

Mourning and Melancholia in the Anthropocene

by Margaret Ronda

<http://post45.research.yale.edu/2013/06/mourning-and-melancholia-in-the-anthropocene/>

1. Thinking the end of nature

Under this older twentieth-century theory, central to environmental studies discourse beginning in the 1960s (and also associated with Frankfurt School and Heideggerian philosophy), nature remains a powerful external force that stands as the essential antagonist of industrial modernization. By contrast, the "end of nature" thesis asserts that under late capitalism, this process has drawn to a definitive close. Nature has been entirely vanquished, its cultural meanings depleted, its status as an "independent force" destroyed.

The provenance of this ["**end of nature**"] phrase and its logic of total rupture can be traced to Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature* (1989). In this book, often described not only as the first mainstream text on climate change but as a groundbreaking theory of planetary ecological crisis, McKibben lays out the above claim in detail: the structural antagonism between nature and human culture central to modernization is finished, and a new epoch is upon us, in which human activities determine (but do not necessarily *control*) all dimensions of ecological life. The signature demarcation of this new universal condition is global warming, which stands in McKibben's book as both the material fact of nature's end and a figure for the new ways of thinking that this end necessitates. He writes:

This new rupture with nature is different in scope and kind from salmon tins in an English stream. We have changed the atmosphere and thus we are changing the weather. By changing the weather, we make every spot on earth man-made and artificial. We have deprived nature of its independence, and this is fatal to its meaning. Nature's independence *is its meaning*—without it there is nothing but us. (Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 1989), 58.)

McKibben insists on terminal terminology here because the changes he describes are no longer preventable; we are now in the realm of necessity, not speculation. (...) By changing the weather, McKibben claims, we have already produced a permanent break, not only in the material operations of atmospheric and geochemical systems, but in the cultural "meaning" of nature. (...) What would it mean to imagine "nothing but us"? It is a feat of thinking that begins with the recognition of irretrievable loss, unrecuperable absence, and that dwells strangely, almost vacantly, in that logic of the break, the "nothing but." It is, in other words, **elegiac thinking**, bound up in the work of learning how, as Wallace Stevens might have it, "not to think." [An elegy is a sad poem, usually written to praise and express sorrow for someone who is dead]

...the ideas described in McKibben's work have remained central to theories of the environment over the past two decades. It is not merely that his arguments about the material impact of anthropocentric action on the planet have been borne out by all available standards of empirical measurement (the rate of Arctic icecap decline, the concentration of carbon

dioxide and methane in the Earth's atmosphere, human population growth, species extinction, rising temperatures and sea levels, air and soil pollution, the projected availability of fossil fuels, water, and other natural resources, to name a few), but that the *idea* of the end of nature as an independent domain and a salient cultural concept continues to be reasserted anew. Nature's end has retained a rhetorical constancy as a means of describing the cumulative, and still accumulating, environmental impact of capitalist development in the present.

The idea of the end of nature has been proclaimed for the past two decades and has thereby asserted a new rhetorical constancy.

This idea [of nature's end] has gained additional heft by the rise into scientific prominence of the **Anthropocene** as a human-determined geological epoch, which began, according to geologists and climate scientists, in the late eighteenth century with the increasing use of fossil fuels as industrial energy source, and which dramatically intensified in the second half of the twentieth century.

In a note it is written that: The term "The Anthropocene" was first coined by Nobel-Prize winning chemist Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer. In 2008, the Geological Society of America published a statement that accepted this term and its geological dating. Chakrabarty, 210.

Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35.2 (Winter 2009): 197-222.

Understanding the Anthropocene, as Chakrabarty points out, necessitates not only new periodizing approaches—"it is only very recently," he writes, "that the distinction between human and natural histories—much of which had been preserved even in environmental histories that saw the two entities in interaction—has begun to collapse"—but a reckoning with what the *unmaking* of these longstanding definitions means for the possibility of historical thought itself. Chakrabarty's preliminary historicizing of the Anthropocene dwells, like McKibben's end-of-nature thesis, in the logic of the break.

