

Anna Antonova

A Discipline of Hope

Environmental Humanities
in a Time of Crisis

On Origins, Institutions, and
the Future of the Field

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Introduction

I turn my phone over to silence the news notifications and get back to my writing. It feels like a dismal moment to work on a text about environmental humanities. The COVID-19 pandemic made the world pause, a watershed in the *Zeitgeist*: Perhaps the world did not change, but for many, the way they perceived it did. And ever since, an unrelenting series of events including (oh, to name just a few) Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a clutch of fresh wars across the Middle East, and Trump's appetite for annexing Greenland have shifted global attention at the beginning of 2026 toward intensifying geopolitics and away from the need for collective action on climatic and environmental change. As public debates shift, so do the funding lines on which research has increasingly depended for its survival in recent years. At the same time, the rise of large language models (LLMs), embraced by society with the same unbridled techno-optimism once reserved for geo-engineering, threatens to change every aspect of humanities work overall—even down to our very stylistic choices.¹

In a world beset with multiple unfolding *non*-environmental crises, what should be the role of environmental humanities? Does environmental humanities even *have* a role? These are more than just rhetorical questions; they interrogate the self-proclaimed societal duty of the field at a time when serving society is not easy to define and harder still to deliver. Accordingly, it is important to me to state from the onset that this text is not intended as

1 Throughout this text, I use the much-maligned m-dash purposefully and defiantly. We should not be penalized for ChatGPT regurgitating good style.

an attempt to (re)define environmental humanities—an exercise that has been done many times and yielded as many different definitions²—but rather as a snapshot of the current moment in time of the field: in terms of its intellectual work and societal impact, yes, but also in terms of its institutionalization across a variety of global contexts and relatedly the pedagogical duties it has taken on.

With uncannily poor timing, this global shift in attention has come just as environmental humanities seemed to have extended its metaphorical wings. Hatched in the early 2010s from the appeals of scholars based in pursuits like philosophy, literature, history, anthropology, or religion to bring humanistic work to bear on the greatest environmental challenges of our time,³ the field took some time to grow fully fledged.⁴ Even as of 2019, when I joined the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society at LMU Munich while finalizing my PhD in an environmental humanities doctoral training network,⁵ it was still possible to argue that the field was a niche research subject.⁶ As of 2026,

2 See, for example, Rose et al., »Thinking Through the Environment, Unsettling the Humanities«; Neimanis, Åsberg, and Hedrén, »Four Problems, Four Directions for Environmental Humanities: Toward Critical Posthumanities for the Anthropocene«; or Van Dooren et al., »Developing the Public Environmental Humanities: Challenges, Opportunities, and Lessons.«

3 For some of the earliest postulations see, for example, Bergthaller et al., »Mapping Common Ground: Ecocriticism, Environmental History, and the Environmental Humanities«; Rose et al., »Thinking Through the Environment, Unsettling the Humanities«; Sörlin, »Environmental Humanities: Why Should Biologists Interested in the Environment Take the Humanities Seriously?«

4 Any and all bird puns here are intentional and, in my view, fully appropriate.

5 ENHANCE ITN (innovative training network) was a Marie Skłodowska-Curie doctoral training network based at the University of Leeds, UK, the Rachel Carson Center of Environment and Society at LMU Munich, Germany, and the Environmental Humanities Laboratory at KTH Stockholm, Sweden (Grant №642935).

6 Indeed, in 2019 I participated in a funding bid from the RCC that attempted to justify the field as a »kleines Fach« (small subject) within a funding scheme by the Volkswagen Foundation designed to support the survival of niche research subjects in Germany.

however, environmental humanities can no longer be said to be niche. From its multifaceted disciplinary beginnings, it has grown into a rich inter- and transdisciplinary field; engaging critical epistemological approaches and varied—predominantly qualitative—methodologies, it brings fundamental humanistic aspects like meaning, value, and responsibility to the fore of interlinked social and environmental challenges all across the world. Environmental humanities is now taught in a range of programs globally; it supports varying research projects, centers, and positions; and it has produced scholarly work on pretty much any and all societal or cultural issues that touch on environment.

Despite this overarching success, the current political climate raises doubts about environmental humanities' future. It would not be an exaggeration to say that existential fear is present for many environmental humanities scholars regardless of their career stages. Students who followed their passion into newly established environmental humanities degrees worry if their choice will translate into a viable career. Both early career scholars and their mid-career colleagues face rising precarity, either because of the scarcity of permanent positions and the ticking clocks of fixed term contracts (see: Germany), because entire humanities departments face closure after being deemed insufficiently profitable (see: UK) or because their analytical perspectives have been deemed politically polarizing (see: US) or because funding for environmental research has dwindled altogether (see: everywhere). These dynamics often mean that even senior researchers can see the communities of learning they have worked hard to establish become undone. It seems timely to take stock of the field and its promises.

These multifold anxieties about the future of environmental humanities also feel, I must admit, personal. Environmental humanities was one of the core fields I was »raised in« academically; but more importantly, it is also a field I have been professionally engaged in shaping over the past seven years

through my work at the Rachel Carson Center (RCC). From 2020 to 2026, especially, reflecting on and promoting the field's conceptual, pedagogic, and institutional agenda was—quite literally—my job. During that time, I held the role of director of environmental humanities development at the RCC, responsible for coordinating »Strengthening the Environmental Humanities« project funded by the Volkswagen Foundation under their »University of the Future« funding line—a role I shared with my close colleague Hanna Straß-Senol. Our joint work included, from 2020 to 2024, conceptualizing, developing, legally establishing, and later coordinating and teaching the environmental humanities-based Master of Arts in Environment and Society program at LMU Munich; and later, further popularizing the field through various public-facing events.⁷ Having engaged for so long with environmental humanities and invested so much of my professional effort in the field, I cannot help but also feel the anxiety of the present moment for its future.

Every anxiety is halfway hope. This text emerged from my seeking what lay behind these feelings. To sketch a partial answer to questions about environmental humanities' contemporary purpose and role, I posed them to fifteen environmental humanities scholars who I hoped could help me answer them better than ever I could on my own. I conducted largely unstructured in-depth interviews with these scholars over the Fall and Winter of 2025. My interlocutors—all of whom I am very grateful to for taking the time to speak with me and share their perspectives for this project—were:

7 Especially through the »One Book—Many Worlds: Munich reads *Gun Island* by Amitav Ghosh« 2024-2025 project, which saw Indian author Amitav Ghosh visit Munich and kick off a semester-long series of discussions about the relationship between creative expression and the climate crisis. For more information, see Straß-Senol, Bax, and Antonova, »Amitav Ghosh in Munich: Inspirations, Insights, and Storytelling.«

- **Marco Armiero**, ICREA Research Professor at the Institute for the History of Science, Autonomous University of Barcelona. Previously, he was the Director of the Environmental Humanities Laboratory at KTH Stockholm.
- **Elizabeth DeLoughrey**, Professor at the University of California, Los Angeles Department of English and Institute of the Environment and Sustainability.
- **Robert Gioielli**, Associate Professor of Environmental Humanities and Director of the Environmental Humanities Laboratory at KTH Stockholm. He had previously been Associate Professor of History at the University of Cincinnati.
- **Lesley Green**, Professor of Earth Politics and Director of Environmental Humanities South at the University of Cape Town, South Africa.
- **Liesbeth van de Grift**, Professor of International History and the Environment at Utrecht University and Co-Director (alongside Susanne Knittel) of the Utrecht Network for Environmental Humanities.
- **Susanne Knittel**, Associate Professor of Comparative Literature at Utrecht University and Co-Director (alongside Liesbeth van de Grift) of the Utrecht Network for Environmental Humanities.
- **Sebastian Lundsteen**, Postdoctoral Researcher at the Centre for Sustainable Futures at the University of Copenhagen. He holds a PhD in Environmental Humanities from the Greenhouse – Center for Environmental Humanities at the University of Stavanger.
- **Christof Mauch**, Professor of American Cultural History and Transatlantic Studies and Director of the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society at LMU Munich.
- **Paul Merchant**, Associate Professor in Latin American Film and Visual Culture and Co-Director (alongside Rachel Murray) of the Center of Environmental Humanities at the University of Bristol.

