



LIVING LEXICON
FOR THE ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES

Future

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The future has long been viewed in terms of modernity's human-centered categories of innovation, emancipation, progress, and civilization (which have historically been predominantly coded as white and male), while nature has been shoved to the realm of the ahistorical, understood as a fixed background for the development of society. These categories entail the subterfuge that the future is always "ours" to shape and build. They are deeply rooted in the transformation of the Christian doctrine of the Apocalypse during the early Renaissance, which carried the shift from a belief in humankind's future redemption by God to the secular ideology of progress that assumed that humans themselves actively contribute to the shaping of a better future.¹ This ideology was embodied in Francis Bacon's view of scientific advancement, as in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's view of history as a teleological movement of human emancipation toward a *more human* future, a future in which humans would be freed from diseases, hunger, and other material restrictions.

The emergence of the social sciences in the nineteenth century was also bound up with this constitution of a modern view of the future, no longer as fate and destiny but as the outcome of a movement of material and moral improvement triggered by humankind's creativity.² This was particularly the case for early anthropology, which of-

1. Walker, "Economy of Nature."

2. Ross, *Origins of American Social Science*.

ferred a history of human civilization and emancipation out of animality, reinforcing the dualism between “our” future and the unchanging essence of nature.³

Alfred North Whitehead once insinuated that the present is perceived as “the vivid fringe of memory tinged with anticipation.”⁴ But imagining the future as some kind of extension of the past can also be flawed. As we are confronted today with unprecedented futures of exponentially rising temperatures and brutal ecological tipping points, it might indeed be the right time for the social sciences and humanities to appreciate—and act on the fact—that humans do not build “their” futures alone. While much needed attention has been given to the entanglements of humans and environments that are creating new connections and proximities in a global world, now is the time to address the shared *futures* of nature-culture entanglements.⁵ This is not only because impending radical environmental changes orient human and nonhuman beings toward shared possibilities; this is also because nonhumans (animals, plants, things, matter, and ecological and physical forces) themselves instigate change and trigger the advent of futures often perceived as uncertain and unpredictable. “Our” future is unquestionably a *more than human* future.⁶

Barbara Adam has emphasized how the contemporary environmental predicament deeply destabilizes the modern view of an “empty” future that is ours to shape and fill with our projects and realizations.⁷ Today, the social sciences and humanities need to engage with contested and multiple futures not as blank canvases for human projects but instead as autonomous ongoing realities, even though the environmental futures being faced are a product of radical entanglements in which humans facilitate the making of inhuman futures. Planetary environmental changes suggest that we are heading not toward more human futures but rather toward more-than-human or even “inhuman” futures—at odds with any human intent, action, and sense of justice,⁸ despite what those entrenched in the Enlightenment philosophical tradition and the epistemology of modern deterministic science might continue to argue.

Too often, instead of in the futures of nature, environmentalism has found its justification in a narrative of the “end of nature,” assuming the need for conserving natural places at the edges of society where we could “come back” and heal at a distance from society’s race toward human-only futures. Confirmation of the “end of nature” has even been found in climate change, which is seen by some as announcing a world in which nature has thoroughly become techno-nature.⁹ And this narrative of the end of nature is also at work in some conceptualizations of the Anthropocene. As epoch and

3. Despret, *Quand le loup habitera avec l'agneau*.

4. Whitehead, *Concept of Nature*, 72.

5. Granjou, *Environmental Changes*.

6. Whatmore, *Hybrid Geographies*.

7. Adam, *Timescapes of Modernity*.

8. Clark, *Inhuman Nature*.

9. McKibben, *End of Nature*.

discourse, Ben Dibley argues, the Anthropocene not only designates “the advent of a geological era of the human species’ own making”; as “the crease of time,” it also invokes the “folding of radically different temporal scales: the deep time of geology and a rather shorter history of capital.”¹⁰ Without aiming to add an extra piece of critique to a constantly growing posthumanist theoretical edifice, we think it is imperative to recognize the outside reality of multiple futures and emphasize the future-making potentialities of nonhumans where multispecies entanglements have critical consequences for acting and living in Anthropocene times.

Strangely enough, the future-making capacities of nonhumans have not always been addressed in these terms even within an emergent field of environmental humanities. In spite of Sarah Whatmore’s and Donna Haraway’s¹¹ major contributions to exploring the contagious dynamics of becoming-with of which humans and nonhumans are made up, elaborating the notion of more than human futures requires the destabilization of Western conceptualizations of progress-oriented time and technoscientific innovation.¹² This demands at the very least a finer attunement to the autonomous capacities of nonhumans for driving new futures as well as to the future-making performance of multispecies relationships, including consideration of species evolution in terms of nature’s invention and creativity.¹³

This also forces an exploration of how various futures are situated and the politics of their locations.¹⁴ We are being asked to engage with how different beings imagine, prepare for, and anticipate multiple futures within cultural categories of time and potentiality and their particular relationships to natures and cosmos.¹⁵ This implies that modes of decolonizing the future need to be enacted; too often, ideas about the meaning of “the future” and the possibilities for shaping the “not yet” are not globally shared. Various modes of indigenous mythical thought and Islamic philosophies, among a diversity of other non-Western forms of temporality, have too often been pushed to the fringes.

The turn of the twenty-first century has brought about renewed concern with problematizing how futures are at work in reorganizing our present activities and communities. Several decades after Wendell Bell attempted to found a sociology of the future, a new interest in futures has recently begun taking root in interstices of social research traditionally absorbed with the spatiotemporal dimensions of the past and the present. This essay is also therefore an invitation to foster dialogue and cross-fertilization between environmental humanities and the transversal and engaged agenda of future studies. As climate modeling and socioecological scenario making increasingly require

10. Dibley, “The Shape of Things,” 140.

11. Haraway, *When Species Meet*; Whatmore, *Hybrid Geographies*; Wright, “‘Becoming-with.’”

12. Bastian, “Inventing Nature”; Puig de la Bellacasa, “Making Time for Soil.”

13. Grosz, *Time Travels*; Plumwood, “Nature in the Active Voice.”

14. Franklin, “Future Mix.”

15. Razak, “Essays in Anticipatory Anthropology.”

us to live in the anticipation of a fractured post-climate-change society,¹⁶ such a dialogue can cultivate a growing series of tactics of proximity with the “not yet” of various environmental and social emergencies.¹⁷ We increasingly appear to be “living in a regime of anticipation in which likelihoods and probabilistic outcomes prevail.”¹⁸ Researching the future challenges us not only on the grounds, we argue, that “the future lacks the tangible materiality needed for empirical study”¹⁹ but also because it requires the destabilization of disciplinary patterns that support the “social construction of reality”²⁰ in order to confront the transformative agency of nonhumans and the creativity of multispecies entanglements.

Reintegrating human lives within the myriad multispecies entanglements of which we are a part means that the ways in which we take stock of how we make futures with other species will be essential to understanding that we are always crafting shared futures with others.

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16. Hastrup and Skrydstrup, *Social Life of Climate Change Models*; Oreskes and Conway, *Collapse of Western Civilization*.

17. Anderson, “Preemption, Precaution, and Preparedness.”

18. Mackenzie, “Programming Subjects,” 391.

19. Adam, “Wendell Bell and the Sociology of the Future.”

20. Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction of Reality*.

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