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Aphasia or another world

[On Enclosed Spaces and the Great Outdoors](#) • 30 Mar 2020 • English

When I think about global warming, that is, the human influence on the climate system that, judging by a huge stream of news reports and scientific publications, increasingly marks all life and will continue to do so for centuries to come, I quickly experience how complicated it is to use a language that does justice to this, to the scale on which all this as yet undetermined 'new weather' will intervene in the lives of all beings on earth.

Global warming will not leave anything or anyone unaffected, will affect the air (atmosphere), the ice (cryosphere), the water (hydrosphere), the earth's crust (lithosphere) and the entire biosphere: all the biological tissues, structures and relationships that make up life on earth will either change or disappear. As Pierre Charbonnier puts it in his study *Abondance et liberté*: 'Nous vivons une expérimentation géologique d'ampleur globale qui bouleverse toutes les dynamiques éco-évolutives connues.'

There is a danger, in my case at least, that this will simply make me fall silent, overcome by an overwhelming speechlessness. The climate crisis, a new kind of aphasia? Now you might object that all speaking is a victory over speechlessness. Every time again, as an author, you have to invent a language for the reality you are trying to capture. So it's an old problem, but the scope is unmistakably new.

The much-used word 'crisis' seems justified to me, although it is perhaps still too light. After all, what is the financial crisis compared to a climate crisis? Because this crisis, to use this word anyway, is so strange and all-encompassing, it feels like I have to justify every term I use to get a handle on it. Every word has to be reweighed to determine its use value.

Who would dare talk about 'environmental problems' by now? What does 'sustainability' mean now that even fossil energy companies are using this term? Or take the word 'nature'. The ease with which I used to talk about 'nature' until a few years ago now seems strange to me. I hardly dare to use the word anymore, so much so that it seems to be on the verge of bursting, laden with (historical) meaning it creaks and squeaks. My fingers are ready to make the quotation mark gesture. Add a little dialectical thinking to bring culture into play, and even further from home you are. 'Nature' expresses so much that it no longer means anything. It feels like fighting germs with a butterfly net.

During David Weber-Krebs and Jeroen Peeters' theatre conference *On Enclosed Spaces and the Great Outdoors – 3. Haunted Scenes, Decolonial Ecologies*, which took place in Amsterdam on February 29 and March 1, 2020, a major role was reserved for language. Lectures, after all, are communicated primarily in language. During the conversations I had with guests and participants that weekend, the concept of 'nature' also came up for discussion, as well as its shortcomings.

Contextual note

On February 29 and March 1, 2020, at De Brakke Grond and DAS Theatre in Amsterdam, *On Enclosed Spaces and the Great Outdoors - 3. Haunted Scenes, Decolonial Ecologies* took place, a performative conference curated by David Weber-Krebs and Jeroen Peeters about the place of art in times of climate crisis. Jan-Willem Anker followed the performances, lectures and conversations and afterwards wrote a reflection on the search for an appropriate language to speak about the climate crisis. This essay was realized with the support of the Flemish Community and the Flemish Community Commission within the framework of the project *On Enclosed Spaces and the Great Outdoors*.

The title of the program specifically evokes a juxtaposition between the inside of an enclosed space (of the theatre) and a wide, unbounded outside that has been put under tension by the climate crisis. The juxtaposition is entirely appropriate; both places exist simultaneously and may not even be able to exist without each other. Would we be able to imagine an 'outdoors' if our lives did not also take place continuously in enclosed spaces? By the way, I am writing this at the very moment when the Corona pandemic is demanding that we invent a 'Great Indoors'.

In what follows, using the lectures from the theatre conference and personal experiences, I want to explore the language we use to understand climate system disruption. In doing so, I will also consider ways in which the concept of nature is understood and conceived of. Finally, I will briefly discuss a proposal by Australian philosopher Glen Albrecht that can move us forward in this time of climatic crisis. During my exploration, oppositions such as inside vs. outside, human vs. nonhuman, life vs. death will resonate.