- **Rachel Murray**, Lecturer in Literature and the Environment and Co-Director (with Paul Merchant) of the Center of Environmental Humanities at the University of Bristol.
- **Ursula Münster**, Associate Professor of Environmental Humanities and founding director of the Oslo School of Environmental Humanities at the University of Oslo. Prior to joining the University of Oslo in 2019, she had worked at the RCC as the academic coordinator of the Environmental Studies Certificate Program and Doctoral Program in Environment and Society.
- **Catherine Rigby**, Alexander von Humboldt Professor of Environmental Humanities and the Director of Multidisciplinary Environmental Studies in the Humanities (MESH) at the University of Cologne. She had previously been Professor of Environmental Humanities and Director of the Research Centre for Environmental Humanities at Bath Spa University.
- **Katie Ritson**, Assistant Professor in the Department of Scandinavian, University of California, Berkeley. She worked previously at the Institute of Scandinavian Studies and at the Rachel Carson Center at LMU Munich.
- **Francesca Tarocco**, Professor and Director of the NICHE Centre for Environmental Humanities at Ca' Foscari University of Venice.
- **Jamie Wang**, Assistant Professor of Environmental Humanities in the Department of Literature and Cultural Studies at the Education University of Hong Kong.

Many of the scholars I spoke to, as I will soon explore in more depth, raised the difficulty of the moment themselves. Some observed that optimism for environmental activists seemed harder to find in 2025 than it had been in 2015: not only had the world's focus shifted away from climatic and ecological change, but worse, efforts in many places were being dialed back. As a further backdrop to these interviews, outcomes from the

United Nations' 30th Climate Change Conference (COP30) in Belém, Brazil had just emerged and were widely seen as weak; the European Commission was rolling back its environmental regulations; and climatic and environmental governmental services in Trump's USA were being actively dismantled. Despite these objective causes for pessimism, however, all of my conversation partners spoke emphatically about a sense of purpose and a duty to find and maintain hope and joy alongside activist communities, students, or other scholars. Between them, I heard a unanimous (and independently arrived at) consensus that in this difficult moment, there are tasks for environmental humanities more urgent than ever before.

In case you do not have the time to read the rest of this text, I have distilled here the four most important tasks that emerged for environmental humanities from my discussions with these scholars:

- To hold space for ourselves and for others: A space in which to connect with each other and together acknowledge the environmental sorrow, anxiety, and fear, yes, but also to find and encourage in each other the joy and hope we all need to keep us going;
- To radically resist and critically unpack both singular narratives and false binaries about the future of our world;
- To imagine alternative futures, often rooted in critical understandings of our histories;
- And to notice, connect with, uphold, and work alongside the many existing efforts within communities fighting for other worlds that are imminently possible.

Connection, then, was a recurring theme. And indeed, for me personally, each conversation became a microcosm of all four tasks: A way of connecting with peers, mentors, colleagues, and friends, and of thinking together about sources of hope at a time when the news cycle seemed filled with reasons for pessimism. There is a beauty to the work of taking a breath for thought, and

to grasping toward the right words that can enable the imagining of different worlds. *That* is what environmental humanities can offer, and that is what I hope this text can at least partly convey to you, the reader.

Environmental humanities in the eye of the beholder

As is typical of any snapshot, this text is laden with all the subjectivity of a picture, from the quality of the film and the lens to the eye of the observer who frames the shot. It is a text written in a transitional period for its writer, between projects, as so much of academic writing is done now, and thus it is not as far reaching as I would have liked. By no means did I manage to speak to everyone I wanted to reach, nor did I succeed in including all the perspectives that I would deem important. In particular, due to the specificity of my own networks, as well as—speaking frankly—the limited time and budget for travel I had with this project, the text is much too strongly dominated by voices from the Global North and Anglosphere, especially Europe, North American, and Australia, as well as by the voices of white, English-speaking scholars. In my text's defense, however, this is a failing largely shared by the wide field of environmental humanities itself. The dominance of the English language and the English-speaking world's perspective in environmental humanities scholarship was a concern raised by many of the scholars interviewed here, and accordingly it is one to which I will return later in this text.

Despite these broader challenges, in approaching potential interlocutors, I did my best to incorporate different geographical perspectives and a variety of academic backgrounds. The scholars I interviewed conduct their research and work with communities in contexts spanning all continents except Antarctica. In many cases, my participants had themselves moved between different geographical contexts multiple times (to name just a few: Rob had

moved from the USA to Stockholm; Kate had traced a trajectory from Australia to the UK to Germany; and Jamie had moved from Australia to Norway to Hong Kong). This mobility matters because, as I also discussed with many of my interlocutors, environmental humanities has distinct geographies.⁸ The field, Ursula Münster told me, has always been one that »draws on the traditions of places [...] [I]t's always been a place-based field«:

[The] environmental humanities always responds to the current condition and the current crisis. So that's why it's different in different places, even at different universities. And also it needs to be, you know?

Methodologically and thematically, too, these scant fifteen perspectives nevertheless represent a wide variety. Among them are those who analyze archives, literary texts, written or spoken narratives, or visual materials; those who work with local communities or study the work of different organizations; and those who observe other people, other species, or both. Similarly, the topics that interested my conversation partners encompassed many different types of environmental work, from adapting to pollution and toxicity to the militarization of the oceans and the history of environmental politics to greenwashing and conservation. Finally, the career stages of the scholars I spoke to varied: From senior academics and leaders of institutes that have been pivotal in establishing environmental humanities' popularity over the last decade(s), to mid- and early career

8 And scholarship has been explicitly dedicated to defining the specifics of these geographies. See, for instance, Ogude and Mushonga (eds.), *Environmental Humanities of Extraction in Africa: Poetics and Politics of Exploitation*; De la Croix and Penati (eds.), *Environmental Humanities in Central Asia: Relations between Extraction and Independence*; or Kueffer et al., »Environmental Humanities Switzerland—A Decade in Retrospect.«

researchers who had »grown up« with the field and adopted it as their academic home or as one of the main foci of their work.

My conversations were always, inevitably, heavily inflected with my own positionality and relationship to environmental humanities. As already indicated above, I inhabit a very subjective perspective as someone whose PhD was earned in the context of a European environmental humanities doctoral network and who has, over the last six years, been tasked explicitly with developing the field's institutional, pedagogical, and societal impact as part of her employment and tasks at the RCC. Indeed, I had first gotten to know many (indeed, most) of my interlocutors through these experiences. Thus, the evident informality in my referring to them throughout by their first names reflects both the overall tone and the particular subjectivity of the RCC's wide-reaching network that we shared: Unquestionably, one of the world's largest networks in environmental humanities. In this sense, the snapshot that this text captures also inevitably reflects the RCC itself as both an institution and a network, from the limited perspective of one of its (many) cogwheels.

