

<http://somatosphere.net/2019/03/canguilhem-milieu-today-in-history-of-anthropology-newsletter.html>

## Canguilhem's Milieu Today, in History of Anthropology Newsletter

2019-03-22 11:59:59

By Anna Zogas

The [History of Anthropology Newsletter](#) has published a Special Focus section on Canguilhem's "The Living and Its Milieu" (1952). The section includes six open access essays, and here are some excerpts. Enjoy!

[Editors' Introduction: As Adventurous as Life](#) (open access)

*Gabriel Coren and Cameron Brintzer*

[...] The traditional objects and concepts in the human and interpretive sciences are not always adequate for apprehending the variety of forms of life, the kinds of relations they establish with their environments, and the problems they pose. Sometimes "human", "life", "society", "culture" or "ethnos" fail to help us grasp the living at multiple levels and scales. The contributors to this Focus Section offer instead lesser milieus like Beverly's living room; affects, rhythms, atmospheres, and everyday life; relations that are exterior to both terms; the odor of rancid butter, microbial metabolites, leaky colons, fatty acids, and smelly genomes; tangential arousals, abrupt change, and droughts, storms, and wildfires. Thinking with Canguilhem is an invitation to experiment, to invent, to attempt approaches that acknowledge the precarity of both living beings and milieus, the contingency of present and emerging relations, and the fragility of the knowledge and techniques we are forging to cope with these changes.

[The Life of the Milieu](#) (open access)

*Kathleen Stewart*

[...] Let me give you a tiny example to illustrate thought compositionally attuned to a milieu. I found a tick stuck in my head last summer in New England. Because I didn't want to repeat any part of what ensued (the pulling it out with tweezers, holding it up close to identify it through coloring and shape, its prolific legs twitching chaotically, grasping at air close to my face, then the

persistent pain on my scalp, the trip to the doctor's office for a prophylactic antibiotic, the waiting for the telltale red ring of Lyme's disease), I am now, this summer, in a state of a vivid pragmatic attention in relation to ticks. But I only remembered this state, or, rather, it was activated, when I read in Canguilhem's "The Living and Its Milieu" that a tick can sit dormant on the swaying tip of a branch for eighteen years waiting for the one thing that activates its life—the smell of rancid cheese it senses from a mammal passing underneath. Then it drops onto the mammal, attaching when it senses the heat of its blood pressure, its legs extending out of its body for the first time. I thought, "What?" This outrageous detail of just how weird relationality actually is spurred in me an affective, open-ended process of conceptualizing myself in an immediate milieu with the waiting tick, a newly vulnerable and precarious being; I had changed.

[A Living Room](#) (open access)

*Todd Meyers*

*Sitting in her living room.* What occurs here, in this space filled up with her? And despite its force, how is it that this space so easily recedes to the background once words are spoken, once words are put to bodily experience and social relations, effaced by the retelling of the things of life that tend to unravel here? These questions are by way of an introduction to moments of coming apart in the household of a woman, Beverly, who I first met in 2002.[...] Beverly's living room is a large room situated in the front part of her row house. The front door leads immediately into this room. A dining room to one side, unusable as a dining room, filled with boxes and old clothes. Her living room is more than its four walls; so much lives "outside the frame." It is dust floating on rays of sunlight through cigarette smoke, chemical disinfectants, peeling wallpaper, cobwebs, stale urine, cooking oil, street noise, television chatter, and strong soap. [...]

[Canguilhem's Vital Social Medicine](#) (open access)

*Carlo Caduff*

To what extent might one consider Georges Canguilhem a scholar of social medicine? Defined as a field of study that examines health and disease from a social science perspective, social medicine has a long and complex history. It has changed over time and has taken different forms in different parts of the world. Social medicine has relevance and significance today as an

interdisciplinary endeavor that includes anthropological, sociological, historical, and philosophical modes of inquiry. This piece is not an attempt to reconstruct the transnational history of social medicine and compare and contrast its various manifestations. Rather, its aim is to explore how Georges Canguilhem's essay "The Living and Its Milieu" might be useful conceptually for contemporary work in social medicine. Given his concern with the social and the vital, we can easily see Canguilhem's importance for the question of what social medicine might be as a field of study concerned with questions of health and disease. [...]

[Le Vivant & Partial Pressure Milieus](#) (open access)

*Adriana Petryna*

The breath you just took contains about 400 parts of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) per million molecules (ppm) of air. 350 ppm is generally considered safe. People living at the start of the Industrial Revolution would have inhaled about 278 ppm. Since then, levels of CO<sub>2</sub>—the leading greenhouse gas driving changes in the climate—have doubled from the relentless burning of fossil fuels. Carbon dioxide is born of cellular respiration in animals and plants. Its accumulation from anthropogenic emissions in the atmosphere and oceans over the past two centuries now poses a direct threat to living beings on Earth. In a worst-case scenario that is increasingly likely, CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations will reach 1,450 parts per million by 2150. But what does this mean for the proximate biological body? [...]

[On the Odor of Rancid Butter, a Twenty-First Century Update](#) (open access)

*Hannah Landecker*

[...] Think of this as an update to the odor of rancid butter literature. Why is everyone so interested in the tick? It might be time to put aside the barely masked contempt for chemistry as a chapter of physics, to reclaim it for the everything-that-remains-to-be-done of biology. Let us focus instead on the odor, an instantiation of chemistry pursued in the name of understanding molecular mechanisms whose understanding is nonetheless far more expansive than it is reductive. Taking the odor of rancid butter as our protagonist instead of the tick or the human is to take a perspective on the world that sees relationality as primary to and constitutive of life: or to put it slightly differently, to see organisms

as always and only in relation to environments, many of which are composed of and by other organisms.

**AMA citation**

Zogas A. Canguilhem's Milieu Today, in History of Anthropology Newsletter. *Somatosphere*. 2019. Available at: <http://somatosphere.net/2019/03/canguilhems-milieu-today-in-history-of-anthropology-newsletter.html>. Accessed March 22, 2019.

**APA citation**

Zogas, Anna. (2019). *Canguilhem's Milieu Today, in History of Anthropology Newsletter*. Retrieved March 22, 2019, from Somatosphere Web site: <http://somatosphere.net/2019/03/canguilhems-milieu-today-in-history-of-anthropology-newsletter.html>

**Chicago citation**

Zogas, Anna. 2019. Canguilhem's Milieu Today, in History of Anthropology Newsletter. Somatosphere. <http://somatosphere.net/2019/03/canguilhems-milieu-today-in-history-of-anthropology-newsletter.html> (accessed March 22, 2019).

**Harvard citation**

Zogas, A 2019, *Canguilhem's Milieu Today, in History of Anthropology Newsletter*, Somatosphere. Retrieved March 22, 2019, from <<http://somatosphere.net/2019/03/canguilhems-milieu-today-in-history-of-anthropology-newsletter.html>>

**MLA citation**

Zogas, Anna. "Canguilhem's Milieu Today, in History of Anthropology Newsletter." 22 Mar. 2019. *Somatosphere*. Accessed 22 Mar. 2019.<<http://somatosphere.net/2019/03/canguilhems-milieu-today-in-history-of-anthropology-newsletter.html>>