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## What the cassowary does not need to know<sup>1</sup>

by Stephen Muecke

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Imagine Nature divided from Culture by an official barrier, like a state border. This is a metaphor, certainly, but the division between the two concepts is nevertheless real enough, and with real political effects. The aim of this essay is to reorganise the two concepts so that the barrier becomes more permeable, and so we are not bogged down in the kind of politics it allows.

Why the *state* border between Nature and Culture? Why this particular inflection? Because everything that is official, institutional and corporate insists on this separation between Culture, where people live, and Nature, which is there for people to exploit. There is only one thinker who has been bold enough and smart enough to really challenge this separation, the French philosopher and social scientist Bruno Latour.<sup>2</sup> But he is not against institutions, not at all, nor am I; just the way they are currently organised.

For a start, he says, stop thinking about Nature as singular. Singularisation makes nature metaphysical and a source of power for dogmatic scientists and ecologists. 'The facts are out there', say the first group, the lab-coats. 'There are Laws of Nature. You can't mess with them, and trust us, we will tell you how they work.' And from the other side we hear an anguished cry. 'Nature is suffering', says the moral rhetoric of the greenies, as they personify Nature as a deity. This forces people to feel guilty about what they are doing to all-providing Nature, to their 'mother'. They still say 'Mother Nature' often enough.

But consider this: nature is *plural*. Just like cultures. We have learnt not to talk about Culture in the singular; we have learnt to respect difference and become 'multicultural'. Why not respect difference among non-humans as well? 'Multinaturalism', therefore. And since natures and cultures are always intertwined, Bruno Latour came up with a new word. There are only *naturecultures*, he says. Humans and non-humans are always in it together, strange or not so strange collectivities of things in the world. So nature is not a singular backdrop to all this interesting cultural diversity which social scientists work on, elaborating their descriptions of humanity as if it is the most important thing to be done. This is a human-centred philosophy which has been around in European thought ever since the Enlightenment.

And right through to the present day narrow-minded philosophers are still worrying about how *humans experience or interpret the world*, in the tradition of Kant and Husserl, puffing themselves up in their philosophy departments with *their* knowledge, as if we humans are so clever we have done it all by ourselves. But we have only ever managed to philosophise with the help of things: the turning stars, apples which fall, turtles and hares, rivers and gods, cameras and

computers. Latour, on the other hand, wants to bring the prestige of philosophy into the actions of every animal, machine, cockroach or cassowary. They all have a part to play. But, there is a process. People and things have to have meetings to decide who can live with what and how.

That state border is still in the way; we will have to apply for passports to go across. At the moment it looks like this. On the side of human cultures (in the plural) we have Indigenous people, in communities. We also have another community of migrants who came a while ago, and another of more recently arrived migrants from somewhere else. They have their languages, customs and habits, so translators, representatives and social scientists are employed to explain the differences and patch up disputes. It is all pretty complex, but Nature is never called in, except with a few clichés, like 'it's human nature to fight', or 'the milk of human kindness'.

So, let's call a meeting, not just with the scientists, but also with the cassowary, with a motor car, with some Aboriginal people and with an artist or two. First we will have to change the structure of the institution to accommodate non-humans. Nature will be admitted as a player, and also technology. We can get hold of the motor car easily enough, it seems to be a technology humans have pretty much mastered, though sometimes they are recalcitrant, like when the brakes fail. A representative from the Aboriginal community has been recruited, and says she has a few stories to tell. We will bring Joseph Beuys and Jimmie Durham into the conversation, via their artwork and writing. The scientists are there, and the politicians. But where is the cassowary, the representative of Nature? No one can find one, people are even *scared* to find one, and it turns out they are not only dangerous, but totally *uninterested* in having a meeting with humans and others to decide how we should 'get on'. We were trying to do the right thing, to *diplomatically* negotiate how we can live together, without assuming that it is *only* the humans who need to decide what is to be done with nature (And we can't leave technology out, which is why the car is there; we use tools to examine 'nature', to ask questions like *Will there be a road through the national park?* We need a technological representative because we can't assume we have fully mastered technological things either.) Once the meeting starts we will have to rank the problems in order of importance. Lunch? Chickens will contribute to that, as will fields of wheat and vegetable farms. There is a cost that has to be taken into account. Is the cassowary habitat more important than the tourist resort, or how can their claims to existence be mutually accommodated? Everyone will get a chance to put a proposition about the importance of the ranking of problems.