In a way, the utter subjectivity that my positionality, approach, and interpretation produce is only right for a text on environmental humanities. As a humanistic field fundamentally based in critical inquiry, it does not and should not postulate a singular perspective. Unlike, say, chemistry or biology, environmental humanities can never afford to operate from a belief that reality is objective in the positivist sense, or even *mostly* objective, as in the postpositivist tradition. In fact, one of the longest standing debates in the field pertains to its/their identity—whether it/they constitute(s) a discipline in its/their own right or, on the other hand, provide(s) an umbrella term for the intellectual meeting point between a variety of fields.⁹ Even within the relatively small

9 The language used to describe environmental humanities, itself, carries political meaning: Should we refer to environmental humanities *plural*, to denote

sample size of respondents for this text, views on this and on other of the varying aspects of environmental humanities ranged a great deal. Discussions about environmental humanities are never inherently neutral. Its genealogies are contested—and often political. Whose voices come to the center of the field matters a great deal and thus narratives and counternarratives, a long-term interest of environmental humanities, proliferate as a discussion throughout. In describing the views I heard with respect to the field's different facets throughout this text, I always sought to capture the complexity and diversity of my respondents' opinions, sketching out some of the tensions as well as the many harmonies that make up the field.

Each of the two main chapters of this text is organized around a particular aspect that arose in the discussions I had with fellow environmental humanities scholars. The first of these addresses the leading thematic engagements across the wide field of environmental humanities, from the varying accounts of environmental humanities genealogy I heard—what I have called the »origin myths« of environmental humanities—to the way that the scholars I spoke with felt that the field ought to engage with the wider public either politically, through its research, or through its teaching. The second chapter focuses on the story of the field's institutionalization across different geographic contexts, paying particular attention to how the varying processes of institutionalization *also* make real a long-standing debate on the field's status as either an independent field or conversely as a meeting point for many disciplinary perspectives.

These aspects, of course, are strongly interconnected and can only poorly stand to be separated from one another. In my interviews, individual topics often arose organically and in different configurations. It follows that the organizational

their diversity, or singular, to indicate its cohesion as a field? I tend toward the latter, but that is by no means the only correct answer.

distinction for the purpose of this text is both arbitrary and entirely my own. Yet all of the aspects that form the basis of a chapter were ones that my interlocutors were without exception keenly aware of and ones that they saw as central to the field. That there were so many of these aspects to choose from, and so many ways in which the insights could have been arranged, is a testament to the wide-reaching ambitions that environmental humanities has set for itself from the beginning.

So, then, what will the future of environmental humanities be? The future, Sebastian Lundsteen told me when we spoke, »doesn't really exist. How you practice the future is what you do today.« Let this snapshot of environmental humanities today, then, be one answer as to its possible future.

I. Environmental humanities' pasts, presents, and futures

Origin myths of environmental humanities

Like any good story, environmental humanities has many beginnings.

When I was a doctoral student, I traced the field's origins for myself through the lens of other disciplines that had started to place »nature«—in all the complexity that the word conveys¹⁰—more centrally into social life. I found early environmental humanities thinkers amidst critical theorists like Raymond Williams¹¹ and Lawrence Buell, environmental historians like Donald Worster, Carolyn Merchant, and William Cronon, anthropologists like Arturo Escobar, or philosophers like Val Plumwood and Bruno Latour (among many others). Seeking connections, I traced similarities between their intellectual engagement with the need to collapse the socially constructed distinction between *environment* and *society*: A distinction tasked with a great deal of work. In the West, Williams argued, the constructed abstractions of »nature« and »culture« as separate entities came at the root of agricultural and industrial

10 Kate Soper observed of »nature« that it is »one of the most complex words in the language« (*What is Nature?*, p. 1). She referred to the *English* word, of course—and language matters, as the rest of this chapter will show. Nevertheless, her point is a valid one.

11 Williams set down his thoughts on nature, as the external examiner for my PhD thesis tartly noted, before I was even born—see »Ideas of Nature« in his 1980 book *Problems of Materialism and Culture*.

advancements, at the heart of thinking of economic and legal relations, and at the base of scientific thought: »a separated mind observing separated matter; man looking at nature.«¹² In a similar vein, Latour posited in *We Have Never Been Modern* that the conceptual distinction between »nature« and »society« defined modernity, justifying not only the difference between humans and nonhumans but also that between cultures.¹³ Yet the nature–society distinction cannot be conceptually sustained in the age of the Anthropocene. Thus, the rise of environmental history, showing how society and nature had influenced each other; of ecocriticism, theorizing what meaning is imbued in creative expressions of nature; of environmental anthropology, exploring the living relations between human societies and their natural environment; or of environmental philosophy, examining the ethical aspects of these relations.

As far as genealogies go, this first interpretation I constructed for myself on the emergence of environmental humanities seemed likely enough. But over the course of the seven years I worked at

»Environmental humanities always was and always is many things. It's always a multiple.«
Ursula Münster

the RCC—and now, in my conversations with other environmental humanities scholars for this text—I heard of many other origin stories. Each of the scholars I interviewed emphasized the urgency of environmental humanities in this moment; and at the same time, each offered a slightly different genealogy. Often, they existed side by side; sometimes, they contested each other. I heard from environmental historians like Rob Gioielli or Marco Armiero that the field had at first been dominated by ecocriticism: »[O]ne might even say,« Marco mused, »that it was a rebranding of literary studies.« Others—like Ursula Münster—shared with me that *environmental history* had been

12 Williams, »Ideas of Nature,« p. 77.

13 Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, pp. 6-7.

the field's beginning: »[I]n the US, you had the environmental movement starting with Rachel Carson and then you had the famous environmental historians [...] traditions where they were always drawing on Aldo Leopold and Thoreau.« Yet these seemingly opposing chronologies were not necessarily in tension with one another. »Environmental humanities,« Ursula further emphasized, »always was and always is many things. It's always a multiple.« The more I took in all these different perspectives, the more my own understanding of the beginnings of environmental humanities expanded: At times, the different accounts of the field's origins seem as varied and multifaceted as the world's mythological canons.¹⁴

Indeed, for some I spoke to, environmental humanities has religious beginnings. In speaking to Kate Rigby, I learned that the field of religion and ecology had been one of the first lines of inquiry from which environmental humanities inquiries sprung—at least in the Australian context. Kate, who now leads the Multidisciplinary Environmental Studies in the Humanities (MESH) research hub at the University of Cologne, Germany, had been involved from an early stage with the Australian National Working Group for the Ecological Humanities—a circle of Australian scholarship established twenty-five years ago that proved highly influential for environmental humanities' development. The »usual suspects« of environmental humanities' ancestral disciplines—environmental history, ecocriticism, environmental philosophy—were, of course, all to be found there. But so, Kate underlined, was religion. She describes the theological approach to ecology as one of her earliest formative influences in what was to become the environmental humanities decades ago. »I became aware,« she told me, »that just as there was this field of ecocritical literary studies, so there was emerging

14 Hence why, although these accounts of genealogy are not, strictly speaking, »myths« in the literary sense, I refer to them throughout—playfully—as origin myths.

a field of ecological religious studies, including *ecothology*, with some kinship to eco-philosophy.« It was a field that, working in the tradition of theology to conceptualize »the divine and human relations with the more-than-human world,« also worked across communities to establish interreligious assemblies on »green faith.« For Kate, this focus on making a difference to communities was crucial:

One of the things that was decisive for the emergence of what we called the ecological humanities in Australia, with the sense that scholars with an ecological concern within the humanities were being challenged to find new ways of working.

From the 1960s onward, Kate highlighted, critical »left liberal humanities scholarship« had been dominated by the »work of critique« with respect to societal structures and ideas. But in the 2000s, at least in Australia, a sense emerged »that we had to get beyond critique, that we were in the midst of a planetary crisis that was absolutely unprecedented, and that it was now insufficient for scholars in the humanities to simply diagnose sociopolitical ecological problems.« Thus, to Kate, the emergence of environmental humanities demanded an approach that went beyond what one might call the »classic« humanistic approaches, in which scholars would predominantly analyze and in turn produce different types of text.

