

## *Nature-Thinking*

### Bauhaus-Hopkins Summer Lab on Comparative Thought

June 18<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup>, 2025

#### Abstracts

##### **Jane Bennett:** *Nature as Process and Sweeping as Acting*

Must the idea of connection between a physics and an ethics be abandoned with the acknowledgement that nature is not providential or anthropocentric, but indifferent to human happiness, salvation, or survival? This paper explores an ethical practice of attending to (and mimicking) nature conceived as perpetual process and an essentially cloudy/dusty source. It takes up the daoist text Zhuangzi to pursue a pragmatic version of the idea that it is valuable to attune to the style of creativity characteristic of broad-scale natural-physical processes. One such practice is sweeping dust with a broom. Zhuangzi suggests that this small act repeats the style of dao, the ur-process of (what can be imperfectly translated as) nature. Sweeping, as action that is not an enactment of an intention or quest for a goal set in advance, is a fractal instance of the continuous, creative self-rearrangement of the cosmos. Sweeping considered also as a gateway to the dusty substance of subjectivity.

##### **Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky:** *Acting into Nature versus Play and Experimentation: Arendt and Benjamin on the Relationship between Nature, History and Technique*

In the 1950s, Arendt linked atomic physics and its technique to a change in the relationship between nature and history: humans were acting into nature in a way that they had previously only done in the realm of history. For Arendt, human actions are fundamentally transient, their effects unpredictable. When humans act into nature, they transfer this unpredictability from the realm of history to nature itself. The world is no longer the unchanging ground but becomes transitory itself. For Arendt, this reveals a centering of all worldly relationships on human action. Benjamin, on the other hand, sees in the emergence of the second technique, which he associated to the age of technological reproducibility, the possibility of overcoming a technique that has been centered on humans for centuries. His focus is not on human action but on play and experimentation. Following Arendt and Benjamin this presentation examines the relationality between nature, technique and the situatedness of humans in time.

##### **Rhiannon Clarke:** *(Un)natural landscapes, feral archive: Lorca's legacy, on and off the page*

My paper considers the relationship between 20th-century Spanish poet and playwright Federico García Lorca, his nature-writing, his image in Spanish culture, his archive, and landscape. Material and affective environments informed Lorca's creative process and his relationship with the "natural world" which he elegized in his writings. His mythologization in Spanish culture has fed calls for ecological preservation in a desire for mimesis between Lorca's poetic landscapes and their real-life Andalusian counterparts. But this is within the context of a country that was geoengineered by Franco during a lengthy dictatorship: terrain moved for mass graves and monuments, millions of non-native trees planted, rivers dammed and valleys flooded. The un-naturalness of these landscapes mirrors the

problematics of Lorca's archive, an untidy or feral network that was censored, expunged, lost, and dispersed by the ravages of the Spanish Civil War, a history smoothed over by the printed page.

**William E. Connolly:** *An Ecology of Nonhuman Modes of Production*

What happens if you rework Marxist ideas of a mode of production, extending it to a variety of intersecting, nonhuman processes? Well, perhaps even more vibrant, volatile and regionally diverse images of planetary ecology unfold. Key examples of nonhuman initiated modes of production include species crossings, glacier flows, the ocean conveyor, storm production, photosynthesis, and perhaps the origin of time itself. This essay examines those modes, exploring how they interact with each other, what the products are, and what happens when they collide with the modes initiated by neoliberal capitalism. We begin to discern more clearly how climate damage is produced and, perhaps, the need to both protect the grandeur of a planet far more powerful than we are and how to transcend humanocentric modes of production.

**Jennifer Culbert:** *Still Life: Natural Law and the Art of Man*

My talk/presentation is about natural law. To narrow the scope, I focus on the discussion of natural law in Thomas Hobbes' *LEVIATHAN*. In the introduction to *LEVIATHAN*, Hobbes defines nature as "the Art whereby God hath made and governes the World." Drawing on this definition, I examine Hobbes' presentation of *JUS NATURALE*, the right of nature, and *LEX NATURALIS*, the laws of nature, as a representation of a work of art. Rather than interpret Hobbes' text with reference to the famous frontispiece he designed for the book, I look to the genre of still life (*STILLEBEN*) and offer readings of several different paintings from the period when *LEVIATHAN* was published to examine Hobbes' reflections on God's creation and the Art of Man that copies it.

