Kir Kuiken, Introduction: Romanticism and Political Ecology

Romanticism’s relationship with ecology has been a lively topic of concern. In arguing that English Romanticism poets discovered a new “holistic” paradigm that prefigured contemporary ecological thought and ecocriticism, John McKusick’s seminal *Green Writing* (2000)set the stage for a renewed concern with the way Romantic-era authors form part of a genealogy of our own contemporary ecological concerns in the era of anthropocentric climate change. In *Ecology without Nature*, Timothy Morton clarified that while the “holism” specific to the Romantic period concerns not just a feeling of enmeshment with “nature” or with the “non-human,” it also contains a burgeoning feeling of interconnection that dovetails with nationalism, a sense of belonging to “a whole greater than the sum of its parts” that potentially underpins a conservative or reactionary politics (101). At the root of these concerns is the bugbear of organicism and “organic community”—a form of holism that implies an identity between members as well as their subsumption by a totality that remains irreducible to the differences contained within it. In contradistinction to this kind of organicism, Morton proposes a thinking of “collectivism,” which he argues rules out organic community by making the collective enmeshment of human and non-human unsubsumable by any discrete totality. As he puts it in *The Ecological Thought*, with a nod to Saussure:

The ecological thought permits no distance. Thinking interdependence involves dissolving the barrier between “over here” and “over there,” and more fundamentally, the metaphysical illusion of rigid, narrow boundaries between inside and outside. Thinking interdependence involves thinking difference. This means confronting the fact that all beings are related to each other negatively and differentially, in an open system without center or edge. (39)

From holism to ecological collectivism, from nationalism to Morton’s “mesh,” Romanticism becomes a necessary touchstone not just for a genealogical account of our own sense of ecology, but also for how it necessarily presages a *political* ecology—a conceptualization of the relations between the *polis* and what it excludes or includes, what forms of collectivity it allows or disallows.

However, the idea that Romanticism lays the groundwork for our own ecological preoccupations begs the question of exactly what *kinds* of political ecologies it articulated. Nearly two decades ago, Nicholas Roe’s *Politics of Nature* argued that Romantic authors concatenated their politics with a conception of the natural world that was bound up with notions of human nature and natural right, aimed largely at democratic or republican political commitments. In this way, Roe challenged earlier new historicist claims that Romanticism entailed a retreat from history to the supposedly ahistorical domain of nature or the imagination.[[1]](#endnote-1) As he puts it, “nature could never suffice as a Romantic escape from history because . . . nature as an idea and as a physical actuality was fundamental to contemporary interpretations of history and to the political theory of an age of revolutions” (11). When Wordsworth suggests in *The Prelude* that the French Revolution seemed “nothing out of nature’s certain course,” this sense of nature can hardly be seen as indifferent to the political domain since it figures as the very concept generative of a reading of historical change.

Yet all of these Romantic tropes and themes remain firmly embedded within a particular reading of the liberal tradition, which maintains or even privileges the distinction between *human* nature and a nature “out there” that it parallels, echoes, or separates itself from. And the notion that the political dimension of Romantic conceptions of nature is tied primarily to human-centered “natural rights” fundamentally limits the scope of the ways in which Romantic political ecology might be seen to contest not only purportedly natural formations such as the nation-state but also the basic categories of liberal political philosophy, including its investment in universal figures of “the human” as the primary bearer of rights. This investment hardly constitutes a convincing bulwark against the ways in which the category of “the human” is both at the center of the period’s declarations of rights and sovereignty for a range of hitherto bereft members of the polity *and simultaneously* at the center of a long history of violent dehumanizations and renaturalizations of all kinds. As I will discuss below, among the issues that this volume explores is the question of whether the Romantic preoccupation with nature, and thus with questions surrounding what we now call political ecology more generally, can be reduced to these concerns.

Recent theoretical work by thinkers of contemporary political ecology—Latour and Descola in particular— repeat a central tenet of contemporary ecocriticism: the need to relinquish any concept of a “nature” external to the political. Latour’s *Politics of Nature*, for instance, argues that any political ecology worthy of its name must abandon the tradition’s great divide between the political domain on the one hand (where political “rights” are accrued and citizens are formed) and an ahistorical “nature” on the other (whose denizens remain outside the political domain, without “rights” or political standing). This divide not only separates politics into two houses but also accounts for a variety of exclusions of nonhuman *as well as human* noncitizens, relegating them all to the domain of nature. As Latour argues, modern political ecology must liquidate this opposition if it is to address adequately the current ecological crisis of the Anthropocene, wherein humans have now become the equivalent of a natural force, altering the Earth’s geological record and climate systems to such an extent that it is no longer possible to rigorously distinguish human-made from natural processes.