In Kate's estimation, therefore, the origin of environmental humanities as a field partly founded in religion studies also offered a lesson for the ethical responsibilities that were embedded in it from the beginning. Doing environmental humanities research, in what I'm here playfully referring to as her origin myth, implied the necessity of undertaking scholarly work that sought solutions. These were »not necessarily grandiose solutions,« she conceded; but the intention of environmental humanities was to seek modes

of inquiry that could »make a difference on whatever level was viable.«

For others I spoke with, too, the origin stories of environmental humanities led to reflections about the field's present. »One of the reasons that we think about the development of the history of the field,« Paul Merchant aptly remarked, »is to think about its blind spots.« At stake in debating the intellectual origins of environmental humanities, therefore, is not only any perspective's right to belong to environmental humanities from its beginnings. Instead, each version of genealogy stakes a claim to the field's present and future agenda: A claim, in other words, to determine what is most important for environmental humanities today.

This was partly the spirit in which I understood the genealogy of environmental humanities as a story of resisting threatened erasure related to me by Elizabeth (Liz) DeLoughrey. Initially, Liz recounted, the term »ecological humanities« came from Val Plumwood's reflections on feminism, Empire, and settler colonialism in Australia.¹⁵ And indeed, when Deborah Bird Rose and her co-authors wrote the inaugural piece for the *Environmental Humanities* journal¹⁶—a journal Liz herself would go on to serve as co-editor from 2015 to 2020—they amended the term to »environmental humanities« but paid homage to Plumwood's influence as »a key figure in analysing some of the major parameters of this growing field of research.«¹⁷ To Liz, the postcolonial critique embedded in Plumwood's work was also key for the field she helped establish.

Liz's origin myth of ecological humanities thus emphasized the focus on »Empire in Australia and [...the] need to think

»One of the reasons that we think about the development of the history of the field is to think about its blind spots.«
Paul Merchant

15 See, especially, Plumwood's *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*.

16 Rose et al., »Thinking Through the Environment, Unsettling the Humanities.«

17 Ibid, p. 3.

through these histories of settler colonialism.« But the centrality of environmental humanities' postcolonial critique, she told me, had later been at least partially marginalized by »back to nature« perspectives that »weren't actually thinking about indigenous claims to that same nature.« Environmental humanities, in her view, has continually been in danger of adopting a romanticized view on »nature« stripped of the essential postcolonial, social, and racial critiques that had defined the field from its start. »Larry Buell referred to postcolonial ecocritics as the ›second wave,« she remarked, but: »We were not the second wave. We were the first wave.« Reducing postcolonial critique to a subsequent development, Liz pointed out, risked misplacing its concerns outside of the core of environmental humanities.

The political engagement inhabited by environmental humanities was a vital part of its origin myth for many others I spoke with. Ursula Münster emphasized the way feminism had played a central role from environmental humanities' earliest fabulation »from day zero.« This grounding imbued environmental humanities, in Ursula's account, not only with feminism's concerns with social justice but also with its »deep engagement of science«¹⁸ from both a positive and a critical stance: taking the scientific inquiry seriously and seeking allies amidst the ranks of natural scientists while *also* raising important questions about existing scientific paradigms. These origins, for Ursula, contributed to the rise of multispecies as a core theme that »has really arrived [...T]o become less anthropocentric, I think that really happened over the last years in environmental humanities.« And similarly, feminism's centrality to the field ensured that it could develop a salient socio-political critique: »[In] the first years, nobody even spoke about capitalism. So I think that's happened.«

18 Especially in the sense of Donna Haraway's 2006 »A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century.«

In a similar spirit, Katie Ritson highlighted that environmental humanities had always been political. »It's difficult to represent this discipline and not implicitly represent a political position,« she remarked. Environmental humanities is »there to speak truth to power and not to just become subsumed into the academic machine.« Indeed, the field's relationship to the *academy* as an institution, as well as to political activism and other forms of engagement beyond academia, are both points I will return to later.

From an intellectual legacy perspective, the origin stories I heard did not always agree on *which* political engagement should be central for environmental humanities. As Marco Armiero explained to me, tensions between the various perspectives embedded in the field are perhaps unavoidable given the diverse disciplines that come together within it. In his account of environmental humanities' emergence, Marco paid homage to the philosophical, religious, and ethical beginnings Kate and Ursula had also referenced: »I would argue that from the very beginning, EH were characterized by an attempt, I would say even a desire, to look beyond the human. This was a radical change for some of the disciplines that would later converge in the EH field, perhaps especially for environmental history.« History, Marco pointed out, has traditionally centered on the *human*—starting with »the famous individuals [...] generally a male« and gradually opening up to »new subjectivities, for instance, the working class, the women, the marginalized, the colonized, and many others.« Yet environmental historians, including Marco himself, have been frequently challenged by their colleagues to consider non-human agencies more centrally. This challenge was a vital one, Marco emphasized, and he told me that he had learned a great deal »from scholars who have explored the entanglement between humans and more-than-human ecologies,« especially for his own concerns with the politicization of the body.

But to Marco, the concern with political and social power still needed to be one of environmental humanities' centermost foci. With a touch of humor, he told me:

Perhaps I am exaggerating a bit, also for the sake of stirring some discussion among us, but I would say that nowadays it is easier to find a panel or a paper on bees, rats, cows, for sure, fungi than a paper on miners, workers, or a marginalized community affected by a dam. [...] I have the impression that sometimes the shift toward the more-than-human has also implied a risk of depoliticization. When colleagues talk about diffuse agency, agency that is distributed beyond the human subject, I am also wondering whether we run the risk of losing the issue of power in this discussion.

With this concern, Marco stressed, he did not imply any desire to return to the »narrow anthropocentrism« that had characterized the historical materialistic approach before the influence of environmental humanities. Nor did he wish to juxtapose more-than-human approaches to societal and political critique, a debate that he acknowledged had been »very heated« in the field and had »sometimes brought disruptive conflicts.« »I have enough enemies on the other side of the barricades,« he joked, »I don't need to fabricate new enemies for the sake of feeling alive.« Citing Carolyn Merchant's work, which had brought to the fore the parallel between the oppression of nature and that of humans in the capitalist system,¹⁹ Marco emphasized that he did not see multispecies perspectives in direct opposition to political engagement and that in his view it was eminently possible »to have an intellectual agenda that can include social and more-

19 Merchant, *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable World*. Val Plumwood's work, including *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, likewise makes this parallel, as do the works of many feminist scholars.

than-human justice.« Yet he also warned about the dangers of leaving discussions of power in the background.

To illustrate this danger, Marco outlined a concern he saw with the Anthropocene narrative, particularly its tendency to adopt a depoliticized »we« of humanity:

Let me use a metaphor that has been employed by many, even among environmental activists. We all remember the terrible fire that destroyed Notre Dame in Paris. Many people used that accident as a metaphor for the climate crisis. As with the Paris Cathedral, our entire planet is on fire because of global warming; and as with the Paris Cathedral, also with climate change we are all call on duty to extinguish the fire. It is indeed a moving metaphor about our common house and the need to work together to save it. However, I am sorry to crash the nice metaphor but, in my experience, when our common house is not on fire generally it does not look very much as a commons but rather as a very well-protected private property. Not everyone is invited when the house has a nice swimming pool, drinking water, air conditioning, heating, and over-abundant food. In that case, the house comes with fences, cameras, and armed guards. Think of how Fortress Europe is treating migrants trying to enter the continent. Isn't it strange that the house is common only when it's on fire and it's not common at all when it's in good shape, providing a lot of amenities to rich people?