**Jessica Croteau:** *For a Fermented, Fugitive, and Earthborn(e) Myth of Democracy*

This article proposes fermentation as both metaphor and method for reimagining democracy in ecological terms. Building on *Earthborn Democracy's* insistence that political life must be attuned to interspecies entanglement and new myths, it argues that fermentation—characterized by decay, transformation, and collaboration across difference—offers a mythic and material framework for democratic life. Drawing on feminist fermentation practices and theoretical engagements with Sheldon Wolin's concept of fugitive democracy, the article explores how fermentation unsettles dominant political imaginaries of stability, purity, and boundedness. In doing so, it supplements existing accounts of democratic natality with an equally vital politics of decomposition. Fermentation becomes a democratic pedagogy through which humans and more-than-humans co-create conditions for collective flourishing. Ultimately, the article invites a re-storying of democracy through decay, arguing that decomposition is not the death of political life, but its ferment.

**David DeBole:** *Ogallala Dreams: On the Value of Other-than-Conscious Thought in Political Resistance*

Underneath the High Plains of the United States, the Ogallala aquifer – once tapped by pumps – revitalized agriculture in this extremely arid area, just at the moment when it seemed agricultural practices in this region would have to change dramatically in response to the Dust Bowl. After decades of pumping for industrial agriculture, however, the Ogallala aquifer in some areas seems to contain only enough water for the next decade, if less. This paper, as a chapter of a dissertation on the concept of not-knowing, explores the contours of resistance to change in agribusiness practices in this area, despite clear indications that such a way of life will be eradicated through its continuation. Taking a pluralist, pragmatic approach, this paper considers how dreams can be a window for subjects dealing with the collapse of nature and a way of life simultaneously into sides of subjectivity that might otherwise go unconsolidated in the Self of waking life.

**Lorenz Engell:** *Nature as Trans-D(io)ramatic Experience*

**Vanessa Franke:** *The Earth on the Horizon. On (Extra)Terrestrial Perspective with Samantha Harvey's Novel "Orbital" (2024)*

The experience of outer space has preoccupied poets, authors of science fiction, and philosophers alike, not only since the early days of space travel. It is often assumed that the extraterrestrial experience, decentering humans from Planet Earth, is existentially disorienting: no horizon, ground, place, or landscape, only space. The human body turns into a floating mollusc, depending on a highly technological environment. In contrast, the recent novel "Orbital" (2024) by S. Harvey, set on the International Space Station, describes an experience of space that is a phenomenological as well as ecological (re)orientation towards Earth, driven by its contemplation in movement. I will discuss how the novel depicts Earth not in a totalizing globality, but rather creates a terrestrial horizon, relating the local and the global. Through addressing various media, the text opens up broader questions on perspective inherent to subjectivity, and media's capacity of creating a common point of view.

**Jennifer Gosetti-Ferencei:** *Thirteen Ways of Thinking About a Blackbird: The Meaning(s) of 'Nature'*

Western thinking about 'nature' has been implicated in its degradation--metaphysically relegating its materiality to a lower order of being, epistemically imposing quantitative frameworks that facilitate its exploitation, and aesthetically regarding its beauty as an occasion for human pleasure or the elevation of reason. In recent ecocriticism, nature has been rejected as a product of culture, an idea that attends human expansionism; as a romantic fantasy that greenwashes our industrial complex; or as a tool of subjugation that aligns with the degraded earth those deemed opaque to reason. Without diminishing the importance of these critiques, this intervention challenges the dismissal of the concept of nature, and explores the possibility of an ecological pluralism that addresses both our

striving to understand nature and its non-absorption by human thought, finding inspiration in philosophical and literary works for possibilities and limits of thinking 'nature.'

**Brahim el Guabli:** *Rethinking Nature through Arid Lands: Saharanism and its Impacts.*

This paper will discuss the impact the phenomenon of Saharanism has had on the way desert and arid nature have been conceptualized and treated. Drawing on a wealth of sources across desertic areas, this paper will demonstrate that Saharanism, albeit under-reached and unarticulated, is a powerful ideology that undergirds the manner arid environments are produced, spoken about, and (mis)treated. From colonial administrations to the UNESCO and theorization of nomadism, Saharanism has drawn on the physical and demographic realities of arid lands to produce universalizing ideas about the environment, including ways to transform it or make it profitable. By articulating the ideas underpinning Saharanism and demonstrating how it's work in different intellectual trends, this paper will both shed a new light on and challenge the biases that most people have internalized about arid spaces.

