

University College Cork Eco-Humanities Research Group

Workshop:

Agency, Onto-Epistemology and the ‘more-than-human’

Wednesday 12 January 2022 (online workshop)



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Workshop Description

The University College Cork Eco-Humanities Research Group is delighted to host an online inter-disciplinary workshop to explore diverse notions of the agency, ontology and epistemology of the non-human, or ‘more-than-human,’ in the context of contemporary ecological crisis.

Multiple and interlocking environmental challenges require a reconsideration of the different types of agency non-human - or more-than-human - beings, entities and objects may have, including non-human animals, plants, mountains, rivers and oceans, ecosystems, land, and even matter or materiality itself. How do variant and diverse forms of agency relate to ontology, epistemology and ethics? What forms of relationship exist, and are possible, between humans and non-human communities, beings and entities? How do humans participate in wider non-human communities and multi-species societies? Drawing on a range of perspectives, the workshop will examine the close, even inextricable, relationship between being, knowing and ethics which seems to emerge when we think through notions of distributive agency. We particularly encourage approaches which draw on and utilise indigenous and decolonising epistemologies that acknowledge and attempt to move beyond the cultural specificity of the predominant western techno-scientific worldview which has attributed agency only to human beings while simultaneously denying it to non-human beings and entities.

Relationships between bodies, sound and language will be a particular focus of the workshop. Can the language of nature (and/or natural entities) be heard and understood? Can we interact with the language of animals, insects and birds, or with rivers, mountains, seas and land? To what extent might nature, the land or the world itself be seen as a communicative presence “capable of dialogical congress with us” (Freya Matthews (2003) *For Love of Matter*) and what are the ethical implications of this?

The workshop aims to explore how such diverse notions of distributive agency can help us in thinking through, and responding appropriately to, the multiple ecological crises which we face today. Does re-conceptualising or thinking about notions of agency, ontology, epistemology and ethics in a much broader and more interconnected way facilitate more productive or helpful responses and modes of action in relation to climate crisis, biodiversity loss and other environmental problems in the contemporary world?

Workshop Organising Committee:

Crystal Addey (Classics, University College Cork); Caitríona Ní Dhúill (German, University College Cork); Tomas Buitendijk (Earth Institute, School of Biology and Environmental Sciences, University College Dublin); Hanna Bingel-Jones (German, University College Cork); Kevin McNally (Music, University College Cork and The Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, University of Limerick); Maureen O’Connor (English, University College Cork); Paolo Saporito (Film and Screen Media, University College Cork).

For further information, please contact Crystal Addey (crystal.addey@ucc.ie)

Format of the workshop

The workshop consists of 20-30 minute papers exploring the themes set out in the workshop description above and related issues with 10-15 minutes for discussion and Q&A after each paper.

The workshop will also include a roundtable/open discussion, taking several readings as a starting-point. These readings will be distributed to attendees in advance of the workshop. Several panel members will talk about agency (and related themes and issues) in relation to the applied environmental humanities and activism.

Please see the detailed schedule given on the following page.

Registration for the Workshop

All are welcome at this workshop. Attendance at the workshop is free but advance registration is required – please register for the Workshop through Eventbrite here:

<https://www.eventbrite.ie/e/agency-onto-epistemology-and-the-more-than-human-workshop-tickets-223916208407>



Workshop Schedule

9.45-10.00	Introduction and Welcome (Crystal Addey)
10.00-10.45	Eva Meijer, University of Amsterdam <i>The Role of Language in Multispecies Politics: Toward a Theory of Political Animal Voices</i> Chair: Caitríona Ní Dhúill
10.45-11.30	Maureen O'Connor and Benjamin Gearey, University College Cork <i>Answer in Bog Tongue</i> Chair: Hanna Bingel-Jones
11.30-11.45	Break
11.45-12.30	Tomas Buitendijk, Earth Institute, University College Dublin <i>Shifting Sands. Shared Agency and the Creation of Value.</i> Chair: Paolo Saporito
12.30-1.30	Lunch Break
1.30-3.00	Roundtable/open discussion: 'Applied Environmental Humanities and Activism' with panel: Dr Eva Meijer (artist and novelist work); Dr Benjamin Gearey (presentation at COP 26, Global Peatland Initiative, United Nations Programme, and community initiatives); Etain Addey (environmental activist, author, and leader in the bioregional movement) Chair: Crystal Addey
3.00-3.10	Break
3.10-3.55	Kevin McNally, University College Cork and University of Limerick <i>Intersubjectivity in improvised music: instruments as duet partners</i> Chair: Paolo Saporito
3.55-4.00	Workshop: Closing Remarks

