The Humanities *of* Crisis
Climate Change and the Discipline

Pramod K. Nayar*

From scientific upheavals in the Early Modern to world wars in the twentieth century, Humanities has responded to the crisis and also reinvented itself in terms of methodologies and fields of inquiry. If this assumption about the origins of Humanities has credibility then it throws up two subsequent questions. One, is Humanities evolution primarily driven by crisis, as a response to a crisis? Two, instead of speaking of the Humanities in crisis – as is the usual trend – should we speak of the Humanities of crises?

The Humanities' 'self-understanding', write Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon on the very first page of their *Permanent Crisis: The Humanities in a Disenchanted Age* (2021) "didn't merely take shape in response to a perceived crisis; it also made crisis a core part of the project of the humanities" (1). This imputes crisis-thinking to the Humanities as its article of faith, particularly in the form of Humanities as we have inherited it in the modern world from the "West". Rens Bod in his *A New History of the Humanities: The Search for Principles and Patterns from Antiquity to the Present* (2013) anticipates Reitter and Wellmon when he writes: "A line runs directly from humanism to the upheaval in the world view that is known as the Scientific Revolution" (142). That is, the Scientific Revolution produced a massive response from the Humanities. Humanism's responses, particularly philology's, to the discipline of history-writing, argues Bod later, "contributed to one of the most drastic upheavals of the early modern age—the secularization of the world view" (161). Bart Karstens cites Thomas Kuhn: " 'in periods of acknowledged crisis, scientists have turned to philosophical analysis as a device for unlocking the riddles of their field' " (2015: 198). Even key sources of humanistic inquiry – such as history – have been responses to crises and extreme situations. For example, Stef Scagliola and Franciska de Jong argue that "oral history" as a method of documentation and history-recording emerged in the wake of crises as well:

> the practice of interviewing in relation to bearing witness to crises and conflict in the first half of the twentieth century. Then the emergence of the postwar social movement is described and its central role in developing a pluralist perspective on history by giving voice to minority groups through collecting life stories and making them public. (2015: 512)

And more specifically:

> The dissemination of the practice of documenting and recording interviews should be seen in the light of the emergence of the social sciences as instruments for social engineering in the two World Wars … the first massive involvement in the

---

* Pramod K. Nayar teaches at the English Department, Central University of Hyderabad.

*eSSays. Nayar on Humanities **of** Crisis.*
November 15 2021

1

circumstances of war by citizens who could write letters to their loved ones led to a culture of giving testimony about extraordinary experiences…

An example of a folklorist for whom the context of war created unique opportunities was the German teacher Wilhelm Doegen. Having been granted access to all German prisoner-of-war camps during the First World War, he began to systematically record the languages, music and texts of prisoners from other countries with the intent to create a collection for a future 'Museum of the Sound'. In the United States the massive draft in 1917-1918 called for an adequate selection mechanism and interviewing became a method for psychological testing. This was repeated during World War II when more than half a million American soldiers were interviewed to document their mental and emotional lives. (515)

From scientific upheavals in the Early Modern to world wars in the twentieth century, Humanities has *responded* to the crisis, these commentaries seem to suggest, and also reinvented itself in terms of methodologies and fields of inquiry. If this assumption about the origins of Humanities has credibility then it throws up two subsequent questions. One, is Humanities evolution primarily driven by crisis, as a response to a crisis? Two, instead of speaking of the Humanities in crisis – as is the usual trend – should we speak of the Humanities *of* crises? Certainly, the actions of the German government during the pandemic – bringing in philosophers and other Humanities personnel as part of the team to address the crisis – suggest that policy-makers do see the Humanities as intrinsic to crisis-management.

Humanities and the Crisis of Climate Change

The University of California Irvine ecologist, Steven Allison, and their Dean of Humanities, Tyrus Miller, issued a statement in which they argued that the sciences need to collaborate with the Humanities to offer solutions to climate change. Fiona Stafford, a Professor of English at Oxford, has this to say:

Historians, philosophers, classicists, linguists and literary scholars may not be providing the physical evidence for global warming, nor the practical measures to mitigate the worst of its effects, but their insights into the complexity of human interactions may be just as important… It is not just the methods of resisting or adapting to challenging circumstances that matter, but also the way human beings relate to each other when confronted with a shared crisis…

The Working Group I contribution to the Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC] Report of August 2021, devotes a section to "values, science and climate change communications", in which it speaks of

the epistemic (knowledge-related) values of science include explanatory power, predictive accuracy, falsifiability, replicability, and justification of claims by explicit reasoning …key institutional values, including openness, 'organized scepticism,' and

eSSays. Nayar on Humanities **of** *Crisis.*
November 15 2021

2

> objectivity … 'disinterestedness' … operationalized as well-defined methods, documented evidence, publication, peer review, and systems for institutional review of research ethics. (I-32-33)

The IPCC Report clearly envisages a prominent role for Humanities disciplines, from philosophy to research ethics to values, in battling climate change. These most recent instances give credence to the idea that the Humanities is a Humanities *of* crisis and this is its very core, its function and its founding principle: Whenever humanity as a lifeform encounters major upheavals – structural or intellectual/ideological – Humanities steps in to proffer not just interpretations of the upheavals, but modes of dealing with them, in the form of, say, documentation of individual and collective responses to a crisis, delineating shifts in values that engendered the crisis in the first place, the necessity to reorient human thought to face the crisis (epistemic shifts), etc. The Humanities foregrounds the problems and prospects in and of human engineered values in any crisis. "Values" sound abstract and suspiciously moralistic, but they are compasses that, when they go awry, produce a crisis like climate change.