Like many of its critical predecessors, this volume asks what kinds of political ecologies Romanticism devised and deployed in response to its own historical moment. However, *Romanticism and Political Ecology* does so without assuming either that Romantic political ecology can be reduced to the “holism” of organic community and its bedfellow nationalism orthat it prefigures Latour’s liquidation of the concept of the externality of nature in favor of a collectivity that includes both humans and nonhumans. As the essays in this volume attest, the Romantic period abounded with multiple challenges to the seemingly simple division between nature and culture, human and nonhuman, as well as to the ways in which that division helped to inform a specific set of political motifs or concepts. Simply put, there is more Romantic experimentation with various kinds of political ecology than is dreamt of by liberal political philosophy. This includes, among other things, a crucial recognition that in lieu of a simple opposition between nature and culture, a complex interdependency exists that does not necessarily entail a complete immanence of one to the other. In other words, as Alan Bewell has argued in *Natures in Translation*, there was never a Romantic conception of nature in the singular but rather multiple conceptions of nature and of the natural, each of which in turn entailed a different understanding of its connection to politics and the political. Bewell’s claim about John Clare is a case in point: even in the context of a poetry embedded in the language of rights that can be extended to nonhuman entities,[[2]](#endnote-2) we discover a poet marking the passage from the death of one conception of nature and world—the commons and the parish or locale which depended upon it— to the birth of another: privatized industrial agriculture and the system that depends on it. This suggests not just the mutual imbrication of nature with culture but an acute recognition of the *historical specificity* of any concept of nature. There is no nature “as such”—only a set of exteriorities specific to a given world or ecosphere constituted by its relationship to that exteriority.

This is not to say, however, that nature, for the Romantics, is purely conceptual, an invention, or social creation. Rather, it functions as a domain of exteriority to the social-political as it is presently constituted. This volume offers what might be called an “alternative” understanding of Romantic political ecology, searching as it does for those elements within Romantic-era authors that resituate dominant liberal conceptions of the relation between nature and politics. For this reason, the essays included here cover a wide range of canonical and noncanonical Romanticism: from its prefigurations in Rousseau to the way the recently recovered work of Karoline von Günderrode sought to recast German *Naturphilosophie* in ways that challenged any human-centered notion of consciousness; from Hölderlin, whose conception of the Earth is interpreted as a figure for a transition from one conception of world and nature to another, to Mary Shelley’s *The* *Last Man*, which challenges the racial hierarchies ensconced in the allegedly universal concept of “Man” by opening up forms of commonality predicated on a different mode of relationality; and finally to Erasmus Darwin’s pastoral ecologies, which directly challenge traditional natural law philosophy’s elision of the “nonhuman” resources (including human slaves) upon which their concept of human freedom depended. Each essay, in its turn, draws out an underground, unorthodox Romantic political ecology. As a result, our volume provides a novel genealogy for Romanticism’s pioneering role in contemporary politico-ecological concerns.

The collection opens with Frederic Neyrat’s “Communicating the Outside: Nature, the Outside, and Romanticism,” which engages in a critique of the “second wave” of post-structuralism, focusing on the way it argues for the liquidation of the concept of nature as a simple exteriority to the political. Analyzing the work of Bruno Latour and others, Neyrat reads the attempt to eliminate the distinction between the polisand its other—nature—as a symptomof the current environmental crisis. Rather than provide the conceptual matrix for addressing the new forms of collective action and solidarity that would be necessary to confront this crisis, Neyrat demonstrates how this approach ends up reasserting a form of community between entities—one that obliterates any sense of alterity that various forms of “nature” might be said to possess. This paves the way, Neyrat argues, for a neo-holism where all entities are reduced to a single shared plane of immanence, leading to a series of fantasies, including geo-engineering, which finally only exacerbates the crisis. In lieu of this approach, Neyrat argues for a “radical existentialism” that privileges a field of differences that cannot be reduced to one another. It is on this score that the Romanticisms of Victor Hugo and Jean-Jacques Rousseau become an important touchstone. Rather than understanding the Romantic period as reducing nature to a transcendent exteriority or to its immediate phenomenal characteristics, Neyrat understands Romanticism as a “producer of outsides.” “Nature” is not a single transcendent field but something more akin to what Eduardo Viveiros de Castro calls a “multi-naturalism”—the idea that there is not one nature in the singular but a multiplicity of “natures” that includes among their various iterations a notion of something fundamentally untouched by humans (e.g., the Earth’s burning core). This diversely exterior “elsewhere” that constitutes Romantic “nature,” according to Neyrat, opens up a separation, a spacing, rather than an absolute divide. It thereby produces a relationbetween singularities, without abolishing their differences, and introduces a form of community that leaves the alterity of incompossible worlds intact.