The cassowary is totally uninterested in what humans have to say about it. This is not because it is a 'dumb animal' or a 'mere object', but simply that it will have no scruples whatsoever in behaving in the most undisciplined way: running away, attacking, dying or refusing to submit to our experiments. As Latour says, 'natural objects are naturally *recalcitrant*'; the last thing a scientist will say about them is that they are fully masterable. On the contrary they always resist and make a shambles of our pretensions to control'.<sup>3</sup> But we have ways of making them talk, of making them bear witness in a fairly reliable way to our investigations. This happens in 'hard' science. Social sciences try to do the same things with people. But human subjects are usually fairly cooperative, because we can negotiate with them and make them understand how important it is to 'behave appropriately'. People want the social scientists to get results, so they are helpful, and they answer the questionnaire. The cassowaries, despite their recalcitrance and vicious 'natures' have made a couple of biological scientists speak up for them at the meeting to rank problems we just spoke about.

We begin to see how Latour's idea of *naturecultures* can start to be useful in the context of our new institution which has been created in the rainforest: the Interdisciplinary Institute for the Diplomatic Negotiation among Humans and

Non-humans to See How we can Live Together. The Institute was set up in this way as a consequence of the realisation that humans and non-humans have always been 'in it together', linked with tools, energy, shared materials (like carbon and water), etc. Humans are both natural and cultural in what they are and what they do. And nature has never been pure wilderness because it has always been interfered with by humans as far back as we can know. Most so-called wilderness in Australia is overgrown Aboriginal country.

So the cassowary would come to us not as a representative of pure nature but as part of a *natureculture*. Or it could slot into various *naturecultures*, depending on the contingencies. One of our researchers down at the Institute (still looking for a cassowary) went on the web and found a typical story:

Anyway, time for my favourite (though possibly apocryphal) cassowary story, about the Double-Wattled. Supposedly, many years back, a driver in a VW beetle hit a cassowary while driving through Palmerston National Park in northern Queensland. He got out to see if the bird was okay. It was only slightly stunned, but it got up, shook its feathers—and charged. The driver's only refuge was the car roof. He made it just as the cassowary reached him. The bird then expressed its feelings by repeatedly kicking the car from all sides—puncturing both passenger doors AND the petrol tank!

The comic-book style story naturalises the bird by making it human-like, by anthropomorphising the bird which 'expresses its feelings' in this little war between 'machine' and 'nature': you hit me, I hit you.

Another researcher looked at the New Guinea material to find out about the ancient relations between humans and cassowaries there. She found out that the Karam people, in the highlands, don't consider the cassowary to be a bird at all, according to the famous report from Ralph Bulmer, 'Why is the cassowary not a bird?'<sup>4</sup> Bulmer noticed that the Karam put the cassowary in a taxonomic class by itself, unlike their neighbours who are happy to call it a bird. The Karam also surround it with various taboos. While hunting it in the bush they speak what they call 'pandanus language', a ritual language of avoidance they also use when gathering pandanus nuts. They will not spill the blood of the cassowary, because that will harm the sacred taro crops, so they kill it with clubs.

Bulmer found that these practices were reflected in other areas of village life, like their kinship, which is a matrilineal system based on cross-cousins and with pandanus palms as totems in the bush that belong to different lines. When kin fight, they must use clubs, not sharp weapons, which they use for outsiders. In their main creation myth, the Karam say that a brother trapped his sister who turned into a cassowary. Outsiders lured her away and ate her. The brother then killed the men and took their sisters as wives, thus founding the Karam kinship system. When the people told Bulmer that they called cassowaries 'our sisters and cross-cousins', it all fell into place. They thus thought of the animal as far more than a 'species in nature', or a part of a whitefella taxonomy, but as a key to the way they ordered their cultural world. It showed them how to behave towards kin and outsiders, how to eat, how to marry correctly. Basically, they were *integrating nature and culture*, because they did not have that European 'culture' which, ever since the Enlightenment, *has separated off* nature, treating it as a uniform backdrop to the diversity of 'our' cultures, treating it as an exploitable resource which cannot answer back to us. The Karam have no interest in either mastering or protecting nature. They just have their little systems going, their integrated routines, which never even propose such a grandiose concept as Nature. So the cassowary is not a bird. We have to agree, it is much more than part of a taxonomy, for everyone who deals with it.

