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BOOK SYMPOSIUM

The left hand of nature and culture

Stefan HELMREICH, *Massachusetts Institute of Technology*

Comment on Descola, Philippe. 2013. *Beyond nature and culture*. Translated by Janet Lloyd with a foreword by Marshall Sahlins. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Ursula Le Guin's 1969 science fiction novel, *The left hand of darkness*, imagined a planet populated by androgynous humanoids, entities for whom a sexed identity was a temporary state; individuals would phase through male or female embodiments, with their sex during any given cycle shaped by their shifting social surroundings. Le Guin meant to denaturalize sex difference as foundational to human identity but she did so without one of the tools now on hand for social theorists: *gender*. Reflecting on the novel in 2013, she remarked that the concept of gender had not been fully available when she wrote the book (see Haraway [1991] for one historical account of the emergence of gender analytics). As a result, Le Guin's book presented a biologically reductionist vision of "sex," even as it sought to undermine the notion that sexed embodiment was socially determinative (Think Out Loud 2013).¹ The word "gender" *does* appear in *Left hand of darkness*, but only once, and then as a simple synonym, perhaps as a totem, for sex as biological identity.

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1. Ursula Le Guin's anthropological parentage may be relevant to her thinking about gender variant persons. Le Guin is the daughter of anthropologists Alfred and Theodora Kroeber. Alfred Kroeber's work included a 1939 research into Native American Two-spirit people (or, in the language of the day, "berdaches"—a term meant to describe "feminine Native men," but which is now considered inaccurate and derogatory). That research reportedly informed Le Guin's thought experiments in *The left hand of darkness* (Stryker 2004).



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The word “gender” appears only once, too, in Philippe Descola’s *Beyond nature and culture* (2013), a datum upon which I reflect here. By the time of the book’s original 2005 publication as *Par-delà nature et culture* the analytic had been in wide circulation—particularly as a tool for undoing the nature/culture duo—and this fact gives the text, which offers a bold reimagining of human being and becoming, something of an off-kilter feel. It reads itself a bit like a work of science fiction, a missive from a universe in which feminist anthropology had not, beginning in the 1970s, started powerfully to leverage the concept of “gender” into efforts to move beyond nature and culture.

To be sure, the absence of gender is partly a matter of translation and tradition. Much of the anthropological literature on gender has been in English language texts. Even so, there does exist a strong French-language political and philosophical tradition, beginning with Simone de Beauvoir and continuing through to Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Julia Kristeva, that poses the question of sexed difference and hierarchy as a matter of concern—and a target for denaturalization—by querying the solidity of the binary of nature and culture upon which sexual dichotomy rests. Hélène Cixous in 1975 explicitly names “culture/nature” as a duo beyond which writing and social analysis must move (Cixous and Clément 1975: 63).² French anthropology has been, it would seem, in a somewhat different conversation. It has not usually made the politics of sex/gender, particularly in industrial or postcolonial societies, central to its project, leaning more toward ethnological approaches seeking to discern universals of the human condition, often by appeal to putatively precontact small-scale tribal or village society (see Rogers 2001). In its canonical form, French ethnology does not address those axes of difference—race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, class, ability—that have so preoccupied much anthropological work elsewhere, and particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom.

And so it is not, perhaps, such a surprise that gender is missing from *Beyond nature and culture*. Descola has, however, written instructively on gender elsewhere—notably in his “The genres of gender: Local models and global paradigms in the comparison of Amazonia and Melanesia” (2001). Descola there observed that while “gender” has for anthropologists of Melanesia been a critical conceptual idiom through which to think about personhood, sociality, and exchange (cf. Strathern 1988), ethnographers of Amazonia have found “gender” less relevant. In (Amerindian) Amazonia, the weaving together of human and nonhuman worlds—a multinatural realm of agents all imagined as “persons” (cf. Vivieros de Castro 1998)—has been the more salient logic and context. Analysts of face-to-face societies in indigenous Amazonia have found what Descola glosses as a “cosmo-centric” rather than a “sociocentric” world. And so, Descola suggests, the “sexual dichotomy seems to be subordinated to, and instrumentalized by, more encompassing social patterns and relationships” (2001: 101). Insofar as “gender” materializes, women are “first and foremost defined as signifiers and operators of consanguine links, while men are perceived as signifiers and operators of affinal links” (101) so