Across origin myths and stories of the responsibility environmental humanities has for our world, this urgency of political engagement—the field's focus on environmental *justice*—resonated across my interviews. Specifically, my interlocutors frequently cited the tension between commonality and justice that Marco had also alluded to with his Paris Cathedral

metaphor. »The one thing we have in common,« Lesley Green remarked, »is the desire for habitability [...] [W]e all have to live in the same landscape [...] I think that provides a very interesting entry point into a different kind of politics.« Thinking back on the development of environmental humanities specifically in the African context, Lesley pointed out how indigenous ecological

thought on habitability, on relations with soil and spirituality, had been embedded deeply in African postcolonial and decolonial leadership decades before the field's first postulation. These same strands, she reflected, were even more relevant today. To Lesley, what she called *Earth politics* was a vital political responsibility for environmental humanities in the future. Echoing Marco's concerns with foregrounding collective responsibilities

»The question of whose voices are heard is crucial, but it doesn't stop with voices. [...] To what are we empirically and ethically accountable? That would be the basis of an environmental humanities.«
Lesley Green

and an awareness of environmental justice, she observed that the field's political engagement had to be carefully considered:

I do think that there is a real risk in the environmental humanities of getting caught up with individual experiences of the Earth with regard to the politics of the moment. And I think, if that's the case, there's a real risk of becoming solipsistic and of just being caught up in *my* production of *me* as an earthly being (my emphasis).

To Lesley, then, environmental humanities needs to strike a vital balance in its topical focus, one that finds ways of reflecting on the complexities of human experiences of nature without becoming »overwhelmingly focused on identity politics and production of the self« and missing out on the significance of the political economy. She saw a risk in overfocusing on individual experience at a time when the »social media creation of the

self« was ascendant. »If we get caught up in this Zeitgeist,« she carried on, »I think we'll very quickly become irrelevant.« Lesley highlighted that it was important for environmental humanities to draw on phenomenological perspectives that recognize and elevate the value of voices that had been silenced. Equally, though, she claimed that »finding a voice« was only a first step for environmental humanities:

The question of whose voices are heard is crucial, *but* it doesn't stop with voices. You can't allocate water solely based on arguments over voice, because there's a real water balance that has to be respected and understood and then distributed appropriately. You can't just come in and say [that] certain voices need to be heard [based on] identity politics... You're not actually engaging with Earth politics, human rights, international law, earth processes. To what are we empirically and ethically accountable? That would be the basis of an environmental humanities.

Politics, narratives, and hope in a dark moment

Lesley's concern with identity politics externalized, for me, an anxiety evident in many of my interlocutors' reflections on the environmental humanities. Almost without exception, these conversations touched on the difficult geopolitical moment in which I conducted my interviews—a time in which, as Sebastian Lundsteen remarked, »it can be quite hard to think deep about certain environmental things [while] also experiencing a moment of political tension, of societal fractions, of political opportunism.«

One may well wonder how environmental humanities can contribute solutions in a time when concerns of war and the rise of the far-right seem pre-eminent. As Sebastian's statement

also hints at, anxiety about the importance of environmental humanities' mission came up often across my interviews. Ursula Münster spoke of the moment as a »desperate« one; Katie Ritson, meanwhile, remarked that the field's topical engagement had come to reflect this anxiety. She pointed to a »change in affect« across environmental humanities, especially compared to the optimism of its earliest years. Where projects a decade ago had been »about trying to solve or contribute to problem-solving,« Katie felt that current lines of inquiry within the field »turn on grief, extinction [and] learning to live in an irredeemably changed environment.« Paired with the substantial defunding of (environmental) humanities many reflected on, these topical interests suggested a broad sense of helplessness prevailing across the field at this moment.

To Lesley, the origins of this helplessness were broader than the thematic mismatch between geopolitics and environmental humanities' concerns:

I think the left is hamstrung at the moment because the right has taken over the mode of identity politics, and the left doesn't know what to do. And I think the only way to come back is to come back to basic principles. What do we mean by human rights? What would justice be in an international trade? And that can be informed by an experiential, phenomenological identity and voice-based orientation. But it can't stop there. [...]

Why, for example, do we not have any environment in humanities engagement with the Belém COP that I know of, the Belém COP that's going on right now? There's no environmental humanities presence there. Why is that? I think we should be there. But it's not just a case of buying a plane fire, it's building the networks to have the conversation, to be building the important conversations.

The same point about building *policy* networks was raised by Francesca Tarocco, who observed that the contemporary direction of political change would be brutal »not only for the environmental humanities, but [also] probably for all kinds of interdisciplinary work anywhere.« In response, Francesca observed, it was of vital importance »to grow stronger together [...] and] create networks, not only of solidarity but also of institutional strengthening.« To her, this was a point about political engagement in realist terms: She observed that environmental humanities should look to be »represented at the European Union level« and find ways of advising policymakers so that the field's importance translates into what she called »impact on the real.« Rachel Murray agreed, sharing how she felt that »trying to find a way of making senior management and also government policy understand that environmental humanities is just as vital as STEM approaches to environmental issues« was key to the work that the field needed to keep doing, and to do better.

These reflections on policy emerging from across several interviews resonated with me strongly. As an interdisciplinary scholar with ties also to critical policy studies, who had been first trained in (marine) policy, environmental humanities' real-terms engagements with politics, policy, and policymaking have long been a particular interest of mine. Echoing Peter Walker's question to political ecology from exactly twenty years ago, I had often felt like asking: Where is the policy in environmental humanities?²⁰ As Lesley wondered out loud why environmental humanities scholarship was not actively engaging with the COP30 in Belém and Francesca mused on how it can advise European Union policies, I was reminded of a seminar I had once taken on crafting research impact for policy in Brussels.²¹ Some of the seminar's key takeaways had been that knowing how to

20 Walker, »Political Ecology: Where is the Policy?«

21 Concretely, this was a training seminar with Didier Bourguignon and Vincent Reillon from the European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) on March

influence policy was a full-time job, one involving understanding the specific policy cycle you are interested in impacting (whether regional, national, supra- or international), keeping up with the relevant policymaking discussions in order to know when an input may be useful, and building the necessary (political) networks to make the contribution heard.

My impression, both as a doctoral fellow in environmental humanities back in 2017 at the time of that seminar and as a scholar working at the intersection of environmental humanities and critical policy studies today—almost ten years on—has been that environmental humanities largely lags behind at these tasks. I heard a similar skepticism from many of the scholars I spoke with. Rob Gioielli, for example, shared his concern that environmental humanities too often relegated itself to *criticism* rather than to solutions: »I don't know if we've had enough social or political impact [...] I think this is where the critical approach is difficult because [we] don't have solutions [and] ideally, a politician and a community wants to know—»OK, that's wrong. What do we do?« Resonating with Imre Szeman's concerns that environmental humanities must go beyond seeing itself as a »crisis discipline,«²² Rob's view was that the field needed to do more to engage with solutions *in practice*, and to become relevant especially »outside the humanities and social sciences.« In a similar vein, Christof Mauch remarked that »our field is not necessarily taken seriously by policy makers. We speak a language that is difficult to understand, if not esoteric.« And this same impression was echoed also by Liesbeth van de Grift and Susanne Knittel in our joint conversation, albeit in terms referencing not only the environmental humanities but also humanities scholarship in general. When it came to policy, Susanne remarked, »humanities

14, 2017 as part of the ENHANCE Marie Skłodowska-Curie innovative training network midterm meeting and fellows training series.