I spoke of a time of crisis, which is perhaps not correct, perhaps it would be better to speak of an end time, characterized by extinctions and the threat of them. Human extinction, which in cultural-historical and religious terms can boast of an enormous tradition, also acquires through the climate crisis and the climate projections of the IPCC a lasting and, I would almost say, 'sustainable' urgency. Our own personal death is being lifted up to be part of a mass death. In his lecture on the end and endlessness, theatre scholar and dramaturge Kristof van Baarle showed, among other things, how this end state is shaped in Kris Verdonck's performances *Untitled* and *Conversations (at the End of the World)*. No catharsis is possible anymore, in this 'exhausted theatre' the performance begins after the story has ended. We are left with little more than continuity, a hopeless, infernal state without logical actions, with the mascot Cookie who is doomed to wander around in an endless end and conversations that fade into meaninglessness.

So to put my question about nature in different terms: what are we talking about when we speak of 'nature' in these end times, a time that is no longer experienced so much in a linear way, but rather in a circular way, as Timothy Morton notes in *Dark Ecology*. Life degenerates into survival. This is well seen in the images of Gilles Laurent in *Retour sur le territoire*, the short bonus film to *La terre abandonnée*, which explores the post-apocalyptic world of the Japanese city of Tomioka in Fukushima. A handful of survivors have remained while government workers in suits are busy disposing of the poisoned soil with machines. Does the thirst for energy lead to a world of endless survival, without significant development? To what atavisms might such an 'état de paysage' lead? The term is by Giorgio Agamben, cited by Kristof van Baarle to describe a state 'after the end'. In Tomioka the houses look dilapidated and damaged, sometimes they are already overgrown with bushes and plants. The people are, as it were, absorbed in them.

The issue was further explored by statements from Mexican-Chilean choreographer and performance artist Amanda Piña. Once again it became clear to me how ideologically and culturally-historically charged (and thus limited) my understanding has been of what nature can be. Piña argued that in the West a singular conception of nature is common, in opposition to a plurality of cultures. For the Masewal people from Mexico's Sierra Norte del Pueblo this would be unthinkable: on the contrary, there are many different natures in this world.

The consequences of this became palpable during Piña's dance performance in the making. In it, she depicted the life of a mountain, among other things, by projecting images of it onto herself. They were natures connected to each other in the same world. Anyone who recognizes that a mountain not only 'harbours' and produces life, but is also alive itself, will have to acknowledge, like Piña, that the politics of extraction, a policy based on digging and drilling for raw materials, is an act against life. The physical integrity of the mountain is being compromised, violated, in the most extreme case by a practice called 'mountain top removal', a form of mining in which explosives are used to remove a mountain top of up to one hundred meter in order to extract the underlying coal. Such a thing is partly the result of a system of ideas in which a mountain is seen not as life, but at best as a somewhat irrelevant landscape where there is a storehouse of goods underground, a place full of valuable 'things' that you just have to bring up to the surface. A geological treasure trove to

empty out. What gets in the way and who opposes it must go, whatever the cost might be. Extraction politics is a thoroughly violent politics.

What I was reminded of during the weekend at De Brakke Grond is that conceptions of 'nature' are thoroughly political, and that these conceptions can influence us in profound ways. The American thinker Jedediah Purdy has shown this in his history of ideas *After Nature*. The colonists' ideas about nature served as a legitimization for the genocide against the inhabitants. Forests, plants, animals, and people were considered 'waste', which did not mean trash but rather 'wild and uncultivated'. Everything that was wild and uncultivated (think also of the diligent work of Robinson Crusoe, farmer abroad) had to be subjected to the management of a God-sent colonist.

When, to stay a little closer to home, I recently visited the natural history museum Naturalis in Leiden, I was particularly struck by what curious ideas about nature still circulate there. The Naturalis site says: 'The new Naturalis is open: the national knowledge institute on biodiversity and a brand new family museum with everything about nature.' Note: all the animals in Naturalis are dead: as stuffed animals they can be seen and admired. Without the curators ever daring to reflect on it in any way, Naturalis gives the visitor a course in Enlightenment thinking: man as the undisputed and autonomous hunter's master of an animal kingdom who first kills everything that is 'beneath' him (the Enlightenment man was of course a white man) and then classifies, categorizes, labels and catalogues... for education. By killing man has become so successful: lord and master of the entire biosphere.

Impressive is the giraffe in a drinking posture, as lifeless as a statue. But what do you learn from that, in a digital world where images of every animal can be found? That it is justifiable to kill animals and then display them neatly lit as trophies in a dark room? A dark room, by the way, that is part of a gallery with the ludicrous name 'Life'. What was truly interesting was the information that was missing: where exactly did these animals come from? Who killed them and when? How were they brought to Leiden? Who prepared them into the artefacts they are today?