The same researcher dug up material from Queensland on the web, from the Tjapukai Cultural Park, out of Cairns. When they perform for their Creation Theatre ('a blend of culture and technology', I am delighted to note), they re-create the Dreamtime legend, which, they say, 'reflects the Djabugay people's beliefs concerning the duality of the universe':

In the beginning of the story, a cassowary egg forms, growing to a size of 2 metres. Bolts of lightning appear and form around the egg, forcing it to break apart. Out of the egg come the twin elements that create the universe—the Wet (*Damarri*) and the Dry (*Guyala*), and all life forms that relate to these twin spheres—birds, lizards, animals etc.<sup>5</sup>

The cassowary is made to bear witness in this story which has nothing to do with scientific ways of getting it to talk about its habitat, as important as that knowledge is. To say that the cassowary can speak to us as a sacred thing, and not just in a scientific language, is to make it a part of culture, which it has always been, just like cars and operas. This, then, is the turning point of my argument. Down at the Institute we call meetings to decide who and what can live together. (Asbestos was thrown out of the collective recently; what a storm that caused!) At these meetings we need to have present not just the scientists who can tell us just how the cassowary does its work to disperse the seeds of more than 100 woody rainforest plants, but also the culture workers and artists whose contribution is essential when it comes to living as a part of *naturecultures*.

Now *our* artists do *not* do what Marcia Muelder Eaton has suggested in an article called 'Fact and Fiction in the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature' in the prestigious *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*<sup>6</sup>, because they are so much more advanced conceptually. She says:

A good exercise to give to ourselves and our students would be suggesting and designing ways of providing information about the Cassowary that would create and stimulate imaginative images that would help protect it.

This moral/redemptive discourse will get us nowhere because, just like the scientists, it too assumes absolute human control of a nature 'out there'. And, opposite from the scientists, it is not dispassionate and objective (as they are in appearance only), but morally loaded and preachy. At the Institute we find ways of not leaving the facts to the lab-coats and the values to the humanists and artists, values which always pop up too late in the progress of things. We ask the scientists about their values early on in their research, and they never bang us over the head with solid facts. Along with the Djabugay people, we do not assume that progress will mean taking sacredness or even superstition out of the world, and that is where the artists and philosophers come in. I always want to say artists *and* philosophers, because where an artist is not philosophical he or she seems less than an artist because a vision or conceptual shift will not have been performed.

Down at the Institute, our artist-philosophers like to work in the tradition of Joseph Beuys and Jimmie Durham. Embracing a radical ecology, like Beuys did so many years ago, means working with economics, media and the law as much as a kind of primitive animal-based spiritualism. If we are passionate about what we do, then our expressions should perform or at least embody some of that passion. Why do people pull back from their natural forces in order to demonstrate a more measured objective response? Beuys's famous Action of 1974 *I Like America and America Likes Me* focused on indigenous and ecological issues with the figure of the coyote, a quintessential American animal. Beuys decided to live with one for three days, wrapped in his familiar felt. 'The spirit of the coyote is so mighty,' he

said, 'that the human being cannot understand what it is, or what it can do for humankind in the future.' A body is defined by what it can do, said the philosopher Gilles Deleuze, following Spinoza, and since new capacities are always being discovered, our Institute needs experts with ever-expanding modes of perception.

Towards the end of the Vietnam War (hence the ironic title of the Action) Beuys flew into New York, was dressed in felt and then was driven to the René Block Gallery in an ambulance, without once setting foot on American soil. Beuys and the coyote spent the three days together in the gallery, watching each other, with Beuys performing a cyclic series of actions, including using a flashlight and striking a triangle chime. A daily stack of *Wall Street Journals* was brought in each day, so that the coyote could piss on money and power.

For Native Americans, the coyote is a figure of cosmic spiritual transformation, as described in the Don Juan books of Carlos Castaneda which were read extensively at that time. The colonists' wilful destruction of the coyote as a pest was more than symbolic for Beuys, who said, 'You could say that a reckoning has to be made with the coyote, and only then can this trauma be lifted.' Shaman-like in his performances, Beuys's Actions created their own events as they resonated on a number of levels using different media and codes. So his interventions vis-à-vis the natural never had to be 'simply' moralistic or pedagogical. They more intelligently mobilised intuitions, memories, concepts and feelings.