Anna Ezekiel’s essay “Earth, Spirit, Humanity: Community and the Nonhuman in Karoline von Günderrode’s ‘Idea of the Earth’” examines author and poet Karoline von Günderrode’s prose writings as a response to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century *Naturphilosophie*, particularly the version put forth by her contemporary, Friedrich Schelling. A neglected figure of German Romanticism whose work has only recently been translated into English (by Ezekiel herself),[[3]](#endnote-3) Günderrode is primarily known as a poet. Ezekiel takes up her brief text *The Idea of the Earth* and reads it in conjunction with her other writings, examining how Günderrode’s rewriting of idealist *Naturphilosophie* notions works along different lines and with surprising results. Focusing on the concept of the Earth as that which both harbors “nature” in general but also surpasses it by including both human and nonhuman elements within it, Ezekiel’s essay shows how Günderrode’s cosmology implies no special status for the human. Rather, the human is embedded in, and of a piece with, the nonhuman. The results of this cosmology are far-reaching, questioning the unique sovereignty of humanity in relation to the natural world and, as a result, its domination over other nonhuman (and human) beings. If “spirit” or “mind” cannot rigorously be distinguished from its other, or from that which is not aware of itself as the unfolding of spirit, then “spirit” or “mind,” not to mention consciousness, are no longer the exclusive domain of human beings. Whereas idealist philosophies tend to understand self-consciousness as the emergence of spirit out of its exteriorization in the natural world, Günderrode’s cosmology, according to Ezekiel, implies that nonhuman entities can partake of “consciousness” (and even self-consciousness) alongside their human counterparts. The result, as the essay demonstrates, is a conception of community predicated on the notion of a form of harmony with the natural world— a kind of harmony wherein human and nonhuman entities enter into surprising connections with each other, producing a new form of sociality that Günderrode calls the “realized idea of the earth.”

Whereas Günderrode’s cosmology effectively equates the Earth with “the world,” my own contribution, “Hölderlin’s Earth,” demonstrates the extent to which one of her German Romantic contemporaries—Friedrich Hölderlin—articulated a different notion of “the Earth” in terms not dissimilar to what Neyrat in his essay calls an “infinity of outsides.” Focusing on the interlocking thematics of the “alternation of poetic tones” that Hölderlin’s prose texts argue are basic structures of all poetry, I analyze how Hölderlin’s focus on the crucial interplay between the organic (a relatively consistent moment of stasis and harmony found within both nature and man’s creations) and the aorgic (the gradual dissolution of that temporary stability) separates Earth from world, culminating in what Hölderlin calls their “real separation.” The Earth thus comes to designate, in Hölderlin’s poetics, a moment between the dissolution of one world and its relation to nature, and the unfolding of another. In short, Hölderlin’s conception of the Earth constitutes a radical exteriority to any notion of the “world” *and* to any cosmology or idea of “nature” upon which that world depends. It also, therefore, entails something other than an *oikos*, a “home” or “habitat” suggested in the etymology of the term “ecology,” which would be capable of reconstituting a shared sense of belonging or rootedness. Turning to one of Hölderlin’s shorter river poems, “The Main,” I analyze the way that he actually reverses the assumed relation between poetry and the Earth found in one of Heidegger’s favorite references to Hölderlin—“poetically Man dwells on this Earth.” In fact, Hölderlin’s river poetry is not one that opens up the possibility of a new “dwelling” on the Earth; instead, it witnesses poetry’s exposure to something so fundamentally exterior to *any* world—the Earth as a *terra incognita*— that it inescapably destabilizes all senses of “dwelling,” along with any conception of native land or soil.

Joseph Albernaz’s essay “Without Task: Abdication, Race, and Relation in Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man*” shifts the collection’s focus to British Romanticism with an examination of the way Shelley’s novel questions the supposedly universal category of “Man” by charting an “end of Man”[[4]](#endnote-4) that is postuniversal. Grounding his analysis in long-standing critiques of “Man” as a universal category, as well as more recent critical race theory that understands this category as constituted by its racial and gendered gradations and exclusions, Albernaz reads Shelley’s novel as an investigation into the possibility of a form of community that would not be predicated exclusively on a “shared humanity.” Since the plague in the novel that ravages the globe undoes all the usual logics of human sovereignty or mastery, human progress and human futurity, Albernaz sees the novel as an exploration of the “end” of Man in another sense: the end of a universal category capable of generating solidarity with that which it excludes. What happens, Shelley’s novel seems to ask, in the absence of any goal or *telos* concerning humanity or its future? Albernaz’s response to this question shows that *The Last Man* opens a space for what he calls a form of “relational life” that no longer has any *telos* or task and that eschews any sovereignty predicated on shared belonging to a category that is both racially exclusive and falsely universal. Focusing his analysis on a key scene in the novel where the main character, Lionel Verney, is potentially exposed to the deadly virus when he comes to the aid of one of its victims—a black man dying from its effects—Albernaz contends that this scene, rather than appealing to some humanity they both share, presents a renunciation of the privileges of the universal category “Man” that the main character does *not* share with the other. In Albernaz’s account, this scene presents most sharply what is at work in oblique ways throughout the novel: an entanglement with an other who, in this case, is “a (non)-person marked by slavery” and therefore by radical dehumanization. For Albernaz, this possibility points forward to a landscape without man that instead contains a solidarity with others whose otherness is no longer filtered through the category of the human and all its particular others, human or otherwise.

