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Notes from the Icehouse

What's in a Name? More-Than-Human Approaches and Environmental History

Emily O'Gorman

Over the last year or so I have had conversations with quite a few people about more-than-human approaches to environmental history. Most of these discussions have been spurred by an article that Andrea Gaynor and I wrote on 'more-than-human histories', published in 2020, and a book I wrote titled *Wetlands in a Dry Land: More-than-Human Histories of Australia's Murray-Darling Basin,* published in 2021.[1] On several occasions I have been asked whether an explicitly more-than-human approach leads to new and different conclusions, or whether it simply describes something environmental historians are already doing?[2] Is there any value for the field in the

[1] Emily O'Gorman and Andrea Gaynor, 'More-than-human histories', *Environmental History* (2020) https://doi.org/10.1093/envhis/emaa027; Emily O'Gorman, *Wetlands in a Dry Land: More-than-human Histories of Australia's Murray-Darling Basin* (University of Washington Press, 2021).

[2] See, for example, Kara Murphy, Nancy Langston, Sarah Hamilton, Ben Wil-

term 'more-than-human histories'? Or is it just unhelpful jargon? I have been reflecting on these questions over the last few months. Here, I will explain why I (still) consider 'more-than-human histories' a useful term and approach to scholarship.[3]

The concept of 'more-than-human histories' was always intended to consolidate and define a set of emerging approaches in environmental history rather than to describe something entirely new.[4] I therefore hope that an explicitly 'more-than-human' approach resonates with other recent studies in environmental history that are not using this term. One of the benefits I see in this sort of consolidation of scholarship – and the naming of an approach – is that it animates reflection on changing methods and influences in the field of environmental history, and encourages consideration of how these ideas might be brought to bear as we search for ways to address ongoing environmental crises.

There is a clear overlap between more-than-human approaches and animal history. In fact, several environmental historians have asked me, in the last few months, how more-than-human approaches differ from animal history. Animal history has developed in conversation with animal studies. These two approaches, and those of more-than-human and multispecies studies, share some important influences (including the work of Donna Haraway) and a concern with non-human agency.[5] But there are important differences too. Animal studies has tended to focus on human-animal relationships; more-than-human-approaches emphasise diverse sets of relation-

ke, Diogo de Carvalho Cabral and Emily O'Gorman, H-Environment Roundtable Reviews **12** (1) (2022): https://networks.h-net.org/system/files/contributed-files/env-roundtable-12-1.pdf

[3] My aim is to continue these conversations rather than give an overview of this concept which is available in O'Gorman and Gaynor, 'More-than-human histories' and the introduction in O'Gorman, *Wetlands in a Dry Land*.

[4] O'Gorman, *Wetlands in a Dry land*, p.18; O'Gorman and Gaynor, "More-than-human histories," p.713.

[5] For example, Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003); and, Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (London: Routledge, 2013).

ships that include plants, fungi, bacteria, elemental forces and more. Even when more-than-human approaches focus on particular species or individual animals they generally examine the wider sets of biosocial relationships within which these subjects are embedded, looking for example at the landscape scale.[6] Animal studies has also focused heavily on animal rights, whereas more-than-human approaches generally take a more contextual approach to questions of ethics and justice.[7] Because particular approaches to scholarship, more-or-less subtly, train our attention and our ways of understanding, valuing and interacting with the world, it is important to acknowledge and trace these and other influences in environmental history. There are no hard lines between these kinds of general approaches, but it is useful for historians to be aware of the sets of ideas with which we are engaging and their empirical, analytical and ethical implications for how we focus, undertake and communicate our research.

Defining more-than-human histories should help to distil a suite of coherent ideas and approaches for the use of all researchers (including myself), and allow us to hold ourselves accountable. It clarifies what these kinds of approaches involve. I have found this sort of distillation useful for my own research and hope that others do as well. Gaynor and I argued for three defining tenets of more-than-human histories: co-constitution; multiple species and multiple voices; and a situated ethics and politics.[8] While some researchers may foreground one or two of these tenets, I think the benefit of considering them as a set is that together they can assist researchers to better 'stay with trouble' and undertake ethically-informed

[6] Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, Andrew S. Mathews and Nils Bubandt, 'Patchy Anthropocene: landscape structure, multispecies history, and the retooling of anthropology: an introduction to supplement 20', *Current Anthropology* **60** (S20) (2019): S186–S197.

[7] Harriet Ritvo, 'Recent work in animal history (and how we got here)', *The Journal of Modern History* **94** (2) (2022): 404–19; L. Gruen (ed.), *Critical Terms for Animal Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); Eva Giraud, Greg Hollin, Tracey Potts and Isla Forsyth, 'A feminist menagerie', *Feminist Review* **118** (1) (2018): 61–79.