In the era of our 'latest' crisis, climate change, the rise of the Energy Humanities, the Environmental Humanities, with sub-fields like the Blue or Oceanic Humanities, all gesture at the Humanities *of* crisis. A full-scale examination of how the Humanities have been responding to the crisis of climate change is beyond the scope of this eSSay. It restricts itself to one development within Humanities, a development that is a direct response to climate change: multispecies thinking, sustainability and ecological thought, all often located within a dynamic field called the 'posthumanities'. In what follows, I flag two key 'moments' in the field that clearly indicate a Humanities response to the ongoing crisis of species loss and extinction, climate change and eco-disaster.

Shared Vulnerability and Relationality

Astrida Neimanis, Cecilia Åsberg and Johan Hedrén in an essay tellingly titled "Four problems, four directions for environmental humanities" identified four problems that characterize human-environment relations: alienation and intangibility, the post-political situation, negative framing of environmental change and compartmentalization of 'the environment' from other spheres of concern" (2015: 67). They propose as viable solutions: "attention to environmental imaginaries; rethinking the 'green' field to include feminist genealogies; enhanced transdisciplinarity and postdisciplinarity; and increasing 'citizen humanities' efforts" (67-8). The emphasis on seeing the environment as not separate from but constitutive of the human is a crucial one.

This environment is *not* human-centric and humanity's instrumental view of the planet as some-*thing* to be conquered, explored, controlled has produced the current crisis, argue the posthumanities scholars. That is, 'nature' is and has always been 'multinatural', and therefore any thinking about 'sustainability' must think in terms of multispecies life. Olga Cielemęcka and Christine Daigle argue that "human-centric futurity" must be dropped in favour of multispecies interconnections so that sustainability would "foster the thriving of *all* instances

eSSays. Nayar on Humanities **of** *Crisis.*
November 15 2021

3

of life" (2019: 72, emphasis added). Recognizing that "human agency is only a part of the picture", as Serenella Iovino and Serpil Opperman put it in their introduction to *Material Ecocriticism* (2014: 3), means acknowledging that, like agency, we also share fragility with other life forms. That is, the crisis of the planet is not the crisis of the human species alone – it is a crisis of all living forms and of the non-living, and because we are interconnected, a crisis for one (species/lifeform) *will* produce a crisis for the other. Indeed, Humanities scholars are beginning to see the world's interconnections as one of mutually assured destruction, a state emerging from our connected fragilities. Writes Claire Colebrooke in *The Death of the PostHuman*: all extinction discourses are mainly about climate because it is the "milieu that is necessary for our ongoing life, *and* as the fragile surface that holds us all together in one web of risked life" (2014: 10, emphasis in original). Loss of biodiversity, species dying and extinction, notes Ursula Heise in her *Imagining Extinction,* are cultural issues: "biodiversity, endangered species, and extinction are primarily cultural issues, questions of what we value and what stories we tell, and only secondarily issues of science" (2016: 5).

Interconnections across species and living-non-living force us to see the world not as discrete compartments and bounded species, but as *relational*. Pioneering this relational view of the planet is Donna Haraway (who builds on the admirable work of Anna Tsing and others). Haraway proposes a method of living called 'sympoiesis', a "complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems… worlding-with, in company" (2016: 58-61). Humans are related to – in every sense of the term – not only other life forms (*zoe*) but also *geo* and *techno*, argues Simon Susen, suggesting a linkage and mutual dependency of life forms, the non-living and the technological (2021).

Multispecies thinking

Decentering the human, for long entrenched as the crown of creation and the dominant force on the planet, has been a prime focus of the Humanities' response to climate change. Multispecies thinking, which accords not only relationality but also mutual dependency, respect and response of/to/with all life forms, is the single most important development of the last five years or so within the posthumanities.

Multispecies thinking in the Humanities, as a response to the extinction and species death statistics and discourses, begins with new approaches to plants and animals. The insights regarding vegetal life in works like Eduardo Kohn's *How Forests Think* (2013), Michael Marder's *Plant-Thinking* (2013), Matthew Hall's *Plants as Persons* (2011) and the anthropology of plant life, among others, will force us to see that "human life is contingent upon the existence of plants" (Hall, 4). Biopolitics, a favourite subject in the Humanities and Social Sciences since the wholesale adoption of Michel Foucault's arguments around the same, has always ignored plants as lifeforms. As "biopolitics sidesteps plants," argues Jeffrey Nealon, incorporating them into the discussion will enable a "robust sense of distributed, interconnected life" (2015: 119).

