

INTRODUCTION

Irina KANTARBAEVA-BILL*

This collection of articles is, by and large, the fruits of 2016 conference organised by the research centre CAS (Cultures Anglo-Saxonnes) of Université Toulouse-Jean Jaurès, "Les rencontres de l'humain et du non-humain dans la littérature de montagne et d'exploration Anglophone / Anglophone Mountain and Exploration Writing: Meetings Between the Human and Nonhuman." It is worth acknowledging here Françoise Besson for her efforts in providing lasting fora and enthusiasm which have helped in the move towards establishing travel and nature writing in Franco-British literary and cultural studies on the whole¹ and in the organisation of this conference in particular.

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Anglophone Travel and Exploration Writing: Meetings Between the Human and Nonhuman is not the first volume of this kind, nor is it likely to be the last. The seventeen articles collected here expand scholarly conversation that surrounds the process of ecocritical engagement by coming into contact with the human and nonhuman environment. To provide a more

* Université Toulouse-Jean Jaurès, CAS

¹Just to mention a few outstanding conferences organised under her supervision: "Mountains Figured and Disfigured in the English-Speaking World" (2007); "The Memory of Nature in Canada" (2012); and the most recent "Land's Furrows and Sorrows in Anglophone Countries" (2018). For the printed materials see the Bibliography.

accurate material-semiotic network of human and nonhuman agents, we argue that "nonhuman" here denotes "a community of expressive presences"² (Abram 173), including not only sentient animals or other biological mechanisms, but also impersonal agents, ranging from water to hurricanes, from mineral to bacteria, from mountains to information networks. Seen in this light, all living creatures, from humans to fungi, tell evolutionary stories of coexistence, interdependence, adaptation and hybridization, extinction and survival. Whether perceived or interpreted by the human mind or not, these stories shape trajectories that have a formative, enactive power.

Witness Donna Haraway, the eminent feminist theorist and historian of science, who noted that the nonhuman world is a dialogic, co-productive participant in human social relationships.³ Whether it was she or Bruno Latour,⁴ human beings and nonhuman animals and things, in their capacity to affect and to be affected, were conceptualized *relationally*. Concepts of mutual articulation, encounters, intra-action and natural cultural contact zones, all implicit and/or explicit in the arguments of the authors above, unformed an understanding of "becoming with" (Haraway 2007:3) rather than simply being in the world. "Partners do not precede the meeting," Haraway writes, for "species of all kinds, living or not, are consequent on a subject-and object-shaping dance of encounters" (2007:4), that conjoin events across indefinite time and space.

This tension between the human and nonhuman is part of a philosophical dilemma that ecologists and writers face alike. Critical and theoretical arguments continue to rage as to whether travel writing re-invents itself in our modern, postcolonial era, or whether it merely re-inscribes (neo)colonial privilege in new ways. Yet there is little argument about travel writing's ongoing importance as a vital medium of cross-cultural contact and exchange, and as a form which profoundly reflects human and nonhuman encounters and vice versa. Many travel writers speak on behalf of the Earth or its creatures precisely because they feel that humanity is turning a blind eye to environmental destruction.

² David Abram, *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology*, New York: Pantheon Books, 2010, 173.

³ Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007; Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century", in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, New York: Routledge, 1991, 149-181.

⁴ Bruno Latour, *Face à Gaïa: Huit conférences sur le Nouveau Régime Climatique*, France: Éditions La Découverte, 2015.

Travel writing about these encounters is inherently interdisciplinary and rich with agencies in various forms, human and nonhuman. Our collection of fiction, exploration and travel strives to expand this sense of "agency", re-thinking the traditional subject-object delineation and the simple association of "will" or "rationality" as primary drivers in earthly actions. It also links to the much older, as well as non-Western, discussions of an animated world as vitalism or animism, in which things, animals, and human beings are all active forces. In our attempt to organize such an endeavour, we have chosen four broad themes that we believe reflect some of the most promising directions in the study of literature and environment: the aesthetics of exploration, travel, fiction and environmental culture as well as several case studies which broadly focus on the agency of mountains.