The scientific research on microbiomes alone makes such exhibitions problematic: every human being is a walking colony, a mobile biotope, buzzing with countless organisms, including bacteria that even seem to influence some brain functions. These invisible collaborations taking place in our bodies point to a form of cooperation as subtle as it is essential: man as a permeable mutualist. In the words of the Australian philosopher Glenn Albrecht: 'We are the basis for life inside us and there is interchange between the inside and the outside through endless permeability. We are reminded of this permeability when we get diseases such as influenza, malaria, or food poisoning [...]. At the microscopic scale, there is no barrier between us and the outside... it is all one seething interrelated party where... as they say in the classics, "everything is connected to everything else".'

This view of nature can show us the way to interact differently with our environment, with the people and non-human beings who live there, without man always being in the foreground, as the writer Daisy Hildyard pointed out during her lecture. Hildyard analyzed the recording of a very specific bird sound from which background noise had been filtered. This particular way of 'foregrounding' a noise, a life, a species or what have you, ignores the fact that all life is connected and intertwined. It is important to remain mindful of that interconnectedness and the lasting influence that different species exert on each other, and influence or 'imprint,' as Hildyard says, which she refers to as 'negative ecology'.

In many zoos (probably in most of them) the true meaning of interconnectedness still needs to sink in. Zoos are remarkable institutions. Beating their chests for the educational function they perform, they unmistakably bear the signature of the Enlightenment. In Arnhem's Burgers' Zoo, for example, a tropical jungle has been recreated. Under a translucent dome you walk into the sticky heat of the jungle, where you will find a capybara, the largest rodent in the world that 'naturally' lives in South America. Under the 'vision' button, the zoo's website explains what its management thinks about nature: 'Nature and the experience of nature are essential for people's well-being. Contact with nature has a direct positive effect on people and a lasting effect on their attitude and behaviour towards nature. Direct contact with

nature is becoming increasingly rare and Burgers' Zoo will be able to play an increasingly important role in connecting people with nature.'

This text strongly suggests that humans are separate from 'nature', the zoo facilitates 'connection'. In short, people should go to a special, fenced-in place where there is 'nature' and where you can get a 'nature experience' (obviously for a fee). That everything in Burgers' Zoo is the result of human work remains underexposed. In fact, an artificial environment is presented as natural, as something that is all around us and exceeds the human capacity for control. Meanwhile, you are left with the question: is that capybara natural or not?

Bestiaire by Canadian filmmaker Denis Côté raises exactly these questions about our dealings with wild animals. His film offers insight into the various living spaces of animals in the safari park of Canada's Hemmingford, not far south of Montreal. The captivity in which the animals live when not seen by visitors is downright oppressive. It's a world of trampling legs, of restless herd animals between mechanical sliding doors, of animals being fed through fences, of tigers banging against their cages. Is this really how we want to treat our fellow mortals?

The climate crisis is forcing us to speak about something we can hardly speak about, a development that has only just begun (but which, we think, can still be slowed down somewhat) and whose consequences are difficult to foresee, because they will extend over a time that geologists call 'deep time', a time that transcends the existence of animal species. In any case, we understand that there is no area of the earth that is not affected by human activity. But when we talk about nature, we always talk about something that is around man, outside 'his' sphere of influence. That this 'outside' is also inside of us, we are experiencing first hand, now that the world is in semi-paralysis due to the Corona virus. As a catch-all term, 'nature' can serve to keep us aware that we will always be connected to our environment, that autonomy and freedom are at best illusions, and at worst harmful fabrications. Anyone who says nature acknowledges that he or she is always at the mercy of something that cannot be controlled.

Many thinkers have tried to introduce a suitable term for our time. It appears we have entered the beginning of a new geological era. The discussion about this new era, which we can also call an end time, was initiated in particular by the Dutch atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen thanks to whom the term 'Anthropocene' has become widely known. Criticism of this term has not been absent, for example because the concept of 'anthropos', or 'man', ignores (historical) economic inequality, (neo-)colonial oppression and current power relations: after all, especially the West has brought most of the carbon dioxide and methane into the atmosphere since industrialization. In addition, in the words of the author Robert Macfarlane, it would be a form of 'self-mythologizing' and would reinforce 'the technocratic narcissism that is the cause of the current crisis'. Macfarlane insists on it nonetheless, in part because it forces us to ask the question 'that the immunologist Jonas Salk so memorably articulated, 'Are we good ancestors?'