Abstracts

The Role of Language in Multispecies Politics: Toward a Theory of Political Animal Voices

Eva Meijer, University of Amsterdam

Research shows that non-human animals have their own languages and cultures. They are individuals with their own perspectives on life, who form social and political relations with human and non-human others. In the current legal and political systems, they are however still seen and used as objects. Animal rights theorists challenge this, arguing that non-human animals are sentient beings whose interests should be taken into account morally and politically. In my talk I will argue this is not enough: we should also recognize that other animals speak and act politically, and see this as co-constitutive for building new interspecies democracies. This requires redefining 'language' and 'politics' together with the other animals.

'Answer in Bog Tongue'

Maureen O'Connor and Benjamin Gearey, University College Cork

Karen Barad has asked, 'Why are language and culture granted their own agency and historicity while matter is figured as passive and immutable, or at best inherits a potential for change derivatively from language and culture'? This presentation will consider these questions in the specific case of Irish peatlands, passive material for economic exploitation as well as cultural production, such as, perhaps most famously, Seamus Heaney's so-called 'Bog Poems'. It is our contention that Irish peatlands demonstrate agency, liveliness, and even expressive powers independent of human intervention, whether mechanical or literary. Human narratives of national independence and identity, as well as personal journeys of maturation and aesthetic growth, have been imposed on Irish bogs for generations. Dr Benjamin Gearey will reflect on the 'deep' and entangled time of human and nonhuman histories preserved in peat. How can an engagement and conceptualisation beyond bog as 'scientific archive' help us think through the loss and bereavement of the Anthropocene? Dr Maureen O'Connor will provide some examples of the gendered implications of acknowledging independent agency in the nonhuman bog landscape in Irish women's writing.

Shifting Sands. Shared Agency and the Creation of Value.

Tomas Buitendijk, Earth Institute, University College Dublin

De Zandmotor ('The Sand Motor') in The Hague, NL is a large scale beach nourishment scheme operating on the principle of '[working] *with water*, instead of against it' (Rijkswaterstaat). It is one of many available examples of contemporary 'soft' or eco-engineering solutions, which aim to leverage existing patterns of collaboration between humans and non-humans to improve biodiversity, climate resilience, and general ecosystem wellbeing. Yet the concept of eco-engineering is relatively new, and for now the value-generating potential of such cross-species, cross-phenomenal collaborations remain mostly unexplored. In order to arrive at a better, more culturally and historically embedded

understanding of these interventions, as well as a greater appreciation of their use value to society, this paper investigates the idea of a ‘sand motor’ in greater detail. It casts the emergence of North Bull Island in Dublin Bay in the early 1800s as an inadvertent deployment of the concept – albeit one that relies on a gathering pattern rather than one of dispersal – and suggests that the present cultural and ecological wealth of the island can be used as an evidence base for the deployment of eco-engineering solutions in general. To sustain this argument, the paper draws on leading ecocritical theory by among others Karen Barad, Donna Haraway, and Bruno Latour.