Moving from plants to animals, animal rights is an established discipline now and more work in Critical Animal Studies has aligned it with posthuman concerns about interlinked lives and the continued domination by the human. Animal Studies critiques the "essentialist notions of the subject that continue to rely on the hegemonic marginalization of the nonhuman" (Castricano 2008: 3). Speaking of companion species, Donna Haraway in *When Species Meet* writes: "all mortal beings … live in and through the use of one another's bodies" (2007: 79). "How must our work itself change when the other to which it tries to do justice is no longer human?", asks Cary Wolfe (2003: 7).

Driven by these new approaches to vegetal and animal lives, posthumanities incorporates insights from multispecies ethnography. Multispecies ethnography is "ethnographic research and writing that is attuned to life's emergence within a shifting assemblage of agentive beings. By 'beings' we are suggesting both biophysical entities as well as the magical ways objects animate life itself" (Ogden et al 2013: 6). Multispecies thinking within the Humanities as a response *to* the crisis of climate change and species death tells us that the resilience necessary and demanded of species can happen only when "active agents co-learn, co-exist, and ultimately, co- evolve together. This entails understanding that our behaviours—human, animal, nonhuman, more-than-human—are formed in co-constitutive way" (Buchanan 2016: 291).

The key word in that last quotation is 'co-constitutive'. Signalling shift from anthropocentric thought to multispecies thinking implies a greater level of responsibility towards all forms of life because all life is 'co-constitutive'. And, as argued before, it also implies greater responsibility: since the non-human and non-living Other are *a part of what I am*, I need to treat them with greater respect, since my very survival in the age of climate change depends on the oxygen levels created by plants, food produced and/or made by other *zoe* or *geo* forms.

*

From even the sketchy outline of the posthumanities above, it should be evident that Humanities is continuously responding to the crisis of the planet, involving plants, animals, humans and the non-living. The Humanities, one could conclude, is *not* in crisis. What we see, and weather (pun intended) as a crisis in the Humanities, is in fact the Humanities reinventing, upgrading itself and responding *to* a crisis, which could be anything from war to prospects of terraforming on Mars to the Sixth Extinction.

Works Cited

Buchanan, Brett. 2016.'Bear Down: Resilience in Multispecies Cohabitation'. In Ursula Heise, John Christensen, Michelle Niemann (eds) *Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*. New York: Routledge. 289-298.

Castricano, Jody. Edited. 2008. *Animal Subjects: An Ethical Reader in a Posthuman World*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Cielemęcka, Olga and Christine Daigle. 2019. 'Posthuman Sustainability: An Ethos for our Anthropocenic Future.' *Theory, Culture and Society* 36.7-8 (2019): 67-87.

eSSays. Nayar on Humanities **of** *Crisis.*
November 15 2021

5

Colebrooke, Clarie. 2014. *Death of the PostHuman: Essays on Extinction, Vol. 1.* Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press.

Hall, Matthew. 2011. *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany*. State University of New York Press.

Haraway, Donna. 2007. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

--- 2016. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin In the Chthulucene.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Heise, Ursula. 2016. *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Karstens, Bart. 2015. 'The Peculiar Maturation of the History of Science'. In Rens Bod, Jaap Maat and Thijs Weststeijn (eds) *The Making of the Humanities. Volume III: The Modern Humanities*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. 183-205.

Kohn, Eduardo. 2013. *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Marder, Michael. 2013. *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Nealon, Jeffrey T. 2015. *Plant Theory: Biopower and Vegetable Life*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

Neimanis, Astrida, Cecilia Åsberg and Johan Hedrén. 2015. 'Four problems, four directions for environmental humanities: Toward critical posthumanities for the Anthropocene.' *Ethics and the Environment* 20.1 (2015): 67–97.

Ogden, Laura A., Billy Hall, Kimiko Tanita, Kimiko. 2013. "Animals, Plants, People, and Things: A Review of Multispecies Ethnography." *Environment and Society: Advances in Research* 4.1 (2013): 5-24.

Scagliola, Stef and Franciska de Jong. 2015. 'Clio's Talkative Daughter Goes Digital: The Interplay between Technology and Oral Accounts as Historical Data'. In Rens Bod, Jaap Maat and Thijs Weststeijn (eds) *The Making of the Humanities. Volume III: The Modern Humanities*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. 511-526.

Susen, Simon. 2021. 'Reflections on the (Post-)Human Condition: Towards New Forms of Engagement with the World?' *Social Epistemology* (2021). DOI: 10.1080/02691728.2021.1893859.

Wolfe, Cary. 2003. *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory.* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.2021 Working Group I contribution to the Sixth Assessment Report.

eSSays. Nayar on Humanities **of** *Crisis.*
November 15 2021

6