Amanda Goldstein’s contribution, “Utopian Pastoral and the Inhuman Trade” extends Albernaz’s exploration of the way Romantic political ecology sets about questioning the centrality of human rights–bearing subjects and the universality of Man through the category of racial difference. She does so by focusing her attention on the genre of Golden Age pastoral in relation to Erasmus Darwin’s *The Economy of Vegetation* and bysetting up her interpretation of Darwin as a riposte to various contemporary new materialisms and posthumanisms that tend to reduce the question of the human to a generality—*the* human*—*and its various nonhuman others. As Goldstein argues, Erasmus Darwin’s work centers around an ecology that recognizes how specific classes or groups of humans exploit *other humans* andnonhumans together—an exploitation that collectively becomes the basis of their mode of life. Darwin thus provides a needed corrective to, or politicization of, traditional political ecology by bringing the problem of slavery and colonialism into its account of the natural world and by figuring “nature” and its various nonhumans (including dehumanized slaves) as active agents of rebellion against their own exploitation and enslavement. Whereas earlier versions of pastoral “ecological jubilee” depicted nature as taking sides with the laboring class, Goldstein’s argues that Darwin’s parables take the idea of “ecological retribution” further by depicting the supposedly extra-political domain of the Earth as released from its indifference, taking up arms against unfettered resource extraction and chattel slavery. These depictions, Goldstein argues, project emancipation and abolitionism not as the domain of enlightened (human, white) benefactors but as the direct and violent retribution of the enslaved. In short, Darwin projects a nonhuman agency found in the human, vegetal, and lithic “resources” upon which the rights-bearing colonial subject depends. The result, according to Goldstein, is a political ecology through and through, where the elemental forces of the Earth themselves become agents of justice rather than of indifferent necessity and where both civil and natural law are seen as thoroughly malleable.

The essays collected here examine the various modalities of Romantic political ecology as a “multi-naturalism,” treating the mutual imbrication of concepts of nature and the particular vision of the political that flows from it without reducing one to the other. As such, they demonstrate the breadth and possibility of Romantic political ecology that remains to be examined, along with the fecundity of the questions it continues to raise: How does one understand the relation between the human and the nonhuman? How does this very question elide the problem of race or colonialism? Is nature a transcendent backdrop for the sovereign rights-bearing subject or precisely that which potentially undermines it? How does a thinking of the Earth demonstrate the mutual imbrication of the human world with nature? In the midst of the current focus on the ecological fate of the planet, this collection hopes to offer some historical counter-examples of modes of thought that exceeded the dominant mode of politics (and ecology avant la lettre) of its time.

Works Cited

Bewell, Alan. *Natures in Translation: Romanticism and Colonial Natural History*. John Hopkins UP, 2017.

Clare, John. *Major Works*. Oxford UP, 2008.

Derrida, Jacques. *Margins of Philosophy.* Translated by Alan Bass, U of Chicago P, 1982.

Descola, Phillipe. *Beyond Nature and Culture*. Translated Janet Lloyd, Uof Chicago P, 2013.

Günderrode, Karoline von. *Poetic Fragments.* Translated by Anna Ezekiel, State U of New York P, 2016.

Latour, Bruno. *The Politics of Nature*. Translated by Catherine Porter, Harvard UP, 2004.

McGann, Jerome. *The Romantic Ideology.* U of Chicago P, 1983.

McKusick, James E. *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology.* St. Martin’s Press, 2000.

Morton, Timothy. *The Ecological Thought*.Harvard UP, 2010.

———. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*.Harvard UP, 2007.

Roe, Nicholas. *The Politics of Nature: William Wordsworth and Some Contemporaries*. 2nd Edition. Palgrave, 2002.

1. These arguments find their clearest expression in Jerome McGann, *The Romantic Ideology*. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. One of the clearest examples of this can be found in John Clare’s poem, “The Lament of Swordy Well,” where the stone quarry of the title is the lyric voice of the poem and laments, among other things, that the system of profit or “gain” that has produced its exploitation and destruction has usurped its “freedom”:

   Gain takes my freedom all away

   Since its dull suit I wore

   And yet scorn vows I never pay

   And hurts me more and more.

   See John Clare, *Major Works*, 151. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Karoline von Günderrode, *Poetic Fragments.* [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. I draw the phrase from Derrida’s essay, “The Ends of Man.” See Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 109–36. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)