The Nature-Culture Divide: Making Change at the Unruly Edges
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Abstract:

This paper discusses work that deals with the manufactured boundary between humans and nature in the hopes of pulling apart the assumption that we somehow stand outside of nature. I have chosen texts that build towards a vision in which we can query these boundaries and find a way to negotiate our place with (and within) nature as both a reality and a set of ordered relations. I begin by examining disciplines and language as tools with which to examine contrasts and connections between nature and culture. I conclude by advancing Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's use of precarity and assemblages, particularly in terms of how these hypotheses can be used in social art practices. I advocate that Tsing's work can show us a possible way forward in terms of negotiating boundaries and making change at the borders.

Keywords: nature-culture, disciplinary boundaries, the Other, collaborative survival.

> Nature is perhaps the most complex word in the language.
> — Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*

Introduction

As a visual artist exploring the urban ecology of a small prairie city, I have been examining how my work shifts between and across disciplinary boundaries. In particular, my interest in the nature-culture divide has evolved from a concern over whether people see themselves as part of nature or as separate from it.

For the longest time, nature was, for me, a construct that had little relevance outside of the ways that it functioned culturally. I had become detached from my childhood spent at a cabin in the British Columbian interior, wandering through the woods, searching every shadow for the

outline of a black bear. My perspective of nature, as Alexander Wilson says, was "shaped by rhetorical constructs like photography, industry, advertising, and aesthetics, as well as institutions like religion, tourism, and education" (Wilson 1991, 12). I centred art, specifically, as a tool to make sense of reality. On my first reading of Wilson, I missed a more nuanced interpretation, including his argument that "[h]umans and nature construct one another" (Wilson 1991, 4). This argument raises the question: does nature construct us only by acting as a mirror that we hold up to ourselves, or is there something concretely *there* beyond our vision, our reality, and our existence in our environment?

Over a century ago, the dominant Eurocentric North-American culture constructed a nature that was unpredictable, dangerous, and chaotic. Our supposed shared goal was to tame it, map it, and exploit it for its resources. The resulting environmental consequences saw this campaign replaced by the need to protect and preserve. Nature is now often regarded as a pristine retreat, a virgin wilderness in need of our stewardship. In both cases, however, there is a perception that we exist outside of nature and act upon it—that nature is, as Nicholas Jardine and Emma Spary suggest, "passive and disempowered," a kind of "slave and victim of human agency" (Jardine and Spary 1996, 4). In what follows, I review work that deals with this manufactured boundary between humans and nature in hopes of pulling apart the assumption that we somehow stand outside of nature. I have chosen texts that build towards a vision in which we can query these boundaries and find a way to negotiate our place with (and within) nature as both a reality and a set of ordered relations.

Understanding Beyond Dichotomies

Much of my work as an artist over the past decade centres around questioning the nature-culture divide. As an academic, this led to an interest in interdisciplinarity and how it is affected

by the boundaries between humanities, sciences, and art. Richard Rorty (1998), for instance, rejects both the idea that the sciences and humanities are fragmented, and the notion that we would get a fuller, richer picture of reality if they could only be united. Disciplines, he argues, are tools we use to interact with reality, and for different purposes, we use different tools. I would argue, however, the richest toolbox is one generated from the combination of tools from differing disciplines. As Maarten Derksen maintains, disciplines provide us with a "heterogeneous set of tools" that can give us the opportunity to examine boundaries between multiple bodies of understanding, even if they cannot give us a seamless body of knowledge (Derksen 2005, 141). Social practice artists, for example, demonstrate that community-based activist work gets done at the boundaries, and that art can mobilize knowledge in ways many hard sciences cannot. This doesn't mean hard sciences can't mobilize knowledge in interesting and accessible ways, only that art provides equally interesting and accessible, though different, means of addressing audience(s).

Language is also a useful tool for highlighting multiple bodies of understanding. Nested within disciplines are words that we can use both to make sense of reality and to shape that reality (Williams 1985; Lamb 2020). Kenan Malik (2000) posits that language allows us to be so much more than nature, restoring a vision of science that returns us to the Enlightenment project, namely, a science for humanist ends. In this sense, as Derksen says, language becomes a tool for working on nature and on ourselves:

> Language, or at least our kind of language, is inextricably connected with the way we experience the world, think about it and act in it. It is more than a means of transmitting information: it is a tool that we use, and that in its use shapes us. (Derksen 2005, 150)

While this focus on language feeds into my previously held belief that nature is culture, it also allows me to yet again centre art as a tool for shaping our realities and thus as a way to promote change via this shaping. (Certainly, art too is a way of both making sense of the world and a means of helping create that world.)

