



# Environmental Humanities

## Entering a New Time

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As we prepare this issue of *Environmental Humanities*, both of us sit in our homes with university campuses shuttered, all conference events for the spring and summer cancelled, and video conference meetings holding scholarly groups together. This has been a challenging time, but it has only strengthened our resolve that the environmental humanities matter. They matter because the relationships between humans and nature are at the center of the COVID-19 pandemic and because the environmental humanities have evolved to interrogate, make sense of, and understand the meaning of precisely these kinds of relationships.

As the new editors in chief taking over the journal from Thom van Dooren and Elizabeth DeLoughrey, we want to take this opportunity to reflect on where the journal has been and where we would like it to go. As a field, the environmental humanities has experienced tremendous growth in the last decade. There are now more books reviewing the field than this short reflection can mention.<sup>1</sup> Environmental humanities centers, both large and small, continue to provide a sustaining ecosystem for fruitful multidisciplinary scholarship, and a growing number of universities offer degrees in environmental humanities.<sup>2</sup> Since its launch in 2012, *Environmental Humanities* has published seventeen issues and now publishes approximately twenty-five articles a year in

1. Some recent titles: Oppermann and Iovino, *Environmental Humanities*; Adamson and Davis, *Humanities for the Environment*; Emmet and Nye, *The Environmental Humanities*; Heise, Christensen, and Niemann, *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*; Bergthaller and Mortensen, *Framing the Environmental Humanities*. Additionally, there are some regional specific treatments of environmental humanities: Iovino, Cesarotti, and Past, *Italy and the Environmental Humanities*; Chang, *Chinese Environmental Humanities*.

2. For the state of environmental humanities education, see O’Gorman et al., “Teaching the Environmental Humanities.”

two-issue volumes—all made possible through generous funding by our partner institutions, the work of the editorial board, the journal's associate editors, peer reviewers, the production team at Duke University Press, and its authors.<sup>3</sup>

The journal's mission has always been to publish scholarship on the environment that draws humanities and critical social science disciplines into conversation with one another. The nature of disciplinarity in the journal's articles has varied. Some articles have been firmly situated in constituent disciplines such as environmental philosophy, literary ecocriticism, or geography. Others have floated more freely from disciplinary moorings, while others still have forged new cross-disciplinary foci on areas such as multispecies or extinction studies. In their different ways, the articles that have appeared in the journal have created the lively ecology of the environmental humanities. The interdisciplinary focus of the journal has been neither programmatic nor dogmatic—indeed its continuing success relies on the contribution of all its constituent disciplinary parts while also creating space for something different to emerge from their imbrication.

Words are the foundation of humanities scholarship; power and responsibility come with our word choices. The journal's first editorial made it clear that the journal would “enrich environmental research with a more extensive conceptual vocabulary.”<sup>4</sup> That call has been taken up explicitly with the section titled Living Lexicon for the Environmental Humanities, which through this issue has published essays on twenty-nine words or concepts valuable for environmental humanities. From *belonging* to *invasive*, *hope* to *sacrifice*, the concepts defined in the Living Lexicon section of the journal open new directions in environmental humanities scholarship.

Because words do matter, we want to stress a renewed commitment to interdisciplinary legibility within the pages of *Environmental Humanities*. The benefit of an open access journal is accessibility, but accessibility is not solely a financial or technical matter: it is also about generosity of communication. We want the articles that appear in the journal to seek an expansive, inclusive readership while not seeking to score points in discipline-specific debates. At the same time, the journal will continue to publish only articles that meet the highest standards of theoretical precision, empirical rigor, and storytelling skill.

The environmental humanities remain, as Rose et al. stated in the first pages of this journal, a field that “engages with fundamental questions of meaning, value, responsibility, and purpose in a time of rapid, and escalating, change.” But the world is in a different ecopolitical moment than it was in 2012. The world is burning. From the wildfires that ravaged Australia to the ongoing unraveling of multiple species'

3. For current details please visit [read.dukeupress.edu/environmental-humanities/pages/About](http://read.dukeupress.edu/environmental-humanities/pages/About).