22 Szeman, »A Crisis Discipline? The Task of Environmental Humanities to Come (Results of a Personal Study).«

scholars have basically not been at the table and that's changing now but only now and very slowly, I think.«

Liesbeth, meanwhile, could speak from her concrete experience having *been* at the table in the Netherlands policy context. In our conversation, she shared that she had been invited to join a Dutch public consultation council and was now a member. Liesbeth, a historian by training, had joined both out of a desire »to understand how this institution works« and because she felt that it could be a good place to insert a critical environmental humanities perspective into everyday governance decision-making. »But I just found it really difficult,« she remarked, »because I'm just raising questions and making things more difficult and that is my role.« Liesbeth particularly highlighted that she had received a lot of goodwill from others on the consultation council, which is why she had been invited to join in the first place – »but somehow it doesn't work in practice.« Overall, therefore, she felt that her participation had not been as constructive as she had hoped.

Implicit in Liesbeth's experience—as well as in Susanne's comments about humanities scholars' absence from the table and in Christof's remark on environmental humanities' »esoteric« language—is a wider doubt about the extent to which existing democratic institutions can actively integrate critical humanistic perspectives in the policy cycle. In general, as Frans Brom has written, »there is little structural dialogue between the humanities and the science advice community.«²³ The environmental humanities, despite the public-facing, transdisciplinary, and society-serving commitments evident in all the origin myths I have recounted, is no exception. Across various early postulations and more contemporary accounts of environmental humanities, claims of engaging directly with policymakers or governance

23 Brom, »Institutionalizing Applied Humanities: Enabling a Stronger Role for the Humanities in Interdisciplinary Research for Public Policy,« p. 1.

institutions are rare. Indeed, in the recent (2024) comprehensive account on »Developing the Public Environmental Humanities,« written by a large collective of environmental humanities co-authors from across different geographies, no instances of policy outreach or impact are mentioned at all despite the field's acknowledged goal of »catalysing democratic and inclusive forms of change.«²⁴

To some, the inherently critical stance that environmental humanities holds—taking up a tradition of resistance and insurgency alongside various disadvantaged and underrepresented human and nonhuman communities—means also that any direct engagement the field undertakes with existing institutions of power would be fraught by default.²⁵ From this perspective, environmental humanities might be *political* but ought not to be beholden to any duties to shape *policy*. This critical stance, in Christof's view, caused »a stigma« against environmental humanities in the policy landscape:

Conservatives see the political dimensions of the EH as a thorn in their side; they fear that students will arrive at university as decent people and leave as voters for green parties. This fear dominates when climate and environmental issues play a major role in public discourse.

Together with his earlier comment on the field's »esoteric« language and Susanne and Liesbeth's accounts of the difficulty of sitting at the table, Christof's observation above raises a wider concern with the perception and communication of

24 Van Dooren et al., »Developing the Public Environmental Humanities: Challenges, Opportunities, and Lessons.«

25 Van Dooren et al.'s »Developing the Public Environmental Humanities« traces the history of this subversive tradition in more detail on pp. 11-13. Brom's »Institutionalizing Applied Humanities« makes the point about insurgency as well, noting that the humanities often frames its »public task« as one »to unmask power structures rather than to support them« (p. 1).

environmental humanities in the policy realm. In short: Can environmental humanities scholarship find a way to translate its insights to real social and political change?

Looking across the records of my recent interviews with environmental humanities scholars, the answer to this question strikes me as follows: *Yes. Environmental humanities can make itself heard in the public sphere. But perhaps not in the form of concrete policy advice.*

After all, it would be entirely disingenuous to claim that environmental humanities has had no public role at all. From its inception, a particularly vital part of the field's work had been that of engaging beyond the academy with different actors and publics. As told by Kate Rigby, the environmental humanities always was »transdisciplinary in the sense of being co-created with knowledge holders beyond the academy.« The field's emergence in Australia, according to Kate's account, was itself a political statement via its recognition that a more active role for the humanities was necessary. Similar claims of the inherent public and hands-on character of environmental humanities have recurred in many opinion pieces about the field.²⁶ And its call for public engagement has deepened further with the field's growth. »During the past ten years,« van Dooren and his co-authors note in their recent article, »the explicit effort to engage publics in various ways seems to have moved from the periphery to the very centre of the field.«²⁷ This same sentiment was, indeed, palpable throughout the majority of the conversations I had.

In that case, if not through engaging with political cycles to influence policy directly, what can environmental humanities contribute to this moment and its challenges? In some of my interviews, the first task was one of »giving people a space and a language to articulate things that feel very difficult,« as Katie

26 See, for example, Dolly Jørgensen's 2022 piece, »Isn't All Environmental Humanities ›Environmental Humanities in Practice?«

27 Van Dooren et al., »Developing the Public Environmental Humanities,« p. 7.

pointed out. Ursula agreed. An important role for environmental humanities, in her account, was creating spaces within the academy that afford the possibility of being human and sharing emotions regardless of your discipline of origin. Environmental humanities as a *space* allowed also for a »shared experience of being desperate,« which in and of itself felt important to her: »that also helps. At least you're not alone.« In this sense, Ursula went on, even though the world seemed dispiriting, »I think that's where the environmental humanities are even more relevant.«

As important as providing connection and space for discussion might be, it could be construed as a rather passive contribution for a field motivated by complex socio-ecological crises. Yet to most scholars I spoke to, the role of environmental humanities also transcended this task. In the context of dark times, many felt that one of the field's foremost public roles was to *narrate other possibilities*. A recurring theme within my conversations was environmental humanities' power to uphold and elevate narratives and stories, particularly of alternative possibilities for the world. Jamie Wang, for instance, described »storying as a method« and »positioning story and storying as a ›slow, careful, work‹ of attending to the world« following Deborah Bird Rose. This approach, in her view, was a vital element in environmental humanities' public role:

As we attempt to adjust to the new normal—living in a climate-changing world—I think multi-modal storytelling helps enrich and build relationships. Good, situated stories help tease out the unevenness, orient what to see, and ask difficult, different sets of questions.

Jamie acknowledged that »stories have their limitations,« particularly in a time of many competing stories. One risk in this polyphony, she observed, was that key actors' voices could become overlooked. Nevertheless, she saw in the foregrounding

of different narrative accounts, and in the challenge to incorporate new modes of telling stories, including what she called »defamiliarisation« and the work to unlearn dominant narratives, something that constituted an important task for the field.

The argument that environmental humanities should attend to alternative narratives as a form of solution-making is, of course, as old as the field itself. As early as 2012, Deborah Bird Rose and her co-authors identified one of its central tensions in the need to navigate between the critique of dominant narratives and the upholding of »better possibilities in these dark times.«²⁸ Yet the recurring insistence with which my interlocutors visited this theme in our dialogues showed me that the role of narratives remained central for many in their conception of the field. Marco, for instance, emphasized that »narratives should be an important common ground for people working in the environmental humanities«:

We can have different approaches in analyzing narratives: we can do it in the historical tradition, we can employ methods from literary studies, from philosophy, or visual arts. But I do believe that the common ground for all of us is to think about the power of narratives and the way in which understanding narratives can help us to understand the world and the sociological crisis in which we are.

Beyond understanding, however, Marco saw narratives as potential stances to take up the task of uncovering alternative worlds. He spoke of the two parallel concepts he has been working on developing: »toxic narrative infrastructure and guerrilla narratives«—as the parallel tasks of unveiling dominant stories

28 Rose et al., »Thinking Through the Environment, Unsettling the Humanities,« p. 3.

about society, particularly the constructs that make alternatives difficult to recognize (toxic narrative infrastructures) and of identifying or imagining active, functional counter-narratives (guerrilla narratives). However, he highlighted, narrating alternatives wasn't an abstraction, even if it was »performative«:

The moment you imagine something different, you're already preparing the ground for the world you want to live in. This might sound abstract, but it's actually very concrete. The capitalist system doesn't impose itself only through violence or repression; it also imposes itself through narratives. Through this toxic narrative infrastructure, even the possibility of imagining something different is silenced. At the same time, other stories—other ways of living—are made invisible.

