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# Human and Nonhuman in Hawaii: Agency, Elegy, Ecology

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## Human and Nonhuman in Hawaii: Agency, Elegy, Ecology: Response

CORNELIA PEARSALL

For all of its bright cleanliness and flowing breezes, the Hilton Hawaiian Village in Honolulu, site of the *Victorians and the World* conference, put me in mind of Christina Rossetti's sonnet "Cobwebs" (1855). The poem begins, "It is a land with neither night nor day" (line 1), and describes an unidentified place of insistent negation, with "No bud-time no leaf-falling there for aye, / No ripple on the sea, no shifting sand" (8–9). Certainly, the waves of the Pacific beat ceaselessly along this shore, overlooked as far as one could see by bustling hotel bars much like ours, yet even these ripples seemed regulated, reassuringly family friendly. Although sunset summoned energetic poolside luau performances (viewable for an extra fee), it didn't augur darkness across the twenty-two always lighted acres, and although no doubt the occasional bloom or leaf fell from the fifty varieties of flora decorating the hotel grounds, not a one dropped without being swept away almost before it touched the landscaped path, along with any grains of wayward sand. Of course, part of the break offered by a resort is that it provides a vacation from mortality; upon check-in, one enters a region seemingly without detritus or decay. In a sense, this space—entirely and minutely managed by humans—is a space that denies the human, the mortal, the changing, the imperfect.

Perhaps it was these reflections on human-made ecosystems' denial of the human that led me to conference papers that reflected on the precariousness of the nonhuman as well, even as moving daily through this manicured and manipulated landscape led to considerations of

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ecology more generally. An untitled 1885 poem by Rossetti declares in its first line “Everything that is born must die,” but she posits that a kind of “equal balance” (line 3) rights “Everything” (the word is a refrain): “Honeycomb is weighed against a sting” (5). The poet could not have anticipated the sixth extinction, in which “Everything,” or at least a tremendous array of species, may indeed die. But according to theorists of the Anthropocene, this mass-extinguishing imbalance was already underway in her lifetime, with what Timothy Morton declares “the inception of humanity as a geophysical force on a planetary scale” (7). Those who argue, controversially, that a shift in geological time (a scale itself created in the nineteenth century) from the Holocene to the Anthropocene has occurred point to the alterations in atmospheric carbon content dating from the Industrial Revolution and the subsequent rise in global temperatures, ocean acidification, and megafauna extinctions. The Nobel Prize-winning atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen, who with Eugene F. Stoermer proposed the contested term Anthropocene, dates the era’s origin to April 1784, when James Watt patented the coal-fired, carbon-emitting steam engine.<sup>1</sup> Many attribute the damage that followed not only to the engine’s carbon emissions but also, more broadly, to the capitalist expansion and consumerism it fueled; as McKenzie Wark puts it, “The Anthropocene runs on carbon” (xv). With this chronology in mind, Jesse Oak Taylor remarks in his essay in this cluster, the Victorians were “the Anthropocene’s first inhabitants” (225).

As it happens, a particularly significant milestone in the measurement of the greenhouse gases produced by carbon-based fuels occurred on the island of Hawai‘i, at the Mauna Loa volcano. At the beginning of his essay “Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene,” Bruno Latour reports on a news item he has just read in *Le Monde*: “At Mauna Loa, on Friday May 3, the concentration of CO<sub>2</sub>” in the air reached “the highest [level] it has been for more than 2.5 million years.” “How are we supposed to react when faced with a piece of news like this one . . .?”, he asks, before suggesting that we may be unable to react: “people are not equipped with the mental and emotional repertoire to deal with such a vast scale of events” (1). The demands of scale are at once vast and all too human, given that, as Dipesh Chakrabarty puts it, “Humans, collectively, now have an agency in determining the climate of the planet as a whole, a privilege reserved in the past only for very large-scale geophysical forces” (9)—such as Mauna Loa itself, which is still active and

is considered the largest volcano on Earth. Measuring human planetary impact at the site of this massive volcano, that human impact is itself best understood by way of the explosive nonhuman force *of* volcanoes—which, as it happens, formed, over thousands of millennia, the land on which the Hilton Hawaiian Village now stands.

