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Entangled Words and Materials: Environmental History and an Etymo-cology of Meaning

Nature, Raymond Williams tells us, is perhaps the most complex word in language.[1] There are, as it turns out, many contenders in a fecund modern environmental vernacular. From *Anthropocene* to *Wilderness*, the words we use to categorise physical spaces, processes and interactions are layered with imaginative significance and, some might say, hamstrung by a messy and (perhaps inevitably) problematic provenance. This makes the matter of narrative particularly significant. Indeed, by digging a bit deeper into the world of etymo-cology (a term I use here to describe a forensic enquiry into words and matter, imagined and material traces) we discover a landscape that is contested, controversial, and eminently more intriguing for it.

Environmental history provides an important guide in navigating these entanglements of materiality and cultural meaning. As Stephen Dovers notes, 'an environmental issue without a past is altogether as mysterious as a person without a past.'[2]
At its core, the discipline announces that human experience cannot be read in isolation from the physical world. Exponents argue that history has been too anthropocentric, of a need to put nature back into history (or the other way round). As practice, it has tended towards three kinds of enquiry: 1) how nature has changed over time; 2) human environmental impacts; and 3) cultural representations, values and ethics.[3] The field gained momentum as part of the revisionist drive to make history more inclusive, with early exponents focusing on (deleterious) anthropogenic impacts on the biosphere and tracking the roots of environmental consciousness. This genealogy is important, as despite the fact that the discipline has matured into a sophisticated canon of eco-cultural enquiry, an activist element still remains important. Where does environmental history end environmental-*ist* history begin? Such responsibilities are particularly prescient in our contemporary world of plastic

[1] Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Flamingo, 1983), 219.
[2] Stephen Dovers, 'Australian Environmental History: introduction, review and principles,' in *Australian Environmental History: Essays and Cases* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), ed. Stephen Dovers, 4.
[3] Donald Worster, *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 293.

overload and planetary crisis. As Ruth Morgan notes, climate change has firm implications for the 'ways in which we undertake writing history.'[4]

Going back to the nomenclature of nature, one of the critical terms that has been forensically examined has been 'wilderness.' In *Uncommon Ground* (1995), environmental historian William Cronon invites a rethinking of the idea to reveal a landscape of social construction, an ethnically vantaged fantasy, and a consumer product. Read in this vein, 'the wild' becomes a place of escape, a paradise untouched by industrialism, and something for sale in the mall. Advising humans to find a home *in* nature, a common ground in which to live responsibly, Cronon's argument ably highlights academic writing as activism. As he asserts, 'the special task of environmental history is to assert that stories about the past are better, all other things being equal, if they increase our attention to nature and the place of people within it.'[5]

For the rest of this vignette, I want to showcase the potential of environmental history to unpack environmental narratives via a short walk around 'the park'. Here, too, we discover a rich palette of shifting meanings. In its original definition, 'Park' described an enclosed piece of ground for the beasts of the chase. Boasting a distinguished lineage, so-named places encompassed the hunting preserves of ancient Assyria, medieval deer reserves of European royalty, and Versailles, Louis XVI's geometric hydraulic masterpiece that mapped the power of the Sun King over nature and nation. While appearing to show the emergence of a more 'natural' park variant, the pastoral lines of the English landscape park, popular in the 18th century, was just as much a designed entity. It also confirmed the importance of the park as a prime site of narrative. Stourhead in Wiltshire, the brainchild of banker Henry Hoare II, clearly depicted syncretic lines of landscape and storytelling: its circular walk around a lake, complete with shaded walk and river grotto, telling the legend of Aeneas' journey into the underworld.

The nineteenth-century cityscape communicated a narrative of civic progress through industrialism. Depicted in a canvas by William Wyld, 'Manchester from Kersal Moor, 1857'

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[4] Ruth Morgan 'Histories for an Uncertain Future: Environmental History and Climate Change,' Australian Historical Studies, 44/3 (2013), 350.

[5] William Cronon, ed*., Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995) & 'A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative,' *The Journal of American History* (March, 1992), 1375.

inferred that city and nature could sit comfortably, with romantic hills and industrious smoke stacks presented as symphonic. Over time, however, the social, economic and environmental consequences of industrialism raised concerns about community health. It was in this context that the urban park idea emerged: a rustic ideal-type transplanted to the city to make it liveable. Attributed to William Pitt and first cited in parliamentary debates about urban development on the edges of London's Hyde Park, the park as 'lungs for the city' positioned it as a kind of environmental and social prescription, a green enclave that circulated the air and allowed citizens to walk and breathe healthily. Also worth noting was the importance of social engineering in these 'parks for the people'. Ordered by racial, gender and class-based codes, these were spaces of socialization and orderly recreation. As leading American landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted noted: 'if thousands of people are to seek their recreation…unrestrainedly, each according to his own special tastes….[the park]…is likely to lose whatever of natural charm you first saw in it.'[6]

Most famous in the dedication of Yellowstone (1872), the *national* park communicated a story of scenic grandeur and stood as an important marker of the celebration of 'the wild'. Suggesting firm connections between the veneration of nature, cultural nationalism, and the emergence of a conservationist ethic, Yellowstone was preserved in 'natural conditions…for the benefit and enjoyment of the people.' The notion of what a national park was *for*, however, changed radically over time. Here the collisions of etymo-cology were clearly seen as managers and visitors grappled with such issues as indigenous access to park lands; the role of fire regimes in a protected landscape; and the place of 'good' and 'bad' animals, a tension most famously seen in the eradication, and later reintroduction, of wolves.

Parks represent complex spaces. What defines them? What is *their* narrative? How do push-button geyser simulations in Disneyworld complicate the story of Yellowstone's 'pristine' Rocky Mountain nature? What of somewhere like Pripyat amusement park, Ukraine, abandoned to its former use after the explosion at nearby Chernobyl, and now an unintended nature reserve roamed by wild boar, brown bear and wolves (largely due to the absence of people)? As a body – or corpus – of material, 'the park' presents an avalanche of contested stories both *in* and *of* the land. Trying to make sense of this complex landscape of matter and meaning is usefully aided by environmental history methods that track the lines of physical change and can 'read' a range of different landscape texts to show processes of

[6] F. L. Olmsted, Mount Royal, Montreal (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1881), 26.

imaginative re-mapping at work. This kind of etymo-cological excavation, I'd argue, is essential for understanding both time and place in environmental narratives.

Dr Karen R. Jones

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1. William Wyld's Kersal Moor [public domain, see https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Manchester_from_Kersal_Moor_William_Wylde_(1857).jpg]
2. Stourhead Lake from the River God's Grotto [author copy]