Thus, for Marco, guerrilla narratives and their role in enabling plurality were a vital part of the field's public and political tasks. Speaking about his wishes for the field, he observed, »I want an environmental humanities that addresses injustice and looks for another world—or, as the Zapatistas say, *a world where many worlds fit*« (his emphasis). And in this sense, he highlighted a way in which the alternative narratives opened the door to a better future: »the world we want is already here, at least in part.«

Independently, Liz DeLoughrey also told me that crafting alternative narratives ought to be at the heart of environmental humanities work. To her, too, the field's attentiveness to narratives and »thinking about how you do storytelling about the environment« allowed for a radical openness to multiple possible futures. »[I]f we give different kinds of role models and tell different kinds of stories,« she stressed, »we then naturalize other ways of being that I think are absolutely integral for thinking about any of this. Because, you know, we're not going to *manage* our way out of this« (her emphasis). Creativity, Liz went on, was of

vital importance. Citing Audre Lorde's maxim that »the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house,«²⁹ Liz observed that Audre's statement pertained to more than revolutionary intent: »that's also a call to creativity in any, in every way.« Thus creativity, to Liz, was the key to what she called »staging different possible futures« that could arm people with narratives for other possibilities that did not need to be transcendent but could be grounded in what already existed, even in the difficulty of the current moment.

»Hope needs to be active, right?« Ursula agreed. »It's *doing* hope, so you can always plant seeds« (her emphasis). Raised in relation to the importance of building communities, Ursula's point that hope is an active practice seemed to me to reference discussions on »radical hope« and »slow hope« that the RCC³⁰ had in part hosted.³¹ Inspired by Jonathan Lear's 2006 postulation of the term, which saw hope as radical in its ability to work »toward a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is«—indeed, to grapple toward a world for which no concepts may yet exist³²—radical and slow hope postulations do see *hope* as work. Christof's »slow hope« emphasizes the need to create stories that open »paths that seemed unwalkable before they were walked.«³³ And John Barry's elaboration of »radical hope« sees hope and its narration as *political* work:

[...] there is much work to be done in establishing a critical, inspiring and realistic »infrastructure of hope«

29 Lorde, »The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House.«

30 Where Ursula worked prior to her current position at the University of Oslo.

31 I am thinking here especially of the 2017 »Radical Hope« workshop convened by RCC fellows Erika Bsumek and John Barry, which later grew into the Radical Hope Syllabus, a collectively curated syllabus that I had the privilege of teaching online alongside Erika and John simultaneously at the University of Austin Texas, Queen's University Belfast, and the RCC in the Spring of 2022.

32 Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*, p. 103.

33 Mauch, »Slow Hope: Rethinking Ecologies of Crisis and Fear,« p. 37.

which I view as allowing for a dialogue around new ideas about how we organise the economy, conceive of a »good life,« reconfigure our democratic politics [...] In the realm of ideas and the politically feasible there is a crying need for unleashing creativity and rethinking and repurposing established ways of ideas, practices and frames of reference. Our crisis is as much a crisis of creativity as it is a crisis of capitalism [...]³⁴

Across environmental humanities, then, the tasks of building connection with others and elevating alternative narratives can be seen to amount to an active political stance—one that cuts to the core of the field.

I heard from several scholars that these efforts were a source of *joy*, with that word recurring in a number of interviews. To Paul Merchant, at the heart of environmental humanities was a willingness to trespass »beyond what is being seen as within the bounds of academic work,« which he described as »a kind of joyous, not just crossing of boundaries, but there's something slightly more willful about it, you know?« To him, this encompassed simultaneously intellectual and methodological trespass. Environmental humanities, he told me, had always been »somewhere between experimentation and iconoclasm.« Most colleagues in the environmental humanities he spoke to, Paul continued, had not liked school because of the rigidity of its structures, »the confines of the classroom,« and the limited scope of its subjects. Environmental humanities therefore gave its scholars the freedom to trespass »joyous[ly]« and »willful[ly].«

Joy was also a term employed by Francesca Tarocco to describe the transdisciplinary inspirations and public links enabled

34 Barry, »Radical Hope in Turbulent Times: Sources of Inspiration from Politics to Poetry.«

by locating environmental humanities in Venice through the NICHE initiative. Modern cities, Francesca observed, are often projects of removing humans from nature, but Venice »does not do that.« In a city defined by its porousness and openness to the tides, she remarked, collaborating with local activists and organizers, as well as with musicians, culinary experts, and artists, was a natural way of approaching environmental humanities. To her, the city enabled an environmental humanities of »co-habitation and conviviality«—and remarking on this, she added, »Because there’s joy to it, there’s joy, there’s joy« that permeated the practice of doing environmental humanities in Venice and beyond.

Similarly, for Sebastian Lundsteen, joy had been the pathway to finding environmental humanities in the first place: »being curious is what led me here and having fun also, and being inspired and happy, so I try to work intentionally on being happy and curious and engaging.« He remarked, however, that the framing of doing work from a place of joy and curiosity amounts to an active approach of scholarly inquiry. Citing Dostoyevski’s *The Idiot* as an inspiration, Sebastian shared his fascination with the idea of »the academic as an idiot«:

When I go into the research fields, I’m an idiot and that’s my position. We all have positions in different ways. And I’m allowed to ask idiotic questions and do it with intensity. And this has also helped me [in the field, talking to participants.] [...] I had all these [framings] from my critical background, you know, colonialism, decolonial, extractive landscapes. And I could act in so many ways that would make [my respondents] confirm their stereotypes. But I went in there with an extreme idiocy.

Thus, the positionality—and humor—of »the academic as an idiot« in Sebastian’s view enabled ways of holding together

the complexities of his research context without alienating the communities in which he conducted his research. This skill, he told me, was a strength of environmental humanities due to the field's demand that a researcher take on many different roles.

This idea that joy, fun, and other positive transversions could be radically productive resonates with—or perhaps directly draws on—Nicole Seymour's *Bad Environmentalism*.³⁵ a book that two of my interlocutors, Katie Ritson and Rachel Murray, cited as highly generative for their thinking. As a counterpoint to the negative emotional color palette frequently associated with environmentalism and ecological issues, *Bad Environmentalism* suggests that co-opting the »absurdities and ironies« of socio-ecological trouble can be a powerful lens. When Lesley Green spoke of the power of laughter—»You know, we live in such an absurd world, I mean, neoliberalism is surreal«—I thought that her »pedagogy of laughter« could be understood in the *bad environmentalism* sense. In the same way, Sebastian's take on »the academic as an idiot,« as well as Paul's vision of environmental humanities as »somewhere between experimentation and iconoclasm,« leaned into the necessities of *irreverence*. Marco's »guerrilla narratives,« Jamie's »storying,« and Ursula's »hope« instead leaned into the painstaking work of building connections that can open alternatives. But they were all, in essence, *political* stances for the environmental humanities.