[8] O'Gorman and Gaynor, 'More-than-human histories'.

research.[9] In my recent work on wetlands, this has meant examining more-than-human relationality and co-constitution while striving to foreground shifting ontologies, attentiveness to diverse human voices and a closer consideration of the ethical implications of my research.[10]

While I have benefited from thinking explicitly about more-than-human approaches and histories, the bigger test is, of course, whether and how other environmental historians might find 'more-than-human histories' helpful in their work. I have been delighted to see other scholars bringing these approaches into conversation with their own research agendas, building on core, early arguments of more-than-human histories and taking them in new directions. For example, Alda Balthrop-Lewis's new analysis of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* brings a more-than-human histories approach into conversation with religious history. She argues that this approach helps us to rethink traditional narratives of Thoreau as an individual alone in Walden Woods and to appreciate, instead, that the woods teemed with more-than-human relations, many of which were integral to Thoreau's text. Indeed, his religious practice was deeply shaped by these more-than-human relationships.[11]

In thinking about more-than-human approaches to history, I have become very interested in methodology and research practices. The key tenets of more-than-human histories (noted above) ask researchers, first, to situate themselves, as well as the subjects of their research, within more-than-human worlds, paying due regard to multiple species and voices within asymmetrical power relation-

[9] Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

[10] This includes *Wetlands in a Dry Land* as well as ongoing projects. See, for example, Danielle Carney Flakelar and Emily O'Gorman, 'Wayilwan women caring for country: Dynamic knowledges, decolonising historical methodologies, and colonial explorer journals', *Journal of Australian Studies*, **47** (1) (2023): 160–80, https://doi.org/10.1080/14443058.2022.2153378.

[11] Alda Balthrop-Lewis, 'Multispecies Walden Woods: Reevaluating Thoreau's religion', *Arcadia*, No. 7 (Spring 2022): https://www.environmentandsociety.org/arcadia/multispecies-walden-woods-reevaluating-thoreaus-religion.

ships; second, to reflect on their research practices as ethical and political acts. How we approach and undertake research matters just as much as the conclusions we may reach. The way we do research is itself world-making. More-than-human approaches lead us to think *with* rather than *about* non-humans; to consider ants (for example and in the words of Diogo de Carvalho Cabral), as 'semiotic-selves' that co-create landscapes and textual archives.[12] This may, in turn, provide new insights into dynamic more-than-human socialities and the role of ants in landscape change.[13] A consideration of semi-aquatic wetland sedges may lead us to new sources, such as woven baskets in museum collections that give insight into relations between particular people, water, fire and plants, as well as changing wetland places.

A more-than-human approach can also foster research practices (already well established in Indigenous studies and geography), such as listening and learning on and with 'Country' (a term used by Aboriginal people in Australia to describe sets of nourishing relationships between different beings in a particular place).[14] I have been involved in this recently as part of a cross-cultural and interdisciplinary research group that includes historians, human geographers, environmental scientists, and government managers of wetlands and river areas, but that is led by Gomeroi/Kamilaroi Aboriginal custodians and collaborators.[15] One of the places we have been listening and

[12] Diogo de Carvalho Cabral, 'Meaningful clearings: human-ant negotiated landscapes in nineteenth-century Brazil', *Environmental History* **26** (1) (2021): 55–78; See also, Diogo de Carvalho Cabral and André Vasques Vital, 'Multispecies emergent textualities: Writing and reading in ecologies of selves', *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* (2021).

[13] Cabral, 'Meaningful clearings'.

[14] Deborah Bird Rose, *Reports from a Wild Country: Ethics for Decolonisation* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2004), pp.160–71. These sorts of methodologies build on foundational work of scholars like Linda Tuhiwai Smith: *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021).

[15] Winaga-li Gunimaa Gali Collective (Uncle Phil Duncan, Gunidjarr Anna Duncan, Gunidjarr Tibby Duncan, Jason Wilson, Brad Moggridge, Jane Humphries, David Preston, Jack Livingstone, Brooke Linnegar, Mahtab Saeedimanesh, Emily O'Gorman, Fiona Miller, Kate Lloyd, Jessica McLean, Ross

Figure 1. This photograph was taken during a visit by our research group and collaborators to the Gwydir wetlands in February 2019. We are gathered near a marked tree for on Country listening and learning led by Gomeroi/Kamilaroi custodians.

Photograph: Emily O'Gorman, 2019.

learning is at the Gwydir wetlands on Gomeroi/Kamilaroi Country in north-central New South Wales (see Figure 1). This wetland site is managed by the state government. Gaining access to this site has become easier over the course of the project, which began in 2019. The process of frequently requesting access has itself created new bureaucratic pathways for Gomeroi/Kamilaroi custodians to better access these places in the future, which in turn can help to enable healthier Country. In this way our research practices and approaches

Thompson, Cameron Muir and Sandie Suchet-Pearson), 'Winaga-li Gunimaa Gali: listen, hear, think, understand from our sacred Mother Earth and our Water', *Overland*, 6 Feb. 2023, https://overland.org.au/2023/02/winaga-li-gunimaa-gali-listen-hear-think-understand-from-our-sacred-mother-earth-and-our-water/ .

are helping to make tangible changes. Not all research practices have such direct effects, but all our research and publication practices are world-making in some way. Far from being neutral observers, we are always situated in our approaches to our research topics, sites and collaborators. Being explicit about methodology helps us to reflect on and orient ourselves accountably within these relationships.