2. Note that even as Cixous calls for women to dive into their “nature” to discover *écriture féminine* [feminine writing], she also writes “there is ‘destiny’ no more than there is ‘nature’ or ‘essence’ as such” (Cixous and Clément 1975: 83).



that each “gender deals with humans and nonhumans alike according to its particular abilities: women convert affinity into consanguinity within the nexus and treat their plants as children; men are in charge of affinal relations and treat the beings of the forest as in-laws” (99). This is not, Descola emphasizes, because of any “natural” tethering of women and men to their roles in “reproduction.” Neither are these associations emergent from any cultural logic (cf. Schneider 1984) that has it that “gender” is an epiphenomenon of “kinship” (Descola 2001: 102). This is, rather intriguingly, something like “no nature, no culture,” Amazonian style (see Strathern’s [1980] “No nature, no culture,” a source that Descola uses to good effect here and employs, too, in *Beyond nature and culture*, though not in connection with gender).

And yet, in “Genres of gender,” Descola collapses gender and sex, writing that, “sex distinctions are universal tools for the building of social categories” (109). His qualification—that this “does not imply that societies everywhere give them the same weight in the definition of their social philosophy and elaborate them to the same degree” (109)—does not diffuse the founding place of “sex” in this model. A more thoroughgoing concept of “gender” could have come in handy here, demonstrating its utility to the project of thinking beyond or against nature and culture, and in sites well beyond Melanesia.

We could call the conversation about gender that has unfolded in other conversations, elsewhere, something like *The left hand of nature and culture*. Paging through an imaginary book by that title might start with Claude Lévi-Strauss, and then move to Sherry Ortner’s (1974) “Is female to male as nature is to culture?” (which opened up the question), proceed to Gayle Rubin’s (1975) critique of Freud and Lévi-Strauss, “The traffic in women: Notes on the ‘political economy’ of sex” (which introduced the “sex/gender system”), move to Donna Haraway’s (1985) “A manifesto for cyborgs” (which reported on how “nature and culture are reworked” in the age of cybernetics, third world feminisms, and biotechnology) to Jane Collier and Sylvia Yanagisako’s (1987) *Gender and kinship: Essays toward a unified analysis* (which made nature/culture a critical dichotomy to be disassembled). From there, the path would proliferate into a ramifying literature on reproductive technologies (cf. the path-setting work of Sarah Franklin [e.g., 1995, 2003] and many more), ethnographies of lesbian and gay families and socialities (Weston 1991), critical anthropological scrutiny of race as a category that continues to be haunted by the “natural” (cf. Visweswaran 1998; Marks 2003; and contributions to the 2003 collection *Genetic nature/culture*), queer readings of political ecology and animal studies (Chen 2012), and much more.

Now, it is true that antiracist, feminist, and queer anthropologies, attached to the project of denaturalizing nature, are themselves often still in the thrall of what Descola terms “naturalism”—insofar as naturalism is the epistemology with which these genres of anthropology persistently wrestle. Because the ambitious project of *Beyond nature and culture* is to name naturalism as *just one* sort of ontological angle—with others being animism, totemism, and analogism—it may make sense that feminist anthropology does not feature as a conversational companion in the book. But I wonder. Though Marshall Sahlins, in his Foreword to the book, calls Descola’s “Big-time thinking” (for a critical reflection on the implications of this term, see Fitzgerald 2013), we might also recall Catherine Lutz’s essay, “The gender of theory.” There, Lutz writes that

theory is generally and informally seen as consisting of more rather than less abstract statements, widely relevant or universalistic or “deeper” statements of more ultimate or timeless value than others, and as statements that require more rather than less substantial intellectual “gifts” to compose. (1995: 253)

