I’d like to use this “Last Word” to announce a beginning. We are launching a new project at the Center for Humans and Nature that revolves around the theme of *kinship*. From biogeochemical planetary cycles to our microbiomes, being *human* is deeply and necessarily relational. As humans, “we are stardust” (as singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell put it) and, simultaneously, could be “classified as a bacterial ecosystem” (as renowned biologist E.O. Wilson put it). But what might such kinship mean for conscientious, day-to-day engagements with other species?

Knowing we are related—that human existence depends upon countless other species—doesn’t automatically make us good relatives. If Western, post-Enlightenment, settler colonialism could be personified, it might be depicted as the crazy uncle who shows up at the house party only to break valuables, consume the entire buffet, vomit in the kitchen sink, and then refuse to leave. In other words: Knowledge of kinship is one thing. Practices of kinship—time-tested, grounded in stories, beautifully adapted, and suited to place—are another.

“Kincentric ecology,” a phrase coined by ethno-botanist Enrique Salmón (see the recommended resources below for a link to his article about such a perspective), provides a helpful guide to the intertwined threads of kinship: social, mythological, and practical. Salmón asserts that “life in any environment is viable only when humans view their surroundings as kin; that their mutual roles are essential for their survival.” This perspective stands in marked contrast to the familiar if not predominant human chauvinism toward other species and alienation from nature in so many contemporary socio-political systems. From a kinship perspective, the landscapes of which we are a part—including rocks, rivers, oceans, prominent geographic features, and other non-human plant and animal persons—provide a shared sense of place and require appropriate human care and respect.

This kinship is deep and wide—and dwells within the human body. In the last century and a half, evolutionary and ecological sciences have brought additional insights to bear on what it means to be human. In only the last few decades, evolutionary models are being rejiggered by research into symbiotic mergers at the cellular level, horizontal gene transfer, and seemingly chimeric creatures that rely on cooperative relationships between species from entirely different kingdoms of life. Kinship, it would seem, is key to understanding biotic and abiotic entanglement.

**GIVING VOICE TO PERSONS**

One manifestation of a kincentric worldview is that “person” encompasses much more than humans. In the West, many of us have inherited a worldview that uplifts the human individual as the locus of meaning and center of importance, while reducing nature to resources, property, or fungible commodities. Bootstrap economics and the literary hero’s journey reinforce such thinking—the lone figure encountering and overcoming obstacles, conquering beasts, and emerging victorious above the fracas. From this vantage, there are human persons (and now corporate “persons”), and there is everything else.

*Kinship is deep and wide—and dwells within the human body.*

In graduate school, I read a book entitled *Animism* by religious studies scholar Graham Harvey. It upended my views about personhood, while simultaneously striking a bell of recognition deep within me. Harvey observes that from an animistic perspective, “the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human.” “Persons,” he goes on to write, is the broader umbrella for those beings who are perceived as displaying agency (and this encompasses landscapes, rocks, and bodies...
of water, in addition to plants and non-human animals). Harvey asserts that:

Persons are beings, rather than objects, who are animated and social towards others (even if they are not always sociable). Animism may involve learning how to recognize who is a person and what is not—because it is not always obvious and not all animists agree that everything that exists is alive or personal. However, animism is more accurately understood as being concerned with learning how to be a good person in respectful relationships with other persons.3

At the time, I didn’t know how or if this type of cosmology could ever make its way into mainstream Western consciousness. Then, in March 2017, the Whanganui River (Te Awa Tupua), the third largest river in New Zealand (Aotearoa), grabbed international headlines. The Whanganui officially gained legal status as a living entity with the same rights of personhood as a human being. More than a change in legal nomenclature, this reclassification of the river is a significant act of bicultural reconciliation among New Zealanders of European descent and the native Māori population (Te Āti Haunui-a-Pāpārangi).

We anticipate stories that do the following: disrupt human chauvinism, counter and complicate narratives of human identity that are based on individualistic ideologies, and celebrate what it means to be human in relation to our fellow earthling kin.