**Diego León-Villagrà:** *Figurations of 'Malignant Nature' in 20th and 21st Century Illness-Thinking*

Exemplarily focusing figures of thought of 'malignant nature' as modes of description of cancer in the 20th and 21st Century, my proposed contribution aims at addressing relations between subject and environment as a whole. These phenomena of 'nature in ourselves' as well as carcinogenic natural environments in the Anthropocene and the relatability of different organic entities are observable in both artistic and scientific practices. Facing cancer, figurations of non-absent 'evil' or 'malignant nature' in ourselves, the differentiation between 'Nature' and the Self becomes so problematic that, as I want to argue, only their relations and general relatability (but not their relata) become addressable and analyzable.

**Anne Merrill:** *Tracing Tor House, "Tor House," and Torrid Zone*

I am assembling a rock collection and building a stone wall. Each text is a single stone that I am attempting to fit carefully into its place. In an attempt to think elementally, most recently with/through rocks, I draw lines of connection between outsider architecture, palpable artifacts, and a broader conceptual process of the physicalization of political and social separatism.

Might the materiality of Robinson Jeffers' California home Tor House (assembled from local and exotic rocks) together with the poet's "Tor House" (1928) be an entry point? What does an additional rock add to the wall, say, ReBecca Béguin's pulp lesbian murder mystery Torrid Zone (1997)? In looking at the space that exists between Tor House, "Tor House," and Torrid Zone, at the gaps between poems, pulp, and the real places that appear in the archive, my presentation proposes a path that allows us to encounter and dwell in a time-resistant experience.

**Katrin Pahl:** *Auntie Earth: With Thomas Köck toward a pedologic of mutual agency*

Via an analysis of Thomas Köck's plays "paradies spielen (abendland. ein abgesang)" (2017 Nationaltheater Mannheim, dir. Marie Bues) and "solastalgia (tryout /habitat)" (2022 Kunstfest Weimar / Schauspiel Frankfurt, dir. Thomas Köck), this paper inquires into the possibility of learning from soil. Inspired by Eve Kosowky Sedgwick's elaborations on the queer avunculate, Auntie Earth emerges, as distinct from the traditional figure of Mother Earth, to offer a model of living/dying and acting together beyond the patriarchal and heteronormative mold. My dialogue with Köck's plays also engages Glenn Albrecht's notion of solastalgia and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's analysis of global late capitalism in her ethnography of naturecultures around the matsutake mushroom.

**Jörg Paulus:** *Nature's Paperwork*

In my talk, I will examine the relation between humans and nature in the medium of paper (and other storage media). The question will be raised as to how these media contribute to the profiling of this relation and even make it possible in the first place. I will take a strictly experimental approach and concretize the idea of the laboratory in the archive: examples include self-inprints of nature from the 19th century, mayflies in calendars, and rock formations. Which philosophies call for such assemblages, and how can they be translated into human language?

**Martin Siegler:** *The Porous Media of Nature*

Nature today is increasingly hollowed out by human and technical intervention: large-scale extraction reshapes landscapes, leaving behind abandoned mines, sinkholes, and landfills. Nature no longer appears as a "whole" but as riddled with holes, hollows, tunnels, and cavities. How can we think this "hole earth"? How can we inhabit a holey space? How can we learn to live with holes?

In my talk, I propose the concept of "porosity" for engaging with holey worlds. Porous bodies are always open to and permeated by their surroundings (Tuana 2008; Bennett 2020), resisting clear-cut separations between inside and outside, nature and culture, something and nothing. From the perspective of porosity, holes are not mere voids or lacks in being, but rather pores as conditions of relationality and mediation. As such, Porosity offers a way of thinking nature beyond the ideal of wholeness, without collapsing into mere negativity.