Lutz finds a more-than-coincidental absence of women’s writing acknowledged in major social theory texts as “theory”: “Theory has acquired a gender insofar as it is more frequently associated with male writing, with women’s writing more often seen as description, data, case, personal, or, as in the case of feminism, ‘merely’ setting the record straight” (1995: 251). The numbers back her up; Lutz’s survey of major social theory collections of the 1990s find very few women anthologized or cited (and almost no women of color)—something like one woman per ten authors (a quick accounting of Descola’s citations finds similarly that of 462 authors in the bibliography, roughly fifty are women, which may—though not precisely, to be sure—account for the thinness of gender in the analytic apparatus). The matter here is not that any particular scholarly demographic or theoretical point of departure must be included in any given anthropological text, but that in a book that strives to offer a program for inquiring into human universals, reading from as catholic a range of social theory would seem a desirable path.³

Having spent a good part of this comment on tools Descola might have, but did not, employ to get at “naturalism,” I want now to take up the other ontologies—totemism, animism, and analogism—that Descola offers as possible formats for human experience. A quick gloss: Naturalism posits that all creatures and things in the world are made of the same materials but have different experience (this permits both a realist attachment to nature and a multiculturalist relativism). Animism assumes shared experience but different substances (this is the logic that enlivens multinaturalism). Totemism assumes a shared experience and substance across bodies. Analogism assumes difference in both physical and experiential constitution, with analogical connection the only possible link to be made across domains. This is an enticing gloss of possible onto-epistemologies and fleshes out axes of difference that were hinted at by Bruno Latour (1993) in his important *We have never been modern*.

To experiment with what these ontologies permit analytically, let me apply them to a contemporary anthropological artifact/offering.

In 2012, Paris’ Palais de Tokyo hosted its third Triennial, *Intense proximity: An anthology of the near and the far*, an exhibit that put the questions and representational strategies of twentieth-century ethnography into conversation and collision with contemporary art, reframing the work of Marcel Griaule, Lévi-Strauss, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and many others either as aesthetic production or as calling out for dialogue with the art critical (see Enwexor 2012). This ethnologically tuned exhibit

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3. Compare Fischer (2014) for an inventory of the many directions one might have gone in this domain, looking, for example, not back to ancient Greece for vocabulary but to contemporary ethnographers of the law, of science, of politics. Or of religion. Fischer asks whether Descola’s accounting of religion could adequately encompass the heterogeneous worlds of “Muslim Sufi, Christian monk, Hindu *pandit*, Buddhist and Jain monk, and Confucian sage” (2014: 341).

took an approach quite opposite to the Musée du Quai Branly, just across the river Seine, which was organized to present ethnological artifacts by geographical region. If the low-lit, winding walkways of Quai Branly give visitors the experience of touring a European colonial subconscious (cf. Clifford 1981), a spooky dreamscape populated by beautiful, phantasmagoric, and decontextualized masks and artifacts, *Intense proximity* meant to address a range of possible viewers and hoped to push visitors into contradiction and difficulty, into thinking about the politics of representation. At issue in many pieces were the fraught histories and politics of nature and culture—politics with which artists played by toying with animistic and totemic links as well as with the incommensurabilities of analogism.



Figure 1: Image from Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz's *Toxic*, Installation with Super 16mm film/HD, 13 min and archive, 2012. Shown in Paris at the Palais de Tokyo's third Triennial, *Intense proximity: An anthology of the near and the far*, April 20–August 26, 2012. Photo: Ouididade Soussi-Chiadmi. <http://www.boudry-lorenz.de/toxic/>