Instead of sustaining the nature-culture divide or erasing it, Derksen says, we need to look at the boundaries between nature and culture as a means of addressing a whole range of juxtapositions that people must navigate as part of their lived realities. In short, there are multiple divides or "a range of related boundaries being contested, crossed and moved in everyday conversations, court rooms, hospitals, laboratories, parliaments, newspapers and art galleries" (Derksen 2005, 154). The aim, then, is to understand those boundaries: we need to recognize and interrogate those multiple divides — all that diversity — and its specificity, rather than looking at one specific dichotomy. Different communities have differing questions (Galison 1997), and we don't necessarily need to dissolve the boundaries between them. We do not need to solve all the problems of these multiple nature-culture divides so much as we need to be specific as to how these divides fit within our projects and how we use such specifications to explore the complex terrain of our research. "Rather than seeing the boundary contests over nature and culture as a problem [to be solved] . . ." Derksen says, "these contests are better accepted as inherent in the terrain" (Derksen 2005, 155). What I am trying to get to here, is that this seeming divide between nature and culture doesn't need to be resolved so much as recognized as complex in the sense that it is both historically and culturally constructed. Instead of looking to fix or pin down definitions, perhaps nature and culture are best examined as slippery and contentious terms.

Middle-Grounds

Foundational to my understanding of the nature-culture divide is "The Trouble with Wilderness or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature" by William Cronon (1995). Cronon states emphatically that it is high time we came to terms with the word *wilderness*. Wilderness, he writes, is anything but a separate sphere from our own and is, in fact, "the creation of very particular human cultures at very particular moments in human history" (Cronon 1995, 7). After giving an historical background to the construction of wilderness – via Wordsworth, Thoreau, Muir, and Turner – he points out that wilderness embodies the nature-culture divide, and that if we believe nature must be wild to be true, "then our very presence in nature represents its fall" (17). We fall into the trap whereby humans cannot be part of nature because we are "culture." If wild animals and wilderness exist as part of a nature that omits humans, that predates contact, how do we discover "what an *ethical*, *sustainable*, *honourable* human place in nature might actually look like" (Cronon 1995, 17)? By idealizing wilderness as not here, not now, we lose the opportunity to engage with the wildness in the environment in which we currently live. Cronon writes:

> Most of our most serious environmental problems start right here, at home, and if we are to solve those problems, we need an environmental ethic that will tell us as much about *using* nature as about *not* using it. The wilderness dualism tends to cast any use as *ab-use*, and thereby denies us a middle ground in which responsible use and non-use might attain some kind of balanced, sustainable relationship. (Cronon 1995, 21)

Admittedly, I feel uncomfortable framing this relationship in terms of *use* and *non-use* because it presents the human connection to the landscape as one in which we consume or do not consume resources. Of course we consume resources, as do all organisms, but we are neither outside of something that exists regardless of our being there, nor trapped grappling with something that is crippled or corrupted by our very presence. Nevertheless, what is key to Cronon's argument –

and what ties in neatly with Derksen's point about boundaries being where the interesting work gets done – is the idea that humans occupy a middle ground where "all of us, in our different places and ways – make our homes" (Cronon 1995, 21). This point is complementary to Derksen in the sense that areas of negotiation are rich sites of enquiry. For Cronon, places much closer to home offer us true experiences of nature, such as a nearby pond, a mist-covered hillside, or rewilded farmland. What he celebrates about these types of places "is not just their wildness," but that "they remind us of the wildness in our own backyard, of the nature that is all around us if only we have eyes to see it" (Cronon 1995, 22). Thus, wilderness privileges some parts of nature – the unspoiled (if such a thing exists), the sublime, and the wide open – at the expense of others, like the too small, too plain, or too crowded (Cronon 1995).

It is interesting to note that the word *wilderness* came into common usage when there was little wilderness or wild nature left (Rolston 1997). Therefore, perhaps more than anything, wilderness speaks to a longing *for*, rather than a reality *of*. Given this, I am left wondering how the term *wilderness* can function for us. If we cannot help but drag our historical baggage around with us, what good is the concept? Maybe if "[w]ilderness is the place where, symbolically at least, we try to withhold our power to dominate" (Cronon 1995, 23), it can show us something about how we engage with concepts and realities that we Other. "In the broadest sense," Cronon says, "wilderness teaches us to ask whether the Other must always bend to our will, and, if not, under what circumstances it should be allowed to flourish without our intervention" (Cronon 1995, 23). This is certainly a worthy question about our relationship to the natural world. Maybe there is a place in our understanding for a concept of pristine wilderness, even if it doesn't exist. Cronon uses the example of a tree in the wilderness helping us to recognize the wilderness in a tree on an urban lot. "Wilderness," he writes, "gets us into trouble only if we imagine that this

experience of wonder and otherness is limited to the remote corners of the planet, or that it somehow depends on pristine landscapes we ourselves do not inhabit" (Cronon 1995, 23-4). In short, recognizing the importance of a historically specific pristine nature helps us open the door to understanding where nature exists in our non-pristine backyards. We can find the residue of wilderness in the most unlikely places, and that recognition can help us redefine what wilderness means to us.

