

Center for Arts & Humanities (CAH): Steps to an ecology of refuge (along with a manifesto for the Environmental Humanities at AUB)

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On April 5, 2019, Sylvain Perdigon, assistant professor of anthropology at the 'Sociology, Anthropology and Media Studies' department at the American University of Beirut, presented his most recent work in a lecture under the title "Steps to an Ecology of Refuge (Along with a Manifesto for the Environmental Humanities at AUB)".

Perdigon commenced his lecture by reiterating a statement posed by the feminist historian of science Donna Haraway, "Right now, the earth is full of refugees, human and not, without refuge", pausing at the 'cruel' paradox it presents while wondering about the cutting edge and force it represents. According to Perdigon, the edge and force of Haraway's formulation lie in suggesting, of course, that the problem of refuge straddles human and non-human "lifeworlds". Accordingly, he says that the same modern age that invented the refugee, this "new kind of human being" (as per Hannah Arendt), will also be the age in which humans started to grapple with a new and bleak understanding of themselves as a cataclysmic 'biogeological' agent. Perdigon went on to say that climate and life scientists now agree that the disrupting impact of human activities (producing, moving, consuming, reproducing oneself...) associated with capitalist civilization has propelled the biosphere into a new age.

Hence, some of the scientists put forward the term Anthropocene to register the radical, rapid and irreversible alteration of the world under the impact of anthropogenic pressures including but not limited to global warming. Perdigon goes back Haraway's formulation which intimates, this grim reckoning forces us to reconsider the ontological exceptionality of the human, and the corresponding domaining of knowledge about the world into humanities, social and natural sciences.

Hence, Perdigon's talk mostly rotates around the need for a sustained, multidisciplinary investigation of refuge as heuristic concept apt to capture the loss and recomposition of lives across orders of living in an age of environmental catastrophe. He concludes that such ideas are built on the premise that the continuing viability of human and other-than-human forms of life — interrupting ongoing processes of extinction of cultural and biological diversity — will depend, on a damaged planet, on the capacity to bring into being spaces of refuge. This, in turn, requires relearning, rethinking and replenishing the meaning and praxis of refuge by availing ourselves of a variety of resources including ecology or the study of how forms-of-life find, maintain and sometimes destroy their habitats. It also entails a critical inquiry into current orientations to life and imaginaries of human freedom, autonomy and sovereignty that have made spaces of refuge such a rare or difficult social, political and ecological achievement in late modernity.