The designation of the Whanganui River is one instance in a growing number of cases in which legal personhood is being granted to non-human entities. An overlapping set of local and national governmental precedents, many of which involve personhood language, began to gain traction in 2006 by focusing upon the “Rights of Nature.” (See the Craig Kauffman and Pamela Martin article, listed below, for an excellent summary of the contexts through which these laws emerged). Ecuador and Bolivia both included Rights of Nature clauses in their national constitutions in 2008 and 2010, respectively. In Columbia, courts ruled in favor of personhood for the Amazon and Atrato rivers. In 2016, the Ho-Chunk Nation in Wisconsin amended their tribal constitution to include Rights of Nature language: “Ecosystems, natural communities, and species within the Ho-Chunk Nation territory possess inherent, fundamental, and inalienable rights to naturally exist, flourish, regenerate, and evolve.” In 2017, the Ponca Nation in Oklahoma recognized Rights of Nature as statutory law to combat fracking. Australia, India, and Nepal have also taken steps toward establishing Rights of Nature. These actions represent efforts to give “voice” to other-than-human beings, ensuring their inherent rights to exist and flourish. Gerard Albert, the lead Maori negotiator on behalf of the Whanganui iwi (tribe), summed up this sense of responsibility well: “We can trace our genealogy to the origins of the universe. And therefore, rather than us being masters of the natural world, we are part of it. We want to live like that as our starting point. And that is not an anti-development, or anti-economic use of the river but to begin with the view that it is a living being, and then consider its future from that central belief.”4

THE KINSHIP PROJECT

The Center for Humans and Nature’s “Kinship Project” will put together an edited volume about kinship that thinks about our connections through a range of different scales: from deep-time cosmic and evolutionary relationships to community watersheds, landscapes, and bioregions; interspecies entanglements; and biological and mythological understandings of human interbeing. I’m delighted (and you’re hearing it here first!) to have John Hausdoerffer and Robin Wall Kimmerer as co-chefs to create this kinship project stew. Important to all of us as co-editors is to invite diverse perspectives and approach this topic from as many creative angles as we can muster in a single volume.
In addition to a book, the Center for Humans and Nature is in the process of creating a podcast series on this topic, and I’m pleased to announce here (you’re also hearing it here first!) that we’ll be working with audio wizards Anne Strainchamps and Steve Paulson from Wisconsin Public Radio’s To the Best of Our Knowledge to put this aural experience together. Other possibilities for the Kinship Project are on the horizon: an audio/art exhibition, experiential walks and “field trips,” and we’re even considering how we might facilitate a Global Kinship Day to celebrate local instances of kinship across the globe.

No matter what expression of media is used for CHN’s Kinship Project, we anticipate stories that do the following: disrupt human chauvinism, counter and complicate narratives of human identity that are based on individualistic ideologies, and celebrate what it means to be human in relation to our fellow earthing kin. At a time when human fidelity with the natural world seems to be fraying, the Kinship Project will bring forward stories of solidarity, highlighting the deep interdependence that exists between humans and the more-than-human world. We will explore challenging questions, including how communities might fairly and effectively give voice to non-human beings and landscapes, including the cosmologies, mythic narratives, and everyday practices that embrace a world of other-than-human persons as worthy of response and responsibility.

RESOURCES FOR YOUR KINSHIP JOURNEY

For those who have an interest in this topic, I would like to recommend a handful of resources—five books, six articles, and two short films—that provide an excellent introduction to this venerable and emerging line of thinking. The books provide foundational concepts, frameworks, and specific examples for thinking about how practices of kinship reach deep into human history and are reflected in contemporary contexts. The articles detail the ways in which such expressions of kinship—most often making headlines when “personhood” is granted to a non-human entity—are beginning to make inroads in various parts of the world.5

BOOKS


The term animism has a checkered history, but a reclamation is ongoing. Harvey provides a careful treatment of historical and contemporary animist perspectives, personhood, and the formation of animistic sensibilities. The dominant cultural narratives in North America and other nation-states have frequently assumed a firm distinction, even a gulf of ontological separation, between the human and the non-human. This “otherness” has typically been seen as a sign of inferiority, and difference has been understood as signaling lesser worth. In contrast, animist worldviews and practices open up questions largely untouched by such dualistic understandings. As Harvey notes, “If every ‘thing’ we humans encounter might in fact be a living person, the implications and ramifications are immense. It is this that generates the particular etiquettes, protocols and dialogues that are at the heart of the lived realities that are animisms.” In short, animisms foster a constant dialogue between humans and non-human persons—a kind of social, spiritual, and ecological conversation that is continuously negotiated. It’s a valuable perspective, and we need a name to hold onto it. Harvey provides a clear case for why animism will do.