This raises another question, however: does recognizing a fuller spectrum of natural landscapes come only from a place of privilege? If I had not grown-up spending time at a cabin in a forest by a lake, would I be able to transpose my understanding of a more pristine wilderness to the city? I grew up watching *The Best of Walt Disney's True-Life Adventures* (1975, directed by James Algar) and *Hinterland Who's Who* clips (1963-1977, produced by Environment Canada Wildlife Service and the National Film Board of Canada). Were these representations enough? Indeed, without wandering through the woods with a machete and getting covered in dirt and tree pitch, my understanding of wilderness would still have been cultural, only in a slightly different sense. The culturally constructed Canadian wilderness of my television-dominated childhood would have been enough of an understanding of wilderness because cultural representations matter. Wendell Berry says: "'The only thing we have to preserve nature with is culture'" (Berry 1987, 138, cited in Cronon 1995, 24). In sum, cultural representations are the tools that help us construct who we are, as well as the reality in which we live. So, then, even a culturally fabricated pristine wilderness has its place.

Rumours of the Death of Nature

David Inglis and John Bone (2006) address the privileging of cultural lenses and experiential factors over natural, in-the-world reality. They argue that the key problem with

constructionist theories is that "an over-emphasis on phenomena at the expense of at least admitting the possible existence of the noumenal properties of physical forces [i.e., things as they really are], can lead to bizarre, and sometimes deeply politically unfortunate consequences" (Inglis and Bone 2006, 284). Yes, biotechnologies, genetic manipulations, and cyborgs challenge the separation of nature and culture; however, climate change, loss of biodiversity, a thinning ozone layer, deforestation, pollution, and the general degradation of ecosystems point to the importance of rethinking the relationships between human societies and a supposedly pristine nature. Inglis and Bone assert that while the world is changing, this doesn't mean the nature-culture divide is no longer an important distinction, a boundary worthy of maintaining out of life-preserving necessity. They accuse social scientists of "disciplinary imperialism" and interpreting "domains traditionally ceded to natural sciences" solely in "terms of their own socio-cultural construction of things" (Inglis and Bone 2006, 284). Here they refer to a Heidegger quote with which they begin their article:

> Man . . . exalts himself and postures as lord of the earth. In this way the illusion comes to prevail that everything man encounters exists only insofar as it is his construct. This illusion gives rise in turn to one final illusion: it seems as though man everywhere and always encounters only himself. (Heidegger 2002, 332, cited in Inglis and Bone, 2006, 272)

As Inglis and Bone point out, social scientists, when they look at the world, "see only themselves and their own reflections" (Inglis and Bone 2006, 284). What does all this mean for examining the complicated, perhaps crucial, maintenance of boundaries? Inglis and Bone conclude that "despite claims to the contrary, rumours of the final death of nature have been greatly exaggerated" (Inglis and Bone 2006, 285), or, in other words, the realities of nature can still overwhelm our cultural lives whether we believe nature is a social construct or not.

In "Ideas of Nature" (1972), Williams writes that the most important point to be made about the nature-culture divide is that the separation of man and nature is "a function of an increasingly real interaction" (82). If humans and nature do indeed construct one another, we are so entangled that we can't separate ourselves into the abstract concepts of human and nature. We need to recognize that these abstract concepts are actually between humankind-as-economics and nature-as-ecology. For Williams, the struggle is with us and our need to conquer, dominate, and exploit – an approach that doesn't work at any level, not for the environment, nor for ourselves. "If we alienate the living processes of which we are a part," Williams says, "we end, though unequally, by alienating ourselves" (Williams 1972, 84). In the end, he argues that we need to come up with new ideas because we need new, better functioning relationships. I would argue that there is so much history, so much mutual reinforcement between the concepts of "human" and "nature," that we cannot abandon these concepts when they have been, and continue to be, extremely useful in terms of highlighting intersections, connections, and locations where environmental work and decolonization needs to be done.

