



Climate

Living Lexicon for the Environmental Humanities

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Climate is an enduring idea and also a powerful one; and, like any interesting word, it defies easy definition. The idea of climate today is most commonly associated with the discourse of climate change and its scientific, political, economic, religious, ethical and social dimensions. I have written about these in *Why We Disagree About Climate Change*,¹ but before we can understand the cultural politics of climate *change*, I believe we need a richer understanding of the idea of climate itself. My argument is that climate—as it is imagined and acted upon—needs to be understood, first and foremost, culturally and that the environmental humanities can enrich and deepen such an understanding.

The operational definition of climate usually starts with something like the official wording used by the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO); climate is “... a statistical description in terms of the mean and variability of relevant meteorological quantities over a period of time ranging from months to thousands or millions of years.” This description conventionally relies upon 30 years of weather data. Or climate might be understood in a more general scientific sense as a description of the state and dynamics of the physical planetary system which consists of “... five major components: the atmosphere, the hydrosphere, the cryosphere, the lithosphere and the biosphere, and the [evolving] interactions between them.”²

But such definitions do not do justice to the deep material and symbolic interactions which occur between weather and cultures in places, interactions which, I believe, are central to the idea of climate. They too easily maintain a false separation between a physical world (to be understood through scientific inquiry) and an imaginative one (to be understood through meaningful narratives or human

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¹ Mike Hulme, *Why We Disagree About Climate Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

² IPCC, *Climate Change 2013: The Physical Science Basis. Contribution of Working Group I to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* [Stocker, T.F., D. Qin, G.-K. Plattner, M. Tignor, S.K. Allen, J. Boschung, A. Nauels, Y. Xia, V. Bex and P.M. Midgley (eds.)]. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, United Kingdom and New York, NY, USA, (2013), 1451.

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practices). Such a distinction maps easily onto the nature-culture dualism which has engrained itself in much western thought and practice and which has been extensively challenged over recent decades.³

Instead, I suggest a different way of approaching the idea of climate which requires, first, to think more directly about weather. A standard dictionary definition of weather would be "... a description of the state of the atmosphere with respect to wind, temperature, cloudiness, moisture, pressure, etc." It is such instantaneous meteorological conditions which, measured objectively and statistically averaged over a period of time, generate the conventional definition of climate offered above. But climate is *not* weather. Weather has an immediacy and evanescence that climate does not have. Weather is constantly in flux; it is always both passing away and in renewal. Weather describes the instantaneous atmospheric conditions in which sentient creatures live and sense. Weather *can* be seen, heard and felt, as expressed in this passage from the Japanese philosopher Watsuji Tetsuro:

A cold wind may be experienced as a mountain blast or the cold dry wind that sweeps through Tokyo at the end of winter. The spring breeze may be one which blows off cherry blossoms or which caresses the waves ... As we find our gladdened or pained selves in a wind that scatters the cherry blossoms, so do we apprehend our wilting selves in the very heat of summer that scorches down on plants and trees in a spell of dry weather.⁴

It is this sensory experience of weather that conditions cultural responses to human dwelling *in* the atmosphere, whether these be celebratory rituals, material technologies, collective memories, social practices, and so on. We design clothes to withstand cold and buildings to withstand wind; we celebrate the coming of the cherry blossom and the onset of the monsoon; we designate weather prophets to forecast the future state of the atmosphere. These cultural artefacts, moods and practices, inspired by diverse experiences of weather—benign or threatening—give shape and meaning to human lives. They are what de Vet calls "weather ways"⁵: the variations that occur between repeated practices as individuals adjust culturally to the weather. Human beings live culturally with their weather; indeed, they can *only* live culturally with their weather.

Beyond the concepts and definitions offered by the WMO and climate scientists, climate is better understood as an idea which mediates between the human experience of ephemeral weather and the cultural ways of living which are animated by this experience. Climate introduces a sense of stability or normality into what otherwise would be too chaotic and disturbing an experience of unruly and unpredictable weather. The weather humans experience often fails to meet their expectations. But the fact that we do *have* expectations is

³ For example see: Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. C. Porter (New York: Harvester/Wheatsheaf, 1993); Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London/ Routledge, 1993); Noel Castree, *Making Sense of Nature* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013); P. Descola, *The Ecology of Others*, trans. G. Godbout and B. P. Luley (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2013).

⁴ Watsuji Tetsuro, *Climate and Culture: A Philosophical Study*, trans. G. Bownas (New York: Greenwood Press, 1935/1988), 5.

⁵ Eliza De Vet, "Weather-ways: Experiencing and Responding to Everyday Weather," (PhD Thesis, University of Wollongong, Australia, 2014).

due to the idea of climate: "Climate is the ordinary man's [sic] expectation of weather ... there is a limit to the indignities that the weather can put upon him, and he can predict what clothes he will need for each month of the year."⁶ Holding on to climate as a normalising idea offers humans a certain sense of security; it allows them to 'put weather in its place' so to speak. Or as historian of science Lorraine Daston explains in her essay exploring the boundaries of nature, "... without well-founded expectations, the world of causes and promises falls apart."⁷

If then, as phenomenologist Julien Knebusch explains, "... climate refers to a cultural relationship established progressively between human beings and weather,"⁸ the idea of climate should be understood as performing important psychological and cultural functions. Climate offers a way of navigating between the human experience of a constantly changing atmosphere and its attendant insecurities, and the need to live with a sense of stability and regularity. This is what Nico Stehr refers to as "trust in climate."⁹ We look to our idea of climate to offer an ordered container—a linguistic, sensory or numerical repertoire—through which to tame and interpret the unsettling arbitrariness of the restless weather. This container creates Daston's necessary orderliness. And it is one of the reasons why the idea of climate *changing* is so unsettling: it undermines this 'trust' in climate as a cultural form of aggregated order which eases human anxieties about the weather.

The definitions of climate offered above, from the WMO and the IPCC, may have value in allowing scientists to study the physicality of weather and climate. But if climate is understood as no more than this, then how the idea of climate emerges from the many ways in which weather and cultures are mutually shaping and changing each other will go unappreciated. It is these interactions that I suggest are captured by the idea of climate, an idea which functions to stabilise cultural relationships between weather and humans. Beyond scientific analysis, climate may also be apprehended intuitively, as a tacit idea held in the human mind or in social memory of what the weather of a place 'should be' at a certain time of year.

But however defined, formally or tacitly, it is our *sense* of climate that establishes certain expectations about the atmosphere's performance. The idea of climate cultivates the possibility of a stable psychological life and of meaningful human action in the world. Put simply, climate allows humans to live culturally with their weather.

⁶ Kenneth F. Hare, "The Concept of Climate," *Geography* 51 (1966): 99-110.

⁷ Lorraine Daston, "The World in Order." in *Without Nature? A New Condition for Theology*, edited by D. Alberston and C. King (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 15-34.

⁸ Julien Knebusch, "Art and Climate (Change) Perception: Outline of a Phenomenology of Climate Change," in *Sustainability: A New Frontier for the Arts and Cultures*, edited by S. Kagan and V. Kirchberg (Frankfurt a. Main: Verlag für Akademische Schriften, 2008), 246-262.

⁹ Nico Stehr, "Trust and Climate," *Climate Research* 8 (1997): 163-169.

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