

Report of LOVA's International Workshop on Gender and Nature

Ina Keuper and Jasmijn Rana

Thirty to forty people visited Radboud University Nijmegen on 15 June 2018 to discuss the relations between gender and nature at LOVA's annual study day, which this year had been organized by Catrien Notermans and Anke Tonnaer of Radboud University in Nijmegen as an international workshop on *Gender and Nature*. After LOVA chair Marina de Regt had opened the day, Catrien Notermans (Radboud University) introduced the topic of gender and nature by outlining three debates: 1) anthropologists discussing the nature-culture divide, starting with Sherry Ortner's work and followed by the critique on the dichotomous construction itself; 2) development scholars discussing gender and environment, 3) ecofeminists discussing the relation between women and nature. Currently, there is an increase of attention for 'environment', 'nature' and 'more-than-human' sociality (Tsing 2013). Very often, however, gender is not mentioned and therefore not considered to be relevant. Notermans stressed that this is why this workshop was so important.

Veronica Strang (Durham University) delivered the keynote lecture this day, titled: *Paradise lost: From veneration to alienation in human/non-human relations*. She presented her ideas for a new book she is writing on the relations

between humans and water-beings. Water often takes centre stage in origin stories around the world, in which the world grows out of the fluidity and chaos of water. When we look at what kind of water-beings are presented in these stories, serpents are ubiquitous. Serpents can be presented as both male and female and are sometimes presented as bisexual. They represent flow and movement of matter and spirit. Strang argued therefore that water-beings are wonderful analogues that make people think about how spirits move through time. In her presentation, Strang shared beautiful pictures of serpents and dragons around the world: Roman, Maori, Guinean, Mexican and many others. It is likely that they occur all around the world because they are formed by water; they represent the meanings people assign to water and remind us of its importance. An interesting debate developed after the lecture when Willy Jansen asked Strang about the danger of projecting one's own ideas onto pictures without knowing the actual stories. Strang agreed that this method is not considered very anthropological; because of her methodological choices, she inevitably only scratches the surface.

After the keynote, the first paper session opened with Anke Tonnaer (Radboud University), who shared her research on the 'wilderness' of the Dutch Oostvaardersplassen. She first confessed that she initially thought that gender was not part of her research but later on realized that it was inevitably part of everyday life. Tonnaer researched the deaths of the cattle and horses in the 'rewilding' of the Oostvaardersplassen and the debates that surround them. Are these deaths part of wild, cruel nature or caused by human intervention? In these debates, the voices of protesting women are framed as emotional whereas men's voices were seen as rational and

sensible. The second presentation in this panel was by Cristóbal Bonelli and Margreet Zwarteveen (IHE Delft Institute for Water Education), who discussed queer personalities with regard to water. When it comes to human/non-human relations, Bonelli argued we should also take living microorganisms such as bacteria into account. Zwarteveen furthermore argued that the role of emotions and stories should not be neglected if we want to understand water as companion. They also explained how difficult it can be to make this argument while working in a non-anthropological setting. At the same time, they said, this is also how anthropologists can make a difference.



After a quick lunch and the LOVA's annual general assembly, we continued with paper session 2. Bachelor student Isa Corbeek (Radboud University) shared her experiences and first results of her fieldwork on how gender matters in

perceptions of nature among inhabitants of rural and urban areas in Mexico. She argued that both rural and urban areas have an anthropocentric view of nature, but that ecocentrism is more visible in rural areas. Eirini Kampriani (University College London) presented her work on gendered nature(s) in ethnographic accounts of disease genetic risk, specifically regarding breast cancer. In contrast to the other speakers, Kampriani specifically looked at *human nature* and at nature as opposed to humans. She explained how nature is constructed as embodied and nurtured, and that this is crucial in understanding how people make sense of cancer. While heredity only accounts for ten percent in chance of developing cancer, it receives a lot of attention. Kampriani noted that the idea that “the genes are like the land we inherited from our parents” has long been critiqued as a patriarchal concept.

In the last panel, Annet Pauwelussen (Leiden University) talked about coral gardening by Bajau women on the east coast of Kalimantan, Indonesia. In the field of maritime studies fishing was so far mostly seen as a men's job. It is only recently acknowledged that women are active in fishing too. Pauwelussen talked about how women were tasked with the fishing of clams and showed a short movie of women swimming with diving glasses to look for clams on the bottom of the reef. This was like a choreography, a conversation of human and non-human material. The gleaning practices are orchestrated by the stream of the tides, the power of nature. The women can smell, feel and taste the quality of the clams. It is an embodied conversation with the environment and understood as a dialogue with ancestral spirits. The sea talks back, through women's bodies. Catrien Notermans (Radboud University) presented a paper about her

research on an annual ritual of women making sculptures of fresh cow dung in three villages of rural Rajasthan, India. She made photos and films of the practice and in March 2018 she showed the film material to the local women to discuss it. Cow dung is seen as a precious gift of the cows; it is collected for manuring fields and burning fires. Once a year, women make a sculpture of cow dung that is decorated and placed at the doorstep of a house or cattle yard, in order to prevent it from bad luck and evil spirits. Even high caste women are involved in this exercise. Notermans presented various (Hindu/Krishna) interpretations by the villagers, and argued that the doorstep can be understood as a moral space in which not division and opposition but union and combination is stressed.

Veronica Strang and Charlotte Marchine had been invited to reflect on the different panels of the workshop at the end of the programme. Strang highlighted the rich ethnography of all the research that was presented. The focus on everyday life stories, and how gender is articulated in them, shows the relevance of ethnography. The papers presented also demonstrate the broad variety of ways in which femininity and masculinity are constructed. She reminded us of how nature is often objectified – like women are often objectified – and that this is quintessential of the anthropocentric perspectives that are so dominant. In her response, Marchine also reflected on the anthropocentric perspective by asking how we can take into account non-human agencies. The senses, and anthropology of the senses, might play a big role here. Marchine reflected on the fact that she works in an interdisciplinary manner, together with biologists and archaeologists. Trained as an anthropologist herself, she invites her colleagues on fieldwork and to stay with local

people. When she did research on human-animal relations in Mongolia, she neglected the aspect of gender – until now. For Marchine, the LOVA-workshop thus also made her reflect on her own research.



The LOVA-day was closed with a general discussion among the speakers and the audience, as the scheduled concluding reflections of Professor of Philosophy René ten Bos (Radboud University) had to be cancelled. Irma Beusink asked Veronica Strang to elaborate on the concept of nature. In her response, Strang explained how the understanding of what nature is depends on disciplinary perspective. Relationality and collectivity are key in the anthropological understanding of nature, as is the realization that nature cannot be reified. While it is a good thing that there is more and more attention for human/non-human relations, Ina Keuper reminded us that we should be careful not to forget that ‘human’ is not genderless.

She stated that the gender constructions of male and female need to be taken into account. At the same time, Anke Tonnaer reflected that we should overcome binary thinking in our work. She regretted the absence of professor René ten Bos today. His idea of the anthropocene is very male biased and Tonnaer would have loved to discuss it with him. The LOVA-day workshop was closed with a critical remark by Reinhilde König. She shared how much she learned today about new topics, but argued that we should try to overcome the (often binary) divides that we are using. Human/non-human, male/female, masculine/- feminine; today's workshop again demonstrated how hard it is to really deconstruct these concepts.



Eirini Kampriani. Photo by Jasmijn Rana