Nature as Practice

Having discussed boundaries as a place where we can examine multiple perceptions of nature – nature as difference (the Other), nature as a reality, nature as a construction – what I wish to address now is nature as practice. This view emphasizes that nature is constructed not just theoretically, but also literally (Vogel 1998). In other words, we busily manufacture spaces, places, and institutions that end up collectively coordinating us. Steven Vogel writes (1998) that the construction of nature has to be viewed as concrete human labour:

> The social world is perfectly real and physical: social institutions are produced
> and reproduced through concrete activities, and are instantiated in concrete
> objects every one of which has to be built, while on the other hand the practical

> processes of building through which those institutions and objects come to be
> are themselves always socially organized ones. (Vogel 1998, 175)

Thus, a philosophy of practice must deal with our built environment, the reality of the objects of our own creation that surround us. For Vogel, the built environment is where environmental theory should begin to tackle wilderness. By looking at wilderness in this way, we can look at the complexity of social practices that construct it. And this is key: those complex social practices do include things like "boundary-drawing" (Vogel 1998, 176). They point towards the ways in which we are socially organized.

Vogel argues for deconstructing the constructed character of nature. Such critiques acknowledge our own relationship to the world. Deconstruction is a useful foundation from which to critically build something new because being able to look at all the historical, social, and economic moving parts is essential. There is something highly retrievable from the idea of practices. If, as Vogel points out, our existing practices have gotten us into trouble with the environment, then we need to look to other, more healthy sustainable practices to save our proverbial bacon (Vogel 1998). In short, we need to do a better job at constructing a healthier world for all species. This is where theory moves into practice.

Vogel addresses the fear that focusing on practices will mean we'll fail to acknowledge the Otherness and thereness of the world. For example, isn't focusing on practices just another way of focusing on ourselves? To this he answers:

> I don't think so; to say we construct the world that surrounds us in our
> practices is not to say we dream up some way we want the world to be and then
> find it magically transformed accordingly; it is to say that we try to build it in a
> quite literal and physical way. Practice is real; it involves difficulty and sweat
> and, quite possibly, failure. (Vogel 1998, 177)

I want to underline Vogel's assertion that the constructions that create the world are practical ones — that our places are constructed, in part, by our activities in them. Nonetheless, this doesn't mean we can create the world any which way we want: "What distinguishes practice from theory is that the former is real, difficult, concrete . . . and nature might be the name we give to that very concreteness" (Vogel 1998, 179). This is appealing because it states outright that this gives us a great opportunity to deal with reality in a better way through concrete practices that can enable change. Nevertheless, I am cautious. The rabbit under the deck exists whether or not I know it is there. Its material reality preceded my discovery of it. Maybe our yard, with a house, with a deck, allowed it to survive, but the actual creature is a being that exists without my social practices. My practices only relate to my understanding of it, how I impact it, how I might change its reality.

Collaborative Survival

Returning to Derksen, there are multiple divides being questioned and challenged in our everyday lives in relation to our bodies, customs, associations, and institutions. If the goal is to understand those boundaries, then we need to acknowledge and question all that diversity and its specificity rather than focussing in on one particular divide. As stated earlier, different groups of people have differing questions and concerns and that's okay. We don't necessarily need to dissolve the boundaries between them, we just need to think in terms of our projects and how they function within them.

It is here that I turn to Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's use of collaborative survival as a way to move forward. In *The Mushroom at the End of the World,* Tsing writes that "we are stuck with the problem of living despite economic and ecological ruination," yet "[n]either tales of progress nor of ruin tell us how to think about collaborative survival" (Tsing 2015, 19). Instead, she

argues, the Anthropocene — which began not with our species, but with the advent of modern

capitalism — entangles us with "ideas of progress and with the spread of techniques of alienation

that turn both humans and other beings into resources" (Tsing 2015, 19). These ideas separate us

out from other species and mask possible ways to mutually benefit from our coexistence. Thus,

anthropocentrism obscures all the interesting prospects for transformation found around the

"unruly edges" (Tsing 2015, 20).

So, how do we shift from centring ourselves to recognizing, listening to, and responding

to Otherness? Tsing asks: "What if precarity, indeterminacy, and what some of us imagine as

trivial are the centre of the systematicity we seek?" (Tsing 2015, 20). Precarity, she says, shifts

us from the status quo, which is leading us down a dangerous path, towards the possibilities of

the variable and adaptable, something that might make life more possible. Critically, however,

these possibilities are far removed from the categories and assumptions of progress entrenched in

capitalism. If we are stuck in a framework that is failing us, she suggests, perhaps we might look

at all the "world-making projects" we've been ignoring up until this point (Tsing 2015, 21):