Also both McKibben and Chakrabarty seem to operate in constant negotiation with globalized capitalism

It is striking how unexplored this paradigm shift and its radical implications have remained in the field of literary studies. (...) the more radical idea of nature's end demands an emphasis on what is *not*, on the negative workings of creative imagination in light of a concept's withering-away. There is, in fact, an emergent literature of this "end of nature" paradigm, engaged in these new modes of thinking—negative, indebted, elegiac—necessitated by global ecological crisis: the field of ecopoetics. (...) Resisting a perspective of innocence or ethical outrage that would suggest an observational, distanced vantage, these works emphasize ecological

interrelationality and complicity in environmental destruction, and often explore collective feelings of vulnerability, hopelessness, and dread.

This essay will examine one key poem in this developing field, Juliana Spahr's "Gentle Now, Don't Add to Heartache" (2005) (...) Interested in "this connection of everyone with lungs" (the title of her acclaimed 2005 collection), Spahr's poetry explores the inextricable interrelation of interior and exterior, individual physiology and global network. At the same time, her work highlights the logics of neoliberal privatization that divert attention from collective commitments toward individual interests and private encounters.

My aim here, then, is to explore how what Chakrabarty calls the "coming undone" of the idea of nature is reflected and reflected on in the workings of [the poem] "Gentle Now." I am interested not only in the ways this ecopoetics text enacts the elegiac or negative thinking that I have been characterizing as an essential feature of the end of nature paradigm, but how it conceives the consequences of such thinking for its own literary operations.

This essay considers the ways "Gentle Now" defines nature as an imaginative resource—an elemental site of figuration and the essential sign of otherness against which the work defines its existence—whose meanings are available only as afterimage, negative vision.¹ Nature's absence as symbolic site of renewal is the "heartache" governing the poem's melancholic structure—an absence at the center of elegy itself. What is no longer available to the elegy as a form, Spahr makes clear, is precisely its conventional dependence on nature as the figurative resource that regulates the mourning process.

This constitutive absence is also the central theme of the poem, which narrates subject-formation as a form of elegiac self-recognition that takes ecological destruction as its tragic precondition.

2. Impossible Elegy

3. Melancholia Forever

The poem's melancholic thinking extends, finally, to its inhabitation of elegy itself. The question that underlies "Gentle Now"'s mobilization of elegiac procedures is whether elegy is even possible in light of the poem's subject matter. Can there be elegy, the poem

¹ See Adorno's key formulation in *Aesthetic Theory*: "Authentic artworks, which hold fast to the idea of reconciliation with nature by making themselves completely a second nature, have consistently felt the urge, as if in need of a breath of fresh air, to step outside of themselves. Since identity is not to be their last word, they have sought consolation in first nature [. . .] The extent to which this taking a breath depends on what is mediated, on the world of conventions, is unmistakable." What does it mean for a literary work not only *not* to "step outside," to "seek consolation in first nature," but to *stage* this incapacity? If, as Adorno points out, this act of "taking a breath" is governed by longstanding "conventions," what happens when those literary conventions become unavailable? This is a key preoccupation in "Gentle Now." Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998), 63

asks, without the 'absolute other' of nature? Part of the reason the poem's elegiac operations of idealization, substitution, and reintegration necessarily fail is that the imaginative resource so central to these conventionalized workings has become the object of mourning itself. With this shift, Spahr suggests, elegy turns in on itself, unable to fulfill its preordained tasks. Thus "Gentle Now" mourns, as well, for an idealized elegy that is now impossible, an elegy whose forms of closure are no longer inhabitable. If the drive toward closure characteristic of the genre operates, in part, to secure the poem's inheritance within a larger tradition and to reaffirm this tradition's significance, "Gentle Now" stages this literary transmission as unavoidably incomplete. Its relation to elegy uncannily echoes its depiction of the determination of the subject. The poem must speak the language of elegy, but this elegiac language must in turn speak its own constitutive failures. Unable to escape elegy's perimeters, but also unable to inhabit its logics and processes fully, the poem lingers in a properly melancholic relation to the genre.

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² Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 1989), 58.

