: the 'white cube' framing the encounter with an artwork³⁵. The intervention is a proposition in the shape of puzzle, challenging a viewer to make sense of it; '*a trap or a snare that impedes passage*' (Gell 1996, 37), slowing down habitual ways of perceiving, feeling and thinking in order to open possibilities for doing these otherwise. In its modest way, the intervention was a provocation towards the prevailing representationalist or correlationist paradigm within anthropological, and social scientific, research, with its tendency to reduce the beings and things of the material world to human representations, meanings, uses, intentions, and significations. As proposition in the shape of puzzle, the aim was to open a space in which the existence of this material world was not yet subordinated to signification: a *wild* space.

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- 31 Margolles trained as a forensic pathologist and used to work for SEMEFO, the Mexican Coroners Office.
- 32 J.-F. LYOTARD, *Discourse, Figure*, Trans. Antony HUDEK and Mary LYDON, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2011.
- 33 A. SCHNEIDER and C. WRIGHT, «Between art and anthropology», *Between art and anthropology: contemporary ethnographic practice*, A. SCHNEIDER and C. WRIGHT (eds), Oxford, Berg Publishers, 2010, p. 1-22.
- 34 See A. GELL, «Vogel's net: traps as artworks and artworks as traps», *Journal of Material Culture*, 1 (1), 1996, p. 15-38.
- 35 M. HIGGIN, «The unexpected gift of beauty», S. BUNN (ed.), *Beauty and Anthropology*, London, Routledge, 2017, p. 67-81.

For Tim Ingold, the civil engineering that characterises the road system in the UK (and in much of the world) aims to:

convert the ground into the kind of surface that theorists of modernity always thought it was – level, homogeneous, pre-existent and inert. It is to make the earth into a stage, platform, or baseboard, or, in a word, into an infrastructure, upon which the superstructure of the city can be erected³⁶.

Modernity has its dream of frictionless matter and instant connectivity but, as Ingold goes on to argue, this hard-surfaced world still partakes in the weather, in the flux of beings, materials and forces from which every particular place is continually being made and re-made. The puddle from which I filled a plastic bottle was not, in this sense, a discrete thing but a *thinging*: a kind of gathering³⁷ carried by the rain blowing in from the North Sea, carrying together the heavy hydrocarbons of asphalt, the synthetic rubber, steel, waxes, oils, pigments and silicas of the tyres passing over its surface, the salt that the council liberally spreads during the winter months, the fallout from the exhausts of countless combustion engines with its sulphur dioxide, carbon monoxide and dioxide, nitrogen oxide, ozone, chlorofluorocarbons, petrol, benzene, particulates, heavy metals, the remains of last year's leaves, spit, the crumbs from a thrown away packet of crisps. A liturgy that only scratches the surface.

Spreading out to envelope the lunchtime chatter of a symposium, the intervention gestures towards a different mode of materiality and connectivity than those of the “middle sized dry goods” which are supposed to populate the world of “common sense”³⁸: that familiar world of stable objects and artefacts that populate economic theories and accounts of the social. Since the inception of anthropology as a discipline, accounts from beyond the familiar horizons of Western material cultures have troubled the apparent ease with which people and things can be distanced, one from the other. The recent, and much needed, turn to ‘materiality’, to the innumerable things that surround us and through which we live our social lives – the houses we live in, the clothes we wear, the pictures we hang on our walls, the weapons we kill with, the cars we drive – has been driven by a recognition that the very physicality of bodies and stuff, so obviously important in everyday life, had been left behind as anthropologists read through them to their social function and cultural meaning.

36 T. INGOLD, *The Life of Lines*, London, Routledge, 2015, p. 45.

37 T. INGOLD, «Footprints through the weather-world: walking, breathing, knowing», *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 16 (ns), S121-S139.

38 B. LATOUR, «“What’s the story?” Organizing as a mode of existence», *Agency without Actors? New Approaches to Collective Action*, edited by J.-H. PASSOTH, B. PEUKER and M. SCHILLMEIER, London, Routledge, 2012, p. 163-77.