“How do we think of this collective human agency in the era of the Anthropocene?” Chakrabarty asks (10), and we might look to the Victorians for at least the beginning of an answer. All three of the deeply reflective papers I’ve selected consider the agency of humans, but each is just as interested in the agency of nonhumans. The nonhuman (or beyond the human) is generally understood to encompass animal, vegetal, and mineral bodies as well as ecologies. These three essays (discussed here in their order in the conference program) were presented on three separate but provocatively intersecting panels and are themselves consistently attentive to the complex intersections among networks of humans and nonhumans. All three contributors understand the nonhumans they study as generative and interactive: as actants, the Latourian term favored by Sukanya Banerjee in her essay, and still more as *interactants*. The authors work with different genres (short story, novel, drama, and poetry) and in different registers, but all study what Gautam Basu Thakur calls in his essay “braided narratives about human-nonhuman encounters” (204). Wholly distinct strands, these three essays can themselves be loosely braided together, with my own response as a kind of trailing ribbon.

Perhaps it is no surprise that explicit or implicit approaches to the Anthropocene are a feature of emergent scholarship in our field; what may be the surprise, indeed, is that they are only now emerging.<sup>2</sup> Environmental emergencies are surely among the most pressing issues of the day; as I write in early November 2015, the *New York Times* reports that the Pacific Ocean is now a “caldron” (Schwartz n. p.), the melting of the massive Greenland ice sheet is accelerating (Gertner n. p.), and the alarmingly high concentrations of greenhouse gases that Latour in 2014 posited we were “not equipped” to deal with have risen still higher (St. Fleur n. p.). Taken together, these and other phenomena suggest that we may be too late to halt or even effectually slow global warming and climate change, given a kind of feedback ratio by which the acceleration of time appears equal to the acceleration of spatial destruction, with the opposite being equally true. The vast scale of environmental emergencies attributable to human agency, hard to imagine

even as it is necessary to do so, has increased recognition of and curiosity about nonhuman agency, and this issue is at the heart of each of these essays. These contributors variably frame the nonhuman through relational issues of nationalism, colonialism, and imperialism, recognizing that while the nonhuman must be understood on its own terms it both defines and is defined by the recognizably human.

Gautam Basu Thakur ends his essay “Necroecology: Undead, Dead, and Dying on the Limits of the Colony,” by reflecting on the many potential meanings of the Marabar caves in E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* (1924), while stressing that no one can ever know what happened there. The cold caves leave us with a “cold case” (210). What is nevertheless evident, he argues, is “the inevitability of the catastrophic in the colony” (204-05) and the associated inevitability of what he calls a “cognitive blockade” (210) about it. One broad implication of this is that when disaster strikes, it is impossible to know precisely what it is, suggesting a type of catastrophic experience characterized by its not being experienced. This cognitive lack seems analogous to that identified by Chakrabarty, namely, that “We cannot ever experience ourselves as a geophysical force” (14), although we function as such.

Basu Thakur defines “necroecology” as a “critical, philosophical approach to studying the human in relation to the nonhuman” (202) in the context of British colonialism. He argues that necroecology, as an aesthetic, contrasts with the picturesque, which in his view highlights self-recognition. In contrast, necroecology is “an aesthetic that does not know itself.” This incapacitated ontological situation allies necroecology to larger ecological and cultural devastations. Supporting his compelling claim that “relations between humans and nonhumans in the colony are always fraught, always rotten, always in a state of death and dying” (203), Basu Thakur contrasts two catastrophic situations concerning vertiginous colonial experiences: the “putrid chasms” (208) of Rudyard Kipling’s “The Strange Ride of Morrowbie Jukes” and the “primeval force” (209) of the caves in *A Passage to India*. These nonhuman vectors, or actors, draw British colonists into vortices they have themselves rendered catastrophic, then force them “to seek fantastic routes out of the void” (210). This trajectory from Morrowbie Jukes to the Marabar caves, traversing “mysterious colonial caverns” (208), chasms, pits, and holes, is what characters should, were they to follow the advice to Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost* (1667), “know to know no more” (IV.775). John Keats gave the term “Negative Capability” to the capacity to resist penetration

of the “Penetralium of mystery” (1: 194), advocating the state of “being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (1: 193). This non-knowledge is part of what the fantasies of cognitive mastery (especially in Kipling’s story) that animate the necroecological landscape cannot prevent and yet also cannot allow.