For additional works that reveal how widespread—and contested—animistic views are, see:


Hailed as a “new genre of nature writing,” Mueller’s book is species-specific, dwelling upon the lives and deaths of salmon, yet the subject matter could apply to any creature that has become a commodity within late-stage capitalism. Mueller focuses upon the Norwegian farmed-salmon industry and the increasing mechanization and reduction of living beings to things (which, unsurprisingly, tends to create an ever-evolving series of problems that needs continuous input and correction). He contrasts the lives of these pen-raised fish to wild salmon populations and native people’s perspectives from the Pacific Northwest in the United States. And he dares to take on the perspective of salmon, sprinkling memorable and moving vignettes throughout the book, helping readers imagine the world from a salmon’s-eye-view. This work of interspecies empathy is a rare and welcome contribution to thinking about personhood through a lens that is other-than-human.

For additional stunning books that explore kinship with non-human animals, see:

- Freeman House, Totem Salmon: Life Lessons from Another Species (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999);
- Doug Peacock, Grizzly Years: In Search of the American Wilderness (New York: Henry Holt, 1990);
- Lyanda Lynn Haupt, Crow Planet: Essential Wisdom from the Urban Wilderness (New York: Little, Brown, 2009);

Paul Kingsnorth’s call for more non-human perspectives in fiction may also be of interest; Paul Kingsnorth, “We Imagine How It Feels to Be a Character, Why Can’t We Imagine How the Land Feels?” Guardian, July 23, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jul/23/paul-kingsnorth-imagine-how-land-feels.


Following the delightful Gathering Moss, Kimmerer broadened the subject matter of her writing without losing any of the lustrous prose and deep insights into human–non-human relations. Kimmerer is a unique entity herself, braiding scientific training and indigenous knowledge in complementary ways. She explores her own history of loss and recovery as a member of the Potawatomi Citizen Band and how such indigenous perspectives can transform one’s engagement with a living world. Perhaps nowhere is this clearer than when she contrasts the “grammar of animacy” embedded in the Potawatomi language to conventional English, with its noun-heavy sentences and objectifying pronouns. An ethical revolution might depend on a language revolution. Finding ways to properly and respectfully acknowledge ki (the pronoun Kimmerer proposes for our other-than-human kin) is a good place to begin.

For more excellent works on kinship, language, and landscape, see:

- N. Scott Momaday, The Man Made of Words: Essays, Stories, Passages (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997);
- Keith H. Basso, Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996);

Books about trees are proliferating, sprouting everywhere. Amidst this dense thicket of books about tree communication, forest therapy, plant sentience, distributed intelligence, and mycelial mutualisms, Haskell’s *The Songs of Trees* stands out. Haskell offers perspectives from diverse places (from Ecuador to Jerusalem to an urban river in downtown Denver) and demonstrates the value of listening deeply in those places. His immersion in the lives and sounds of trees leads to, among other things, profound observations on tree memories and the ways in which “an ethic of belonging” and a non-dualistic, relational understanding of nature can be cultivated. As he writes in the preface: “Tree songs emerge from relationship. Although tree trunks seemingly stand as detached individuals, their lives subvert this atomistic view. We’re all—trees, humans, insects, birds, bacteria—pluralities. Life is embodied network. These living networks are not places of omnibenevolent Oneness. Instead, they are where ecological and evolutionary tensions between cooperation and conflict are negotiated and resolved. These struggles often result not in the evolution of stronger, more disconnected selves but in the dissolution of the self into relationship.”