It is this approach to materiality – as an attention to the sensible qualities of things and how these have been co-opted into human worlds – that I want to unsettle here. There is a clear resonance here with Maris’s argument about how alterity (of the wild) become domesticated in the focus on relation (in the fields of ecology and conservation and also in anthropology). That is, the manner in which anthropocentrism inherent in our ways of knowing, our ways of using, the nonhuman world necessarily render visible only certain aspects. While the attention to materiality, to the wild, has, undoubtedly, allowed for a richer, more nuanced, unfolding of the mutually constitutive relationship between people and the material world within social scientific accounts (for example Miller 2008), this intervention in the ‘surrounding vital quality’ of place – what anthropologists have begun to take seriously as ‘atmosphere’³⁹– aims to bring to momentary attention another, inadvertent and unaccounted, mode of ‘materiality’ and ‘connectivity’ that goes beyond the habitual mode of ‘object-thinking’⁴⁰. This is a ‘world of materials’⁴¹ not yet made good sense of, not yet domesticated as handmaiden for human signification; a ‘world of materials’ not yet subordinated to human knowledge and control.

The very act of reading the label brings attention to our breathing, suddenly unsure of itself, suspiciously sniffing a world beyond familiar grasp. Its aim is to provoke an awareness, however temporary and amorphous, of the involuntary, constitutive relationship with a (latent) commons of which our living, breathing bodies necessarily partake⁴². A home but a strange one. Without the small label framing it as an intervention, the humidifier and vapour would have remained in the background, unnoticed. It is this lack of presence that interests me here. Negligible, neglected, this is materiality and connectivity – as the sensible world we pay attention to, care for and give value to – exhausted; a world that precedes us, that is other to us, mysterious, bewildering; a world that we did not ask for, but which we nonetheless must navigate and live in.

As a coming-together of substances that have fallen out of the familiar world of tarmac and tyres, pavements and pedestrians, this puddle water is fascinating and unsettling precisely because it lays bare the inherent movement and transformation of the world of which every object is but

39 Ssee S. SCHROER and B. SCHMITT, *Exploring Atmospheres Ethnographically*, London, Routledge, 2018.

40 M. HIGGIN, «The other side of society; reflections on waste and its place», *Antropologia* 3 (1), 2016, p. 69-88.

41 T. INGOLD, «Toward an Ecology of Materials» *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 41, p. 427-442.

42 A. TSING, *The mushroom at the end of the world: On the possibility of life in capitalist ruins*, *op. cit.*

a passing realisation. What relations can these substances enter into? What chemical romances are they disposed to? These questions remain open in part because so little is known about the metabolic afterlife of the particulates of iron or zinc oxide released by the engines following each other on King Street, or any of the multitude of other compounds used in the making of all that is transported along its length that will eventually fall out of familiar form. The autonomy and vitality of iron particulates are not, here, understood as *properties*, like a person might have intentionality and agency. Rather, the question is what these particulates can do. This capacity to act is emergent within the relations these materials find themselves in; that is, these are emergent properties of the complex metabolic life in which these materials are relative newcomers.

The wild, then, doesn't belong to some beings and not others, arrayed on either side of an artificial/natural binary. Particulates of iron made within diesel engines are part of the world made by humans but this making does not prescribe the relations they can enter into, the effects they may have in the world. The wild I am pointing to here describes the autonomy and vitality of relations that transform the relata; that is, the wild as *processes* that escape, that exceed, human capacities to know, use or control them. Reciting a completely inadequate liturgy of substances does little to mask the realisation that we have next to no sense, next to no idea, of what we are already undergoing in promiscuous relation with them.

While the turn to materiality in anthropology has gone beyond language and meaning to take seriously the serially overlooked in Western academia – senses, emotions, bodies, practice – this much more generous approach to understanding human relations (with human and nonhuman beings, with deities, with weather, with...) does not exhaust people's involvement with the world into which we have all been thrown, a world not wholly of anyone's making and with which we relate in a multiplicity of ways, most of which escape us. This is not to invoke the well-rehearsed Enlightenment distinction between primary and secondary qualities of the world; the first refers to measurable properties of objects that are independent of any observer, the second to the appearance of objects as they appear to an observer. This dichotomy re-surfaces in a concept of materiality characterised above; to quote from the archaeologist Chris Tilley:

There is on the one hand a processual world of stones which takes place oblivious to the actions, thoughts and social and political relations of humans. Here we are dealing with 'brute' materials and their properties. On the other hand there is the processual significance stones have in relation to persons and sociopolitical relations⁴³.