Meanwhile, all sorts of alternatives have been proposed, including Capitalocene (Jason W. Moore) and Chthulucene (Donna Haraway), and to which the Martinique-French thinker Malcom Ferdinand, who gave a wonderful lecture based on his 'écologie décoloniale', added the notions of 'Negrocene' and 'Plantationocene', in order to expose the intrinsic link between extractive politics and colonialism, and to point out that a political response to the climate crisis is conceivable that seeks to build a kind of Noah's Ark exclusively for the privileged and white section of the world. Those who won't fit into the ark will be left to their fate on a climate-ravaged globe.

The philosopher Glenn Albrecht, to conclude with him, has also been making fascinating proposals in recent years to steer our thinking away from a destructive and human-and-animal-destroying extraction policy. Albrecht is best known for his notion of 'solostalgia', by which he refers to a chronic sadness and melancholy that overwhelms you because of the loss of your environment, a form of homesickness at rest actually. But he has also been extensively engaged in developing a typology that describes a whole range of 'psychoterratic' emotions, emotions that describe our relationship to our environment and that are the result of a profound change in that environment, as a result of extraction politics or a changing climate.

Remarkably, Albrecht does not venture into a discussion of whether the 'Anthropocene' is the right term for our times. Instead, he adopts the term but only to make his point that we need to leave the era the term describes behind as soon as possible, with the goal of ending up in what he calls the 'Symbiocene', a period 'characterized by human intelligence that replicates symbiotic and life reproducing processes to be found in life and natural systems. The elements include full recyclability of all inputs and outputs, safe and socially just renewable energy (preferably produced from that safe and distant nuclear reactor, the sun), full and harmonious integration with physical and living systems at all scales, and the elimination of waste in all aspects of human enterprise.'

His discovery is reminiscent of how the French philosopher Michel Serres already gave substance in the 1990s to the contract with nature that he proposed should be added to the social contract: 'a symbiotic contract, reciprocal, in which, in our relationship to things, we give up our domination and possessiveness. Instead, we must learn to listen to each other with admiration, with contemplation and respect. Knowledge should no longer be power, decisiveness should no longer lead to possession.'

I like Symbiocene because it puts a nice spin on the old adage that we can learn from nature ('natura docet'). Secondly, because this term makes conceivable a way of life in which you deliberately choose not to occupy certain spaces in your environment, at least that is how I interpret Albrecht's reverence for 'living systems at all scales'. Finally, it refers to the biological term 'symbiosis' which describes a long-term coexistence of two or more organisms. The Greek verb 'sumbioun' also means 'living together'. In the Symbiocene, I believe dominance, inequality and oppression are a thing of the past.

A symbiotic way of life might sound a bit tacky, but it doesn't mean that we all have to be fused together. What it does mean, however, is that harmonious interaction with our environment and mutual benefit and respect in our relationships with other humans and non-human animals are central. In the Symbiocene, we no longer have to wonder if we are good ancestors. We know we are! Moreover, it offers the possibility of a re-evaluation of the concept of nature with which my thought exercise began. In the Anthropocene, characterized by pollution, destruction, extraction and extinction, it is difficult to give nature a place, with its etymological origin in the Latin verb 'nasci' (to be born, to come alive). Gloom, melancholy and anger lurk. In the Symbiocene, where all life is respected within an ecological bandwidth, nature(s) will have the future.

To get there, we will need to shape a completely different biopolitics.

Readings

Pierre Charbonnier, *Abondance et liberté: Une histoire environnementale des idées politiques*, Paris, 2020

Ashlee Cunsolo en Karen Landmann (red.), *Mourning Nature: Hope at the Heart of Ecological Loss and Grief*, Montreal, 2017

Robert Macfarlane, *Underland: A Deep Time Journey*, London, 2019

Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*, New York, 2016

Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract*, Ann Arbor, 1995

<https://www.burgerszoo.nl>

<https://www.naturalis.nl>

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