**Christiane Voss:** *Anti-Kitsch or: An Attempt to Resonate with Motifs from Schelling's Natural Philosophy Today*

Questions about the functioning, purpose and accessibility of nature have been more or less completely banished from the humanities in the wake of the European Enlightenment and functionally differentiated modernity. Since the 20th century at the latest, philosophies of technology and media have taught us that nature does not exist. Environments and infrastructures that have always been technically engineered have replaced the "old nature". While Marx and Engels considered adaptation to machine parks, factories and automatons in the industrial age to be alienation from human nature, today, in the age of global turbo-capitalism and widespread digitalization, the technical penetration of our

living environments and the corresponding forms of self-perception and perception of others have become so ubiquitous and absolute, that a hiatus between authenticity and alienation no longer applies. However, there lingers a latent philosophical unease about the abstract negation of nature. So how can one think philosophically today about such things as the origin and connection of thought and being, or about the relationship between infinity and finitude for life-forms, without slipping into either metaphysically unfounded speculations in a pre-Kantian way, or into smooth kitsch? The short lecture will look back at one of the last great nature philosophy-projects of the 19th century, that of Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling. The aim is not to defend his (failed) philosophy of identity as a whole once again. Rather, the aim is to look for thought-figures in a heuristic and playful way that could possibly take on a productive critical function for today questions. References to Warwick Mules book "With nature" figure as an important background-reference as well, as the "phenomenology of kitsch" of the german philosopher Ludwig Giesz.

**Mats Werchohlad:** *Mediating Atmospheres. A Walk through the Park on the Ilm*

Our walk leads through a heterotopic terrain where practices of thinking, sensing and shaping nature converge. Emerging from Anna Amalia's cultural politics, the Ilmpark stands as an expression of the nature ideals of classical Weimar, for which Johann Wolfgang von Goethe holds a particular significance. In his engagement with the garden and in his literary, artistic, and scientific pursuits, he saw his life and work as part of nature's unfolding metamorphosis. Lesser-known topographies unfold in the Bauhaus's relation to the park. Through gardening, spiritual exercises, and spatial uses, nature visions were experienced and reshaped in and through the landscape. Gernot Böhme's philosophy of atmosphere offers a connecting thread for these situated conceptions. The landscape garden becomes paradigmatic: nature is not merely observed but mediated and constructed through experience. Walking thus becomes a mode of reflecting and engaging with nature as an evolving landscape of thought.

**Laurien Wüst:** *The second nature of technology: On Benjamins distinction between first and second technology*

Opposed to a dualistic separation of nature and culture, contemporary philosophy has rediscovered the concept of second nature. This concept expresses not only the insight in the constitutive role of naturalization, be it in the formation of the subject (habits) or of the social (institutions). It also serves as a critical concept by emphasizing second nature as a source of new forms of social domination that demands strategies of de-automatization of our social practices. What is lacking in the philosophical debate on second nature, however, is the question of the role of technical automation. The talk addresses this neglect through a distinction made in Walter Benjamin's artwork-essay, where he differentiates a „first technology“, allied with “magic” (Magie) from a „second technology“, associated with play (Spiel) and experimentation. The talk pursues the question of how Benjamin's distinction can offer a new perspective on second nature as a critical concept.

**Siyu Xie:** *Nature's Orientalism versus Productive Ambiguity*

This paper examines the contested terrain of "nature" in 20th and 21st centuries' China scholarships. Why has nature become a suspect of orientalism? A generation of scholars have positioned nature as central to Chinese art, poetry, and philosophy, with François Jullien emerging as the most influential figure, advancing the ideal of humans and nature in harmony. However, the 1990s witnessed a scholarly pushback against these interpretations. Zhang Longxi's critique argues that Jullien's conceptualization over-emphasizes differences and undermines commensurability, thus providing a skewed view of "nature" in Chinese tradition. Simultaneously, historians like Craig Clunas challenged these representations as monolithic, timeless, and decontextualized. Critiques ask if the promotion of nature in certain contexts potentially reinforces orientalist frameworks. These pushbacks decentered scholarly attention from the abstract nature to historical agencies, socio-economic and cultural specificities. By mapping these scholarly debates across the 20th and 21st centuries, this paper interrogates why the concept of nature in Chinese contexts continues to be revisited and remains intellectually productive despite, or perhaps because of, its contested status.