43 C. TILLEY, «Materiality in materials», *Archaeological Dialogues* 14 (1), 2007, p. 16-20.

The concept of materiality is complicit in a worldview that separates out a human social sphere – its anthropology – divorced from the world within which it grows, takes shape and ultimately falls back into – the natural world. This ‘brute’ matter is understood, within this epistemology of the Moderns, as inanimate, as understandable as a game of billiards or the mechanism of a clock. As Bruno Latour argues:

One of the principal causes of the scorn poured by the Moderns on the sixteenth century is that those poor archaic folks, who had the misfortune of living on the wrong side of the “epistemological break,” believed in a world animated by all sorts of entities and forces instead of believing, like any rational person, in an inanimate matter producing its effects only through the power of its causes⁴⁴.

The root of the problem is that Moderns mistake theories and models for the world-as-it-is: “[t]his is why rationalists never detect the contradiction between what they say about the continuity of causes and consequences and what they witness—namely the discontinuity, invention, supplementarity, creativity (“creativity is the ultimate” as Whitehead said) between associations of mediators⁴⁵. *The man-made world is only man-made on its surface, life off the skin and the wild begins...*

This dichotomy between subjective appearance and objective reality not only misses the *animacy*⁴⁶ of the material world (including the ‘man-made’) but also the centrality of practice to all knowledge-traditions: the making sensible of the world through the practical curiosity of people, following an ‘instinctive faith’ that there is more to nature than first meets the eye⁴⁷. As Bruno Latour argues, the sciences are defined by their tradition of experimentation, understood as the work of a body ‘learning to be affected by hitherto unregistrable differences through the mediation of an artificially created set-up⁴⁸. Rather than adjudicate between Nature, as the really real, and Culture, as the apparently real, these empirical sciences serve to multiply the number of things that are known to be abroad in the world; that is, these sciences disrupt and re-figure our representations of the world, providing new grips, new relations, from amongst a multitude of agencies. Between this world *on the move* and practices of knowing, themselves on the move, is a horizon; on the far side lies the wild.

44 B. LATOUR, «An attempt at a “compositionist manifesto”», *op. cit.*, p. 481.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 483.

46 T. INGOLD, «Toward an Ecology of Materials», *op. cit.*

47 I. STENGERS, *Thinking with Whitehead: A Free and Wild Creation of Concepts*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2011, p. 105.

48 B. LATOUR, «How to talk about the body? The normative dimension of science studies», *Body and Society*, 10 (2-3), 2004, p. 205-29.

Conclusion

What is left of the wild? This chapter picks up what Cronon salvaged from the deeply compromised ideas of the wild and wilderness we have inherited in the West; the wild as the site where a certain autonomy and vitality of the (nonhuman) world makes its presence felt. My use of the term takes me far from the politics of conservation that is usually its domain, far from the establishment of reserves and refuges where the wild might re-assert itself, to what Cronon calls the 'wrong natures' with which we are surrounded. The intervention at the heart of this chapter can be thought as dispositif for opening a moment of bewilderment, in which the habitual ways we represent and think about the world fall short, gesturing towards a teeming *wildness* to the home we have made in this world.

The point is that our collective attention has been elsewhere. We know so little about the substances brought together in this puddle water; so little about their metabolic lives as they are breathed in by the participants in the symposium because these have not been made to matter. They are an externality to how we collectively organise, care for, and give value to our shared socio-material environments. The vast majority of research and development is focused on organising and making available the world for our use (this is Heidegger's definition of technology) that we, collectively, pay next to no attention to what happens when these useful things fall out of use. The tragedy of the synthetic material culture that Europe, in the main, has been responsible for exporting to the rest of the world is that, like a plastic bottle bobbing in the ocean, most of its 'social' life (after its 'consumption') plays out of sight, out of mind. The 'unknown unknowns' (to use Donald Rumsfeld's inimitable terminology) of the metabolic life of materials remain simply unimportant to the 'projects' by which we come to know, and refashion, the material world in our own idealised image. The *wild* gestured towards in this intervention is a proposition that remains an open question, requiring ongoing attention and care. In its small way, this intervention joins in with Anna Tsing's plea for a resurgence in the 'arts of noticing'⁴⁹ that might render visible the 'latent commons' in which we are entangled, for good or for ill, with the world in all the plurality of its becoming and activate them as sites of common interest, while nevertheless acknowledging the limits of this visibility, that we live amongst wild things and need to take care.

49 A. TSING, *The mushroom at the end of the world: On the possibility of life in capitalist ruins*, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