> [H]uman conceit is not the only plan for making worlds: we are surrounded by
> many world-making projects, human and non-human. World-making projects
> emerge from practical activities of making lives; in the process these projects
> alter our planet. To see them, in the shadow of the Anthropocene's "anthropo,"
> we must reorient our attention. (Tsing 2015, 21-22)

After this Tsing introduces the concept of assemblages. She points out that ecologists use

assemblages to pull apart the idea of a unified, rigid, and circumscribed community. (Indeed, the

term is used in many urban ecology papers: Fortwangler 2013; Collard 2011; Ellington and

Gehrt 2019; Ramalho and Hobbs 2012.) In the work of Bruno Latour, assemblages are "strange

hybrids" created from familiar pairings like "society and science, politics and nature, subjects

and objects, social constructions and reality" (Latour 2004, 22, cited in Luckhurst 2006, 4). They

demand new ways of thinking, comparing and contrasting old, familiar concepts with other old, familiar concepts in new pairings. How species assemblages influence each other is complex: "some thwart (or eat) each other," Tsing writes; "others work together to make life possible; still others just happen to find themselves in the same place" (Tsing 2015, 22-23). What is key is that assemblages are not neat, tidy, and contained; they are fluid and open-ended. Thus, they have the potential to be more than the miscellany that come together to form them (i.e., they are greater than the sum of their parts).

I propose we adopt the idea of assemblages as hybrids that make room for new and messy collaborations at the borders between disciplines. Key to this idea, however, is that assemblages are not about collapsing borders, but about maintaining useful ones. Derksen's argument that we should avoid the urge to integrate disciplines, as the boundaries between them are where all the interesting work gets done, is well founded. Tsing, similarly, helps us to see that there is a whole shed of tools that can be used in previously unfamiliar ways to address the unruly edges. For instance, the precarity that Tsing writes about may point to art practices that are a form of social activism. Instead of seeking to achieve equilibrium, socially engaged artists do not shun moments of resistance, and often grapple with the tensions of political, ethical, and material uncertainty. Such practices, and the art experiences that result from them, have the capacity to demonstrate how Tsing's tools might function. For example, Guelph-based artist Lisa Hirmer's *Weather Stories* (organized by the University of Lethbridge Art Gallery together with project partners October 2022 – September 2023, https://www.weathercollection.ca/weather-stories/) combine multiple perspectives from a range of story tellers with varied backgrounds and distinct lived realities.

In art, use of the term *assemblages* is familiar: assemblages are literally a form of art involving combinations of found objects with or without custom-made elements. In theory, this definition can be expanded to include the way in which new existences/realities can be made. In my art practice, I use taxidermy sourced from roadkill to facilitate the possibility of new associations by simply putting the form of an actual synanthropic animal in a white box gallery setting. I also use collage coupled with hand drawings to juxtapose a variety of elements in an attempt to create strange hybrids of familiar elements in new pairings.

As Tsing writes, "World-making projects emerge from practical activities of making lives" (2015, 22). So, instead of getting caught up with in the notion of progress, of always looking forward with predictable goals, we can also look horizontally, or in unfamiliar directions, to see other ways of being. And these opportunities can involve practical ways of coexisting with other species. Tsing's methodology points us towards a way of being in which nothing is "too small, too plain, or too crowded" that it cannot be reconfigured, reworked, and reimagined into world-making projects (Cronon 1995, 22).

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IMAGES:

Figure 1: "Raccoon," *Burrows & Bungalows*, installation detail, Casa, Lethbridge, Alberta, 2021 (photo by Angeline Simon).

Figure 2: "White Rabbit," *Burrows & Bungalows*, Casa, Lethbridge, Alberta, 2021 (photo by Angeline Simon). (Collection of Darrin Martens and Ian Thom.)

About the Author

Leila Armstrong is a Lethbridge-based artist currently doing a PhD in Evolution & Behaviour in the Barrett-Henzi lab at the University of Lethbridge. Leila has a BA in Fine and Performing Arts from Simon Fraser University and a MA in Media Studies from Concordia University in Montreal. She works both independently and in collaboration with other artists, such as in 12 Point Buck (2009-2011) and M.E.D.I.U.M. (2011-2016). Her independent work addresses the intersection of nature and culture, focussing specifically on urban wildlife. Through an investigation into the urban ecology of Lethbridge, her aim is to invite people to rethink their conception of nature as detached from our daily lives. Upcoming solo exhibitions include Casa Arts Centre project space (2023), Red Deer Museum and Art Gallery (2024), and Leighton Art Centre (2025). Leila will be doing a residency at the Gushul Studio in Blairmore, Alberta in 2024 to develop her current body of work on visualizing the data produced during her PhD studies.