

2012 Vol 12 Issue No. 1 — Rethinking the Seasons: New Approaches to Nature

> EDITORIAL

Cultural Studies is not very good at thinking about the place of nature in today's technologically mediated life as it's mainly concerned with "constructivism" or the production of cultural objects, identities and affects. Nature always comes to foil such things, exceeding them, breaking them down, returning them to the earth. The problem is how to "think" nature in this context. And how does this thinking of nature help us to relate to the sciences, with their particular way of thinking of nature as objectified, managed environment.

A number of recent cases in point stand out. One is "climate change" as it problematises a hard and fast distinction between nature and culture. It also upsets an orderly progression and change of the seasons. The seasons are a cultural construction of nature, and the four European seasons imposed in the case of Australia on Aboriginal seasons (often six) are a colonisation of time. Similarly politicians and journalists referring to recent disasters as natural and as exhibiting the wrath of "Mother Nature" is problematic both for their Janus-faced construction of nature and for not acknowledging and appreciating "her" bounty and generosity.

This special issue of *Transformations* brings together contributions to the discussion of the cultural construction of nature around the issues of climate change, seasonality, disaster, and other associated topics related to "the seasons," as well as broader theoretical and philosophical issues concerned with the rethinking of nature as a category of Western thought. The contributions assembled herein fall into the two broad categories of "the seasons" and "new approaches to nature" and are organized into two parts in this issue. The distinction between them, however, is arbitrary and largely dictated by their titles as the articles grouped in the first part under the rubric of "the seasons" also engage with, and generate, new approaches to nature. Similarly and conversely, the articles assembled in the second part entitled "new approaches to nature" also engage with the seasons, and with questions of time, temporality and history.

John Ryan's article kicks off the first part of the issue "Rethinking the Seasons" by tackling upfront the seasons, their role in the natural world, and how the embodied experiences of

time and space in places and moments are expressed in nature writing. As an American currently living in Australia, he not only has to deal with the hemispherical inversion of the conventional four northern seasons in the south, but also to grapple with the cultural difference of the six Aboriginal seasons in south-western Australia related to its unique flora. Out of this confluence he formulates a new approach to nature and the seasons that he calls "embodied temporality."

Katherine Wright in the second article looks at a particular local instance of the imposition of the four European seasons undertaken by planting trees in the town of Armidale in New South Wales that produces "chromatic autumn." She considers this programme to be a colonisation of time and calls for its decolonisation through ecological remembrance. This involves what she calls "the collective cultural remembering of forgotten human and nonhuman agents involved in the collaborative and ongoing constructions of place." As with Ryan's article, there is a similar engagement with time, the seasons and the formulation of a new approach to nature.

Jo Law in the third article of the first section draws on the tradition of the almanac and relates the process of constructing her own almanac as a way of creatively engaging with the changing of the seasons, their variable colours and life-forms. She argues that "the almanac as a medium has the potential to make perceptible an inclusive and encompassing ecology that constitutes our multifaceted experience of the seasons." She does so in an exemplary cross-cultural exchange between Australian and Japanese cultural constructions of seasonality.

The first two articles consider Australia within the context of the European cultural construction of seasonality. The third article considers the seasons in Australia and Japan. Joseph Ballan in the fourth article considers the seasons wholly and solely in the northern polar region in which they are bifurcated starkly between summer and winter due to the widely divergent angles of sunlight at different times during the year. Within the context of Inuit culture, as he puts it, "changes in the natural world are bound together with alterations in social and affective life." He proposes "a way of thinking about how physical changes in the environment take on meaning and affective tonalities for communities and individuals."

In the fifth and final article in the first section, Rod Giblett, like Wright, critiques the colonisation of time undertaken by the European cultural construction of the four seasons in Australia. Like Wright, he also calls for the decolonisation of time and the seasons. He does so through a deconstructive reading of some of the writing about the seasons in the literary canon and through an appreciation for its dissenting minority. He places this project within the contemporary moment of "climate change" and "global warming" and proposes "seasonal

dislocation" or "seasonal disruption" as better, more precise and poetic ways to describe these phenomena.

This brings us to the second section of the issue, "New Approaches to Nature." All of the articles in this section are concerned in one way or another with critiquing anthropocentric approaches to nature, and with providing alternatives. Warwick Mules in the first article considers nature in the philosophical writings of Martin Heidegger. In Mules's reading of Heidegger, poetic dwelling with nature and the technological are intertwined in the artistic rather than remaining separate categories as in other readings. He offers a critique of romantic ideas of a "return to nature" and proposes instead a thinking with the artwork in its "turning" out of technology as an openness to nature "as such." For Mules "to think with nature as a *poietic* event of openness requires a reawakened trust in Being and a recovery of the ontological bearing of art."

Ben Dibley in the second article of the second section considers the place of nature in the age of the "anthropocene" – the era of the human-made world since industrialisation – and the role of humans in that world as both "a biological species with a geological agency now directing planetary life" as he puts it, and as a species-being with "the capacity to consciously direct its own species' life activity." He considers how "the parametric boundaries for species-life open up new domains for the creation of surplus as the earth system itself become financialised and augmented." Dibley concludes that "the Anthropocene is here to stay. There is no return to a benevolent Holocene". Instead he argues that the activity of industrialising the planet by the human species-being "demands the total metamorphosis of its means of production if it is to forestall the demise of its species-life and, indeed, that of thousands of other species."

Anne Schillmoller and Aidan Ricketts in the third article of the second section, consider the possibility of the rights of nature in legal discourse as "earth jurisprudence." They write: "earth jurisprudence aims to develop 'non-anthropocentric' earth justice systems capable of recognising and representing the 'rights of nature.'" However, the authors argue that human justice systems are unavoidable artifacts of human exceptionalism and that to conceive of a non anthropocentric legal system is perhaps both unachievable and, practically speaking, of limited value. Instead they propose a jurisprudence of "strategic anthropomorphism" to enable "empirically based ecocentric interventions in a radical redesign of the anthropogenic project of law."

Monica Westin in the fourth article develops an approach to environmental art based on a modification of the relational aesthetics of Nicholas Bourriaud, and informed by concepts of the "civil contract" and the "civil gaze" proposed by visual culture theorist Ariella Azoulay.

Employing these concepts, Westin develops an approach to environmental art that “creates a relationality between spectator, nature, and art without overt activist statements.”

Rod Giblett and **Warwick Mules**