In “Who, or What, is Victorian?: Ecology, Indigo, and the Transimperial,” Sukanya Banerjee explores the catastrophic force of another nonhuman actor, indigo. In Dinabandhu Mitra’s Bengali-language play *Neel Darpan* (1860), indigo is an actant in the Latourian sense; indeed, it is figured as an aggressor, at one point apostrophized: “Oh indigo, indigo, did you come to this land to destroy us!” (qtd. in Banerjee 219). This accusation encompasses not only the destructive ecological and social impact of the mass cultivation of this crop, but also its mobility, its having “come to this land.” The play’s phrasing identifies the plant as intentional, moving with something like its own volition, rather than having been brought by some other carrier. Mitra’s play both figures mobility and exemplifies it: after appearing in an 1861 English translation under the title *Indigo Mirror* (published in Edinburgh in 1862) it was performed in its original language a decade later as the opening play at the new public National Theater in Calcutta. Depicting the brutality of the colonial planters who forced the tremendously labor-intensive cultivation of indigo, it is “unsparing” and “replete with scenes of graphic violence” (215). Its Bengali performance in turn provoked “great upheaval,” rendering audience members “almost mad” (qtd. in Banerjee 215). Banerjee situates this early performance history in the context of indigo’s performative relation to transimperial history (situating her preferred term “transimperial” as well). She assiduously tracks the movements of this commodity (“indigo has mobility, it circulates”) but is simultaneously alert to the potentially immobilizing consequences of the local and the grounded, asking crucially of non-British authored texts, “what about those that do not circulate so readily across the global/imperial circuits of capital?” (220). Part of the complexity of indigo in Banerjee’s discussion of it as an object of both cultivation and culture is that, in its mobility, it also takes hold.

A global actor, indigo takes root in Bengali ground. As Banerjee shows in her reading of *Neel Darpan*, indigo appropriates “familiar sites of village life” (219), including the jail and the school: “Not an actor in the play but certainly an actant, indigo is everywhere, and its absence-presence on stage actually renders it a more potent force” (219-20).

Her unwavering emphasis on indigo as a critical nonhuman agent whose influence is at once insufficiently recognized and inescapable resonates with Eduardo Kohn's methodology in *How Forests Think*, which seeks "to attend ethnographically to that which lies beyond the human" in order to amplify "certain strange phenomena" (22). Nonhumans also have "points of view," Kohn argues; "these creatures inhabit a network of relations that is predicated in part on the fact that its constitutive members are living, thinking selves" (17). Banerjee similarly places indigo at the center of its own drama, metaphorically and literally: "it is indigo—rather than the colonial state, or even the planters—that is the primary antagonist" (220).

Jesse Oak Taylor's essay, "Tennyson's Elegy for the Anthropocene: Genre, Form, and Species Being," addresses itself to another mobile form, that of elegy, which he argues "ascribes an almost magical agency to form itself" "by conjuring a presence from beyond the grave—a presence that has become, by definition, beyond the human" (228). If elegy as a genre traditionally conjures presences beyond the human, it may be particularly suited to mourn such entities: the nonhuman, the species, the spatial. If so, then it can offer a service and a solace not presently available. Ashlee Cunsolo Willox reports in her recent essay "Climate Change as the Work of Mourning" that a comprehensive subject search on writings about the relation between climate change and mourning yielded an "almost complete absence in academic literature and peer-reviewed research" (159 n. 5) as well as in "media reports, policy documents" (160 n. 12), and "climate change studies" (152). We might refer her instead to Tennyson. As Taylor states, "*In Memoriam* is perhaps the poem of the Anthropocene," and "not only because it speaks to so many themes characteristic of the era—evolution, extinction, geological time"—but also because of elegy's emphasis on form, an emphasis that best marks the disappearance of the biodiverse forms that typifies the Anthropocene catastrophe. Taylor locates the medium of poetry among other historical "traces," including images, skins, fossils, poems, and DNA sequences which, when read "retrospectively may, in fact, be the only way of rendering the Anthropocene legible" (230). Given its place among these traces, *In Memoriam* (1850) is perhaps proleptically an elegy for the Anthropocene, but may also already stand as an elegy for the Holocene.