4. Rose et al., “Thinking through the Environment,” 2.

entangled lifeways;<sup>5</sup> from the global school strikes for climate to the systematic murder of environmental activists in parts of the Global South; from the steady tick of CO<sub>2</sub> ppm measurements to grinding urban poverty; from the upswing of reactionary nationalism in the USA, India, Brazil, Philippines, Europe, Pakistan, and elsewhere to the often unsung labor and care of ecoactivists across the world; from obesity epidemics to superweeds—the signals seem to multiply.

While since 2012 earth systems sciences and the positivist social sciences have engaged enthusiastically with the label of the Anthropocene as a way of apprehending these radical planetary changes, environmental humanities scholars have remained much more skeptical of the term—both within and beyond the pages of this journal.<sup>6</sup> Environmental humanities scholars have balked at the idea of a universal *anthropos*, stressing that inequalities of race, gender, sexuality and so on are not superficial phenomena but have always been integral parts of history: the plantation, not the factory, as the incubator of our hypermodern age.<sup>7</sup> Other scholars have stressed the undeniably multispecies character of epochal shifts, while others still have considered the chthonic, geologic, extraplanetary, mythical, or spiritual valences of earthly life: a decisive shift from the biopolitical moment still visible in 2012 to the thoroughly geopolitical moment that has now arrived.<sup>8</sup>

The global COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 has only brought these issues more sharply into focus. Issues of environmental justice intertwine with epidemiology as we watch the virus often affect already marginalized victims of slow violence.<sup>9</sup> The human relationship with animals both affects and is affected by the outbreak, from speculation about the source of the virus—draped in familiar, racialized tropes—to the rewilding of vacant city streets by wildlife. While the exact genealogy of COVID-19 remains unclear at the time of this writing, as with previous zoonotic pandemics it is a safe bet that this virus emerged from within the stressed spaces of capitalist world ecology rather than as an external threat.<sup>10</sup> As such, the COVID-19 pandemic reminds us that earthly interdependence is no fairy tale: in addition to bringing life together, it also will cleave it apart.

*Environmental Humanities* has an important future in this milieu, and, as journal editors, we will try to ensure that the journal continues to expand its scope accordingly.

5. Van Dooren, *Flight Ways*. For a scientific assessment, see Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), *Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services*.

6. Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene”; DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene*.

7. Tsing, “Unruly Edges.”

8. For divergent examples of this geopolitics, see Latour, *Down to Earth*, and Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*.

9. Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*.

10. Since 2012, the world-historical understanding of capitalist ecology is perhaps best captured in Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*.

We will seek to broaden the geography of the journal's authorial voices, readership, and empirical foci in an attempt to do justice to the multiplicity of environmental cultures. Put directly: we will prioritize heterodox studies that draw on noncanonical texts, films, or stories and explore less heard of times and places. Evolving from the origins of the environmental humanities in the *humanities*—a form of knowledge rooted in quite parochial ideas of cultural validity (not the least of which is the Western notion of the human)—perhaps, then, the “loss of humanist unity” can be, as Braidotti put it, “the starting point for alternative ways of becoming-subjects-together.”<sup>11</sup> Therefore, in addition to expanding the journal's scope, we invite authors to help the journal more radically decolonize the environmental humanities.

Rose et al. concluded their introduction to the first issue of this journal by noting, “In many ways it is not yet clear what the environmental humanities are or will become. . . . This journal aims to open up a space within which contributors and readers can participate in the many lively possibilities now taking shape.”<sup>12</sup> While there has been much foundational work since 2012 to define the environmental humanities, so perhaps we do know more about what it is, as coeditors we want to continue to use the pages of *Environmental Humanities* to allow dynamic movement of our field in an open and nonprescriptive fashion. Environmental humanities need to become even more flexible and far reaching to help us make sense of the new world we face.

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11. Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*, 73.

12. Rose et al., “Thinking through the Environment,” 5.

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