Ultimately, Lesley told me, she saw the realm of politics as one of unresolved potential for the field: »It feels to me like environmental humanities as a field globally is in a holding space, not sure what to do. But I think there's a real potential for environmental humanities providing ethical, Earth-grounded leadership.« Public environmental humanities work, Lesley told me, highlighted the immense joy and connection to be found from standing »in solidarity with communities« and taking an

35 Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age*.

active stance alongside them. This was, in her opinion, the only way to counter the oppressive pessimism of the present: »People are exhausted and tired. And they think, well, ›I don't wanna get into politics because I'm exhausted.« Impassioned, she slapped the table. »But you're tired because of politics! So take it on. And the joy, that energy comes [when you do]. Exhaustion is political, you know?«

The joy of teaching environmental humanities

Across many of my conversations, the arena where scholars most often spoke of putting their sentiments of joy, political engagement, and alternative future-seeking in practice was that of teaching. As environmental humanities matures, many (mostly graduate) taught programs basing their pedagogy in the field have sprung up across the world. Some of the oldest have been in Australia and the USA: the University of New South Wales, Macquarie University, the University of Wollongong, the University of Utah, the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Wisconsin-Madison all pioneered teaching programs in environmental humanities from the 2000s and especially from the mid-2010s onward. Teaching programs were also established on the same timeframe in the UK and Ireland—including at Edinburgh University, Glasgow University, King's College London, and Bath Spa University—as well as across continental Europe—for example, at Masaryk University in Brno, the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the University of Warsaw, or the University of Extremadura. From 2020 onwards, many more taught programs have emerged, including at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, the University of Bristol, the University of Exeter, and the RCC's »Environment and Society« program. Further taught degrees in environmental humanities are about to launch in 2026, including Cardiff University's

»Literature and the Environment« MA and the University of Stavanger's »Public Environmental Humanities« MA run by the Greenhouse.³⁶

A great many of these programs—as I knew from participating in a series of pedagogic discussions while developing and later teaching the RCC's Master's program—sought ways of executing environmental humanities' commitment to public engagement through their curriculum. And when I spoke to colleagues about their own Master's programs in environmental humanities for this project, I heard many accounts of lively and creative teaching collaborations with local non-academic partners. Indeed, in many cases, these programs not only drew on the field's strong traditions of place-based work and public engagement but also, through these engagements, helped produce generative directions for environmental humanities alongside their students.

This form of public-facing pedagogy was well-exemplified at Bristol. The richness of environmental humanities' field engagement, as Rachel Murray shared, was reflected in the core »Themes in Environmental Humanities« module (or course) as part of the University of Bristol's Master's program »Environmental Humanities.« The individual themes the students learned about in the module were always accompanied by field trips across the city. For learning about extinction and biodiversity loss, Rachel partnered with the Bristol Museum Gallery and the natural history curators who had prepared its »Extinction Voices« exhibition some years ago. Students could then explore the museum's holdings on extinct species and were »given the opportunity to design their own extinction exhibition, if they had limitless resources.« As Rachel explained,

36 My list here is very far from being comprehensive. For a great global overview as of 2019, see O'Gorman et al.'s »Teaching the Environmental Humanities«; however, please note that the field is dynamic and many new programs have sprung up since then.

this collaboration proved interesting not only for students but for the curators themselves:

[The curators] are often thinking about ways that they can use their collections and so having the input from students who come from a range of disciplinary backgrounds and sometimes [professional backgrounds]—we've had past students who've worked for environmental NGOs or [the] BBC's history unit—so I think it's been a very mutually beneficial process.

Indeed, both Rachel and Paul—who jointly lead the Master's program at the University of Bristol—shared that this kind of teaching was generative for their own scholarship as well. In Rachel's case, the links with the museum curators had come from her own work; thus, connecting students with these transdisciplinary partners implicitly deepened her long-term public engagement. And for Paul, working in this way with students felt »like a real exercise in co-creation« that not only enhanced his own thinking but also felt highly rewarding: »[T]he seminars that I've taught on the Environmental Humanities MA have [been] the ones that in my eight years I've been teaching at Bristol have felt most like the Platonic ideal of a seminar.« In this sense, for Paul, teaching environmental humanities distilled much of the field's generative joy.

Similar reflections on the joy of teaching and on its role for collaboration with non-academic public institutions and members of the local community often came up in my discussions with other scholars. Several of my interlocutors cited the example of the Greenhouse Institute at the University of Stavanger, which under the leadership of Dolly and Finn-Arne Jørgensen had done a lot to model hands-on collaboration with local museums; at the time of writing, the Greenhouse Institute had also just launched its program in Public Environmental Humanities, which includes

the work of museums and heritage institutions as one of its key pedagogic foci.³⁷ Others, like Ursula Münster, spoke about efforts of »engaging the Extinction Rebellion« or »wind park activism, urban gardening and all these local initiatives [...] and connecting with artists.« In the Oslo context, Ursula told me, she always looked for ways to pair her teaching with an »experiential aspect.« She described a meaningful collaboration with the local artist Signe Lindén, whose hydrophones students could use to listen to the loudness of the fjord, enabling students to access the sensory experience of »just hearing« boat traffic, but also to encounter and learn from different actors »who deeply care about the topic or also create space where things can change.« To Ursula, then, teaching was something that »brings people together in unique ways«—both in terms of enabling co-teaching and in terms of engaging with the local context.

To Liz DeLoughrey, these sentiments went further. Teaching itself was something she saw as a vital form of public engagement for environmental humanities scholarship:

The teaching that we do, I think, is some of the most important work. We don't necessarily see that as political work, but Oh my God, it's absolutely critical. We're thinking through training a new generation to think critically about how we understand the environment and then also to have a certain kind of, you know, sense of ethical responsibility.

What that meant to her in practice in the UCLA context was finding ways of staging global tensions and injustices—as a postcolonial scholar—in the university's own regional context. For instance, faced with the difficulty of »teaching about

37 See University of Stavanger, »Master in Public Environmental Humanities,« available at: <https://www.uis.no/en/studies/master-in-public-environmental-humanities>.

Nigeria and oil drilling and nuclear testing in the Pacific« from the privileged geographic perspective of Southern California, Liz told me that she employed local networks that situated different injustices in that context. She described co-teaching with Rebeca Méndez, an artist and designer who had produced a 360° immersive film on DDT barrel dumping off the coast of California³⁸—which she, as Liz explained, put »in conversation with Acjachemen, Tongva and Chumash understandings of the ocean.« Exploring such art forms with students meant that they could bring their theoretical and historical understanding in conversation with local communities.

»The teaching that we do, I think, is some of the most important work. We don't necessarily see that as political work, but Oh my God, it's absolutely critical.«
Elizabeth DeLoughrey

As another example, Liz also recounted how a field visit with Charlie Moore, discoverer of the Great Pacific garbage patch and founder of the Plastic Pollution Coalition, inflected her teaching on the Plastocene:

When we read about plastic and its ubiquity—right, we carry it in our lungs, it's in our brains, it's in the umbilical or the fetus, it's everywhere—we certainly feel overwhelmed. [But] then we have these concrete examples of people who are actually living [...], actually mitigating it in some way and studying it and showing how we can channel our engagements to do something about it.

Thus, to Liz, public collaborations in the framework of teaching went back to the strategies one could employ to stage alternative futures and empower students to take an ethical responsibility for the world they have inhabited. Pedagogy, in her account, allowed for precisely the kind of hope-oriented work that she and many

38 Méndez, *The Sea Around Us*, 2022, Laguna Art Museum.

others saw as central to environmental humanities, particularly in the difficult political moment of the present.

Liz saw this hopeful potential reflected especially in the final projects that her students completed. Like other environmental humanities lecturers I spoke to, she told me that she encouraged her students to try out different formats. In Liz's classes, some had created websites, others had conducted interviews on plastic at a public beach, one had created a musical rendition of the geological epochs up to and including the Anthropocene on the guitar. »I find a lot of inspiration in the creative ways that [students] are