Of the section of *In Memoriam* culminating "And let the ape and tiger die" (118 line 28), Taylor notes, "These lines have haunted me for years" (231). I find myself haunted by this haunting. To be haunted by



“ape and tiger” is in some sense to enter the situation most fervently sought by Tennyson, whose wish to be actively haunted by his dead friend is the most urgent of the many desires articulated in *In Memoriam*. Taylor acknowledges the evolutionary context of Tennyson’s declaration, then comments, “in the midst of the sixth extinction, when apes and tigers are in fact disappearing from the face of the earth, these metaphors cannot be only metaphors, but instead become synecdoches for the anishing megafauna whose habitats are destroyed.” Tennyson’s verb “let” leaves the role of human agency somewhat confused, as “let” can suggest permission or submission, signifying either intervention or equally damaging non-intervention, either causing death or acquiescing in it. Taylor observes, “To ‘let the ape and tiger die’ makes clear that if apes and tigers do go extinct it will have been on our watch, and thus that we will be culpable in their demise” (231). This responsibility would extend, as Cunsolo Willox puts it in another context, “the concept of a mournable body beyond the human” (141). It would also extend the concept of the act of mourning beyond the human, acknowledging the agency not only of mourning for nonhumans but also mourning by nonhumans. Taylor describes mourning among “almost all human societies” as a “genuinely species-wide, species-deep practice” (225), and we should begin as well to consider its practice beyond the human.

All three of these essays are concerned with the loss of or attributed to nonhuman entities and ecosystems: ape, tiger, indigo, chasm. Each is correspondingly concerned with haunting, variously conceived. This experience could be understood as antithetical to agency (at least for the haunted), but here it is figured as a mechanism of it. Basu Thakur traces the “experience of profound subjective destitution” (204), Banerjee traces the “unrelenting bleakness” of Dinabandhu’s play (215), and Taylor traces the traces, as type and form. In their attention to catastrophe (again, variously conceived) all three address brutality and its aftermath with reference to at least one primary nonhuman category, whether animal (Taylor’s ape and tiger), vegetal (Banerjee’s indigo), or mineral (Basu Thakur’s caverns). I don’t mean to end on a bleak note, as these richly suggestive papers and so many others of their caliber at so collegial and pleasurable a conference are cause for optimism on any number of levels. Banerjee, Basu Thakur, and Taylor all suggest that among the devastated ecologies they survey one may find seeds of a heightened awareness of vulnerability and intimacy—seeds that could

germinate more sustainable networks among the human and the non-human, the living and those threatened with extinction, as presumably we all are in the Anthropocene.

Kohn's recent book sets out to prove one very simple sentence: "Forests think" (21). Although no doubt damaging to forests in consequence of the reams of paper expended in the drafting and delivering of "papers," conferences at their best may nevertheless be akin to forests in their depth, their density, their diversity. Conferences think. The thinking of the conference *Victorians and the World*, inspired in part by the disturbingly dazzling landscape of the Hilton Hawaiian Village, in my view turned toward the fate of the planet. Morton declares, "The end of the world has already occurred" (7). But the claim that it is too late to prevent this end, that the devastation we now predict has already happened, is an inheritance from the Victorians along with our carbon-based economies and carbon-damaged environments. In their cumulative force, these three essays suggest that this end may already have occurred in the nineteenth century: it's the Victorians' dying world; we're just living in it.

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## NOTES

My gratitude to the authors of these three essays, Gautam Basu Thakur, Sukanya Banerjee, and Jesse Oak Taylor; it has been a privilege to learn from and respond to their work. My thanks also to the organizers of the conference and of each of the three panels on which these papers appeared: panels too are ecosystems and each of these was a flourishing one. Alicia Christoff, Suzanne Daly, and Lise Sanders read a draft of this response and I thank them for their astute suggestions.

1. For an articulation of the history and current definition of the highly contested concept and term Anthropocene, see Steffen, Grinevald, Crutzen, and McNeill (369, 842-67).

2. Taylor discusses this in "Where is Victorian Ecocriticism?"

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