More-than-human approaches can transform not only research but also writing practices. Again, by way of example, consider the Bawaka Collective, a group of Yolngu and non-Indigenous human geography researchers who have collaborated for over a decade. They have sought to bring Yolngu ontologies into dialogue with more-than-human approaches. They have foregrounded Yolngu ontologies and leadership in their research practice, spending time together on Bawaka Country in the Northern Territory. Gradually, they have identified Bawaka Country as the lead author of their publications as this approach reflects Yolngu ways of thinking about the world and challenges western academic conventions. Culturally appropriate research practices and approaches for more-than-human research have become one of the key concerns of the Bawaka Collective.[16]

Providing a name like more-than-human histories for a general set of approaches invites scholars from within and beyond environmental history into the conversations generated by these ideas. Within environmental history it can help to develop ideas, sustain dialogue and promote new approaches. For example, Zoltán

[16] Bawaka Country, Laklak Burarrwanga, Ritjilili Ganambarr, Merrkiyawuy Ganambarr-Stubbs, Banbapuy Ganambarr, Djawundil Maymuru, Kate Lloyd, Sarah Wright, Sandie Suchet-Pearson and Lara Daley, 'Songspirals bring country into existence: Singing more-than-human and relational creativity', *Qualitative Inquiry* **28** (5) (2022): 435–47; Bawaka Country, Sarah Wright, Sandie Suchet-Pearson, Kate Lloyd, Laklak Burarrwanga, Ritjilili Ganambarr, Merrkiyawuy Ganambarr-Stubbs, Banbapuy Ganambarr and Djawundil Maymuru, 'Working with and learning from Country: decentring human author-ity', *Cultural Geographies* **22** (2) 2 (2015): 269–83; Sarah Wright, Kate Lloyd, Sandie Suchet-Pearson, Laklak Burarrwanga, Matalena Tofa and Bawaka Country. 'Telling stories in, through and with Country: engaging with Indigenous and more-than-human methodologies at Bawaka, NE Australia', *Journal of Cultural Geography* **29** (1) (2012): 39–60; Bawaka Collective: https://bawakacollective.com/ (accessed 21 Dec. 2022).

Boldizsár Simon, Marek Tamm and Ewa Domańska, have brought more-than-human histories into conversation with a vast body of scholarship related to how we practise history and develop historical knowledge in the Anthropocene.[17] One of the authors argues that historians need to better recognise and examine more-than-human historicities in this time of environmental crises.[18] Doing so can promote productive cross- and interdisciplinary dialogue. Gaynor and I wrote 'More-than-human histories' with an explicit intent to foster more sustained dialogue between environmental history and interdisciplinary more-than-human and multispecies studies. We hoped to promote cross-fertilisation between these fields, and it has been pleasing to see that this seems to be happening.[19] We framed the three tenets of this approach as 'meeting points for environmental history and the broader environmental humanities (where some scholars are already gathering)'.[20] Engaging with shared concepts and scholarship helps to create a shared interdisciplinary language and agenda. Environmental historians clearly have much to offer, and to gain, from more-than-human approaches. For example, anthropologists Anna Tsing, Andrew S. Mathew and Nils Bubandt argue that 'studying the structures and histories of … multispecies webs in a time of global environmental frenzy means thinking about the suspension of human life in more- than-human landscape histories in new methodological and transdisciplinary ways'. They argue that examination of these histories is essential for understanding and addressing uneven power relations and landscape structures in the 'patchy Anthropocene'.[21]

[17] Zoltán Boldizsár Simon, Marek Tamm and Ewa Domańska, 'Anthropocenic historical knowledge: promises and pitfalls', *Rethinking History* **25** (4) (2021): 406–39.

[18] Ibid., 409.

[19] For example, Roderick P. Neumann, 'Tracing the historical agency of wild animals in the archives: Methodology and multidisciplinarity in posthumanist political ecology, *Geoforum* **135** (2022): 71–81; Laurence C. Smith, 'The powers of rivers', *GeoHumanities* (2022): 1–19.

[20] O'Gorman and Gaynor, 'More-than-human histories', 713.

[21] Tsing, Mathews and Bubandt, 'Patchy Anthropocene', s187.

Being explicit about how we undertake more-than-human histories can help us to be more attentive to how we conduct our research. It can also promote discussion within and beyond environmental history around both shared and divergent approaches and interests. I look forward to seeing how more-than-human approaches unfold in historical and contemporary studies of the global environment, to open new spaces and perspectives from which we might understand and respond to multiple and mounting socio-environmental crises.

Emily O'Gorman is an Australian Research Council Future Fellow and Associate Professor at Macquarie University, Sydney. Her research is situated within environmental history and the interdisciplinary environmental humanities, and is primarily concerned with contested knowledges within broader cultural framings of authority, expertise, and landscapes. Her latest book is *Wetlands in a Dry Land: More-than-human Histories of Australia's Murray-Darling Basin* (University of Washington Press, 2021).

Email: emily.ogorman@mq.edu.au