Intersubjectivity in improvised music: instruments as duet partners

Kevin McNally, University College Cork and University of Limerick

My research starts with a simple question: what if we took sound as a basis for our ways of knowing and being? In a world of economic rationality, human subjects impose their will on inert matter, shaping all that is nonhuman into objects to suit human desires. If our engagement with the world is instead conceived of as an act of tuning in to the other, the subject-object divide is blurred, and we recognise the agency of the nonhuman. Sound is always mediated by its environment, and always draws listeners and sounding objects into complex confederacies of contagious resonance. As such, thinking through sound helps us recognise the kind of radical hospitality that ecological awareness calls for. I will discuss a piece of music I devised as a duet between a human performer and two large Javanese gamelan gongs (available to listen to here: <https://youtu.be/7gJ-ZHX4W70>). In Java, the instruments of the *gamelan* tradition are believed to have a personhood of their own, with the large bronze gongs representing the soul of the ensemble. In this piece I use technology to boost the resonant response of the gongs, the result being that they take on a larger role in the developing improvisation. The human performer has to balance their own agency with that of the gongs.



Information about Workshop Speakers and Roundtable Panel Members (in order of appearance in the Schedule)

Eva Meijer is a philosopher and novelist. Meijer works as a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Amsterdam (NL), on the four-year research project *The politics of (not) eating animals*, supported by a Veni grant from the Dutch Research Council, and as a postdoctoral researcher at Wageningen University & Research in a project called Anthropocene ethics: Taking animal agency seriously. She is the chair of the Dutch Study group for Animal Philosophy. Recent publications include *Animal Languages* (John Murray 2019) and *When animals speak. Toward an Interspecies Democracy* (New York University Press 2019). Meijer wrote eleven books, fiction and non-fiction, that have been translated into eighteen languages. More information: www.evameijer.nl

Maureen O'Connor lectures in English in University College Cork. She is the author of *The Female and the Species: The Animal in Irish Women's Writing* (2010), co-editor, with Derek Gladwin, of a special issue of the *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 'Irish Studies and the Environmental Humanities' (2018); with Kathryn Laing and Sinéad Mooney, of *Edna O'Brien: New Critical Perspectives* (2006); with Lisa Colletta, of *Wild Colonial Girl: Essays on Edna O'Brien* (2006); and, with Tadhg Foley, of *Ireland and India: Colonies, Culture, and Empire* (2006). Her latest book, *Edna O'Brien and the Art of Fiction*, was published in October by Bucknell University Press.

Benjamin Gearey is Lecturer in Environmental Archaeology in the Department of Archaeology at University College Cork. He has a wide range of research interests focussed on wetland environments and especially the archaeological and palaeoenvironmental records of peatlands. He is currently editor of *The Journal of Wetland Archaeology* and elected member of the scientific advisory board, Joint Planning Initiative, Cultural Heritage and Global Change, Europe.

Tomas Buitendijk is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow with the Ireland-Wales Ecostructure project, working with Prof. Tasman Crowe at the Earth Institute at University College Dublin. He previously completed his PhD at Dublin City University, on the topic of changing representations of marine environments under the influence of the climate catastrophe. In his work with Ecostructure, he draws on cultural and historical artefacts, ecocritical theory, and conversations with industry partners and community groups to characterise the cultural impact and potential value of existing and new natural and artificial coastal infrastructures.

Etain Addey, together with her partner, has run a small farm in the Italian Apennines for forty years; she is the author of three books of stories about life in the country published first in Italian and later in English (*A Silent Joy*, 2010, *From the Deep Well*, 2016, *The Life of the White Mare*, 2020, all by Eyebright Books) and is a founding member of Sentiero Bioregionale, the Italian bioregional association which has produced several publications including Italian translations of the work of the ecophilosopher Freya Mathews.

Kevin McNally is a musician from west Cork with research interests in ethnomusicology, ecomusicology, popular music and community music. As a performer he has played in traditional Irish music bands, rock bands and in 2010 founded the West Cork Ukulele Orchestra. He is assistant director of the Irish Gamelan Orchestra and teaches gamelan and Irish music in UCC School of Music and The Irish World Academy of Music and Dance in the University of Limerick. Alongside teaching and performing, he is the co-director of the Clonakilty International Guitar Festival. His current research project investigates the connection between place and music in a community music context. It is an Arts Practice approach using as a case study the Javanese gamelan orchestra in Skibbereen, Co. Cork. In it, he seeks to explore sound as a form of co-presence between human and non-human bodies in the rural landscape.