Opening by a dialogue between the prominent British mountaineer and writer **Kevin Reynolds** and the renowned American researcher in literature and environment, Professor **Scott Slovic**, our Part I **Travel, Exploration and Writing Mindfulness: Making Connections** is an attempt to turn our cultural attention back from the specifically human realm to the wider, other-than-human, living environment. This engaged conversation explores the possibilities of different modes of knowing, engaging, teaching and storytelling, braiding the fictional and factual together to enhance our ecological awareness, sensibility and fundamental kinship with nonhuman communities in order to coevolve in local, bioregional and global ecosystem associations.

The four essays in Part II, **Exploration and Aesthetics of travel**, examine the boundaries of exploration and travel going back to the post-Romantic scientific and literary nature writing. Inspired by the first rational approach to nature, developed by Pre-Socratic philosophers like Euripides, and historians like Herodotus, several voyages of discovery rendered a surprising amount of information about different species of plants and animals, fostering natural historians' efforts to systematize such profusion. Developed by Swedish botanist Linnaeus (1674-1748), although a century later, the idea of a stable taxonomy was questioned by two leading travellers of the eighteenth century, the German geographer Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) and the English geologist Charles Lyell (1797-1875). One of the examples of re-appropriation of the nonhuman environment is American literary tradition with 'nature' and 'regional' writing, set in open landscapes of cattle ranges, mountains and rivers, including early narratives of exploration and settlement. Our collection opens with **Laurence Machet** who explores two natural history books: *Travels* (1791) by the botanist William Bartram and Alexander Wilson's nine-volume *American Ornithology* (1808-1814) where she traces exploitative political and economic purposes which

motivated public policy, private interest and literary production. She further argues that both books, using Buffon's degeneration theory as leverage, offer descriptions of nonhuman animals that help delineate the country's political identity.

Questioning the inclusion of exploration writings in the field of travel literature leads to the examination of the definition of this type of text. As **Gaëlle Lafarge** remarks, understanding exploration writings as a branch of literary travel narratives seems to depend on the reconsideration of their scientific value and objectivity. She provides a convincing example of the early nineteenth-century exploration of the Mississippi Valley, when Zebulon Pike and Zadok Cramer's writings offer a verbal depiction of the abundance among landscape descriptions. The explorers' points of views propel the reader not in a geographical space but in a literary one.

British proto-ecocritical writing emerged from within an older literary tradition concerned with long-domesticated and densely populated landscapes, rather than with 'wilderness', or vast, unexplored regions that first ignited American imagination. The neoclassical aesthetic principles of rational order and design gradually merged with Romantic pastoralism, depicting landscapes where industry existed side by side with agriculture, and wild creatures with domestic animals. In European Sublime settings, wanderers and travellers could admire lofty crags and waterfalls by day, and rest in comfortable inns at night.

Dwelling on the Linnean 'economy of nature' and Humboldt's description of mutually dependent communities, Charles Darwin, after a trip to the Galapagos Islands in 1835, saw nature as a web of complex relations and ecological interdependences: a grand scheme of cooperative integration. He had faith in nature as a creative, nurturing force, yet he saw no need for explanations outside the material natural order. **Raphaëlle Costa de Beauregard** traces in Darwin's travelogue *Voyage of the Beagle* a vital materiality of all the nonhuman elements: plate tectonics, fossils, seeds, colours, smells, where he theorised that life began in a 'warm little pond' on early Earth.⁵ Making a parallel with Darwin's 'little pond' and the whole life cycle of the common newt from *Romance in a Pond*, one of the films of the *Secrets of Nature* series (1922-33), the author convincingly proves that the camera-eye was unavoidably Darwinian to the extent that it inherited the traveller's observant eye as a substitute of a microscope.

⁵ In February 1871, Charles Darwin wrote to botanist Joseph Hooker speculating that life could have evolved in "some warm little pond" if it were full of "ammonia, phosphoric salts, light, heat, and electricity." See Philip Appleman ed., *Darwin: Texts, Commentary*, 3rd ed., New York: W.W. Norton, 2001, 174.