When anthropologist Mick Taussig wrote for the Sydney 2004 Biennale about Cherokee artist Jimmie Durham, his first sentence was, 'They say that if you cut across perfection you release something holy.'<sup>7</sup> This reminds me of that 'perfect' Nature which never existed, but was always violated by human presence, by cultures, by naturecultures. In Sydney, one of Durham's performances involved lowering a granite boulder onto a little red Ford Festiva on the Opera House forecourt during the Biennale. What was nature doing to culture here—if indeed the stone 'represents' nature and the car 'represents' culture? They don't of, course, because the boulder has a face painted on it, and it is interesting to see Taussig feeling sorry for the car in a way, as did many of the spectators, thinking about what a waste it was, destroying this iconic, almost sacred, object of Western modernity amidst all those crunching and splitting sounds:

How exceedingly strange, therefore, to go back and look at Jimmie Durham's Sydney Opera House and see this absurd—there is no other word—stone, this 'singular instrument', with its mock-human face, like a clown's with a hangover, squishing that beautiful little sports car so appropriately placed inappropriately smack in the middle of our new ritual space dedicated to Art with its three cathedral towers looking more like monster-sized teeth with every passing pilgrim. But the stone seems too, too clown-like, which means, of course, both sad and happy, as if the joke—this cut into and across reality—compresses with its wit too much history and too much pain to bear, the beautiful little car bravely bearing the burden, the burden of history.<sup>8</sup>

This essay has tried to shift the conceptual architecture of modern Western thought as it relates to culture and nature, erasing the border between them. We now no longer imagine, I hope, a landscape with humans doing their thing on the culture side and non-humans—plants, animals, things—on the other doing their stuff which is available for our interpretation, exploitation, mastery or protective-redemptive work, which is another kind of mastery. Bruno Latour described the 'modernist settlement' installed by the European Enlightenment as having God 'up there', Man 'down here', and Nature 'out there' all around us. The figure of Man was clearly central in this modern secular architecture, but that

arrangement has now given way to a post-humanist conceptual scheme which informs much contemporary art and science. Many indigenous philosophies—we have glanced at a couple—also support a more networked and less human-centred view of the world, where the cassowary's egg can be central in a story of creation.

The cassowary is both a dangerous and endangered species. Because of its occasional vicious attacks with razor-sharp talons, it is a representative of 'the Wild', a concept of absolute naturalness cherished by 'wilderness' conservationists. On the other hand, it represents also a disappearing Nature, slowly being taken over by Culture. But nothing we could write about the cassowary is relevant to its existence, or quite captures its power to survive. It is indifferent to the artworks made about it, even the zoological experiments.

I want to conclude that there is no absolute Nature 'out there' to which 'we' can go to find sublime beauty, laws of nature or facts, but rather Nature and our natures and cultures are always shot through with second natures in processes of formation. Humans and non-humans are always acting on each other in *naturecultures*. Art asks questions about how people and things can live together; so should science. Joseph Beuys found he could live with a coyote, and the audience found it inspiring; not only profoundly meaningful, but *inciting* in an activist sense. Can we live with cassowaries? How? (A tourist website informs us: '*If you happen to encounter a Cassowary **do not** run from it, face the bird and just back away slowly and hide behind a tree or bush.*') But, and here I will drop a parodic sentence and disappear: Can we live with Ford Festivas? *If you happen to encounter a Festiva **do not** run from it, face the car and just back away slowly and hide behind a tree or bush.*

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## FOOTNOTES

1. This essay previously appeared as: "What the Cassowary Does Not Need to Know," Catalogue Essay, *Habitus Habitat* Art and Environment Program, EPA QLD Government 2006, pp. 57-61.
2. Latour, Bruno, 2004, *The Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter, Harvard University Press, Cambridge. [The essay owes a lot to this work.]
3. Latour, Bruno, 2000, 'When things strike back: a possible contribution of 'science studies' to the social sciences, *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 51, No. 1, p. 116.
4. Bulmer, Ralph, 1967, 'Why Is the Cassowary Not a Bird? A Problem of Zoological Taxonomy among the Karam of the New Guinea Highlands', *Man*, n.s., no. 2, pp. 5-25.
5. <http://www.tjapukai.com.au/creationtheatre.html>
6. Eaton, Marcia Muelder, 1998, 'Fact and Fiction in the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 56:2 Spr, p. 154.
7. Taussig, Michael, 'Jimmie Durham', in Isabel Carlos, ed. *Biennale of Sydney 2004: On Reason and Emotion*, Woolloomooloo, N.S.W.: Biennale of Sydney, 2004. p. 82
8. Taussig, Michael, p. 84.

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