Let me take one example: *Toxic*, an installation/film by Berlin-based artists Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz. The film at the center of the piece features two characters: a punk (Ginger Brooks Takahashi) and a drag queen (Werner Hirsch), “both of unclear gender and origin. They linger in an environment of glossy remains, of toxic plants and transformed ethnographic and police photography” (Boudry and Lorenz 2012; see also Engel and Lorenz 2013). The punk recites a roster of toxic substances, poisonous elements that conjoin different sorts of being—plants, humans, all reshaped by environmental toxins, mashing together, perhaps, what Descola would call naturalism and totemism. The drag queen “reenacts an interview of Jean Genet from the ’80s and blames the filmmakers for exposing her to the police-like scenario of being filmed.” The social toxicity of photography—its capacity to poison social relations—is at the center of *Toxic*, calling attention to how such forms as the mug-shot and the ethnographic photograph have historically

positioned “the photographers and the viewers as ‘normal’ and privileged on the one side and the photographed on the other side: criminals, sexworkers, homosexuals, black people and people from the colonies” (Boudry and Lorenz 2012). There is another, more chemical avatar of the toxic here as well. *Toxic* underscores how human embodiment these days is impossible to think through without an account of how toxic waste and toxic substances suffuse life as such:

There are toxic agents, toxic doses, toxic effects, toxic strangers, toxic queers, toxic people with AIDS. Exposure to toxic substances is associated with the inability to work, with no kids, no future, with cognitive delay, enhanced aggression, with allergies and cancer. Lead has recently become racialized as Chinese, radioactivity and its endurance as Japanese. (Boudry and Lorenz 2012)

This list is at once naturalistic (shared bodies, different experiences), animist (different bodies, similar experience), totemic (shared substances and experiences), and analogical (radically different embodiments and experiences, pressing for paratactic modes of representation) (compare Fortun and Fortun 2005). It is, perhaps, beyond nature and culture in many of the ways that Descola would hope for. I think, too, of the work of Eva Hayward (2013) who theorizes “intoxifornication” as a kind of queer sexual becoming that is shot through with toxins—the toxins of endocrine disruption, of poisonous working conditions, of the uncertain ecstasy of hormone replacement therapy or gender realignment (see also Ah-King and Hayward 2014). *Toxic* might be read as an update of *The left hand of darkness*, with “sex” and “gender” now no longer simple “natural” or “cultural” foundations for embodiment, but as natural/cultural/animist/totemic/analogical phenomena realized in the histories and practices of a world full of multiple ontologies. Alongside *Toxic*, one might put the work of the late queer performance studies scholar Jose Esteban Muñoz (2009), which examines how some queer art employs animal-themed camouflage to explore the possibilities of transgressive embodiment—a kind of queer animist totemism.

While on the one hand, my reading of *Toxic* in terms of Descola reinforces the utility of his ontologies as prompts for thinking, it may also unwind their explanatory power, since one begins to wonder whether simply pressing *Toxic* into these categories might not miss what else is going on here, and might also privilege the analyst (that is to say, me) over the work of the piece. I am struck, in this connection, by how even the “analogical”—the weirdest of Descola’s ontologies—requires a kind of view from outside, from above. The analogical gathers differences of heterogeneous kinds and makes connections among them (the brain is like a walnut, sound is like a wave, etc.). In *Beyond nature and culture*, Descola writes of “analogical subjects” that, “their circumference is everywhere, their center nowhere. They exist only by virtue of their surface effects, deploying themselves in concentric waves of variable amplitude and in constant interaction with each other” (2013: 299). But this model of analogy as the operation of “concentric waves” without a center implicitly mourns a God’s eye view, a view of the concentric circles as vibrating out . . . from a possible somewhere. The fact that the analyst, looking down at the concentric waves, cannot discern what and where the causes are does not mean that the analyst’s is the only angle from which to understand the phenomenon.



An alternative angle is, of course, what was once called “the native’s point of view,” and Descola, toward book’s end, confesses that he is a native of the naturalist view and that therefore, in some way, the whole text has been a dream dreamed by one ontology. For me, this *Alice in Wonderland* ending is an elegant and revelatory part of the book, the moment when we realize that this text is a science fiction in the full sense of the term, an imaginative gathering and extrapolation of facts and phenomena in our world, with the aim of showing us how we might imagine it otherwise. Like *The left hand of darkness*, it is revealed to be a kind of speculative ethnology, moving beyond, but not quite, the generative puzzles of nature and culture.

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Stefan Helmreich
Anthropology Program
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
77 Massachusetts Avenue
Cambridge, MA 02139-4307, USA
sgh2@mit.edu