For other floral and vegetative excursions into kinship, see:

- Matthew Hall, *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011);
- Stephanie Kaza, *Conversations with Trees: An Intimate Ecology*, updated ed. (Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 2019);
- For perspective-altering fiction, the Pulitzer-winning *The Overstory* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2018), by Richard Powers, is a masterful work of complicated and sympathetic characters, including the non-human variety.

**ARTICLES**

Recent developments regarding kinship, personhood, and Rights of Nature legal precedents have begun to make headlines. In addition to those

**Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt, eds., *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Monsters/Ghosts of the Anthropocene* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).**

Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet is the best available interdisciplinary (or, as the editors put it, “purposeful promiscuousness amidst disciplines”) edited volume on topics that resonate with various kinship themes. The book is divided topically into two halves, “Ghosts” and “Monsters.” “Ghosts” includes essays that highlight the hauntings of our time, losses and untanglings and simplifications of symbiotic relations and complex, dynamic systems—life and its pauperization in the Anthropocene. “Monsters” takes the reader into fascinating “chimeric entanglements,” from bobtail squids to Australian termites to intestinal bacteria to coral reefs. It raises a tentacle of warning about the forces humans unleash when they act with a lack of care for other earthlings. Due credit is given to evolutionary biologist Lynn Margulis and her theories of cellular symbioses, and the book contains an admirable mixture of scientific and humanities voices. Expressions of “art-science activism” are also prominently featured. As the editors suggest, “Perhaps counterintuitively, slowing down to listen to the world—empirically and imaginatively at the same time—seems our only hope in a moment of crisis and urgency.” It is fitting to link, mingle, and connect creative practices that for too long have been isolated. Symbiotic mergers, indeed.

To dive further into these shifting, symbiotic evolutionary paradigms, see:

- David Quammen, *The Tangled Tree: A Radical New History of Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018);
books I’ve suggested, I’d also like to recommend six articles that provide a window into the flurry of activity taking place around the politics of “living entities” and the ways that kinship discourse is being negotiated at different scales of governance.

The following are two foundational academic articles, specific in their geographical and cultural context yet advancing fundamental frameworks for thinking about kinship, animism, and personhood:


For recent overviews of legislation and newsworthy announcements related to personhood and Rights of Nature designations:


For notable news about other rivers and bodies of water receiving personhood designations or “living entity” status, see:


Finally, the following are short videos that provide visual complements to two of the articles listed above.


This selection of suggested readings and media is, of course, in no way comprehensive. The “Last
Word” of this issue of *Minding Nature* is not the last anything! As with most Center projects, for the “Kinship Project,” we’re motivated by a process of inquiry. Questions create open-ended conversations, call forth alternative narratives, awaken us to diverse ways of being, and provide new sightlines for critical paths. I’d encourage readers to use the comments section below to share other books, articles, websites, and artistic works that have moved them toward new understandings of kinship with non-human people of all sorts.

We are not alone. We have never been alone. Inhale. Take a sip of water. Pluck a wild blackberry. Warm your knees by the fire in the winter, or let a cool breeze caress your cheeks in the summer. Wake to birdsong. All are gifts of planetary affirmation. Gifts that connect us to a multitude of beings. Gifts that embed us in cycles of wild energy. Gifts that bind us together as fellow earthlings. As kin.

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**Gavin Van Horn** is Director of Cultures of Conservation at the Center for Humans and Nature. He develops and directs interdisciplinary projects that seek to illuminate what it means to be human in a more-than-human world. He is author of *The Way of Coyote: Shared Journeys in the Urban Wilds* (2018).

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**NOTES**

1. Apologies to those who don’t immediately recognize the reference. Joni’s heyday was largely before my time, but her lyrical wisdom is timeless and her voice warbles through my head on occasion. The song “Woodstock,” which references that hopeful gathering of 1969, includes the line: “We are stardust / We are golden / We are billion year old carbon (this is sung in the background)/ And we’ve got to get ourselves / Back to the garden.” You can refresh your memory through the wonders of YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3aOGnVRvBwc>


5. Special thanks to Alexander Moore—summer intern at the Center for Humans and Nature and graduate student in environmental philosophy at the University of Montana—for his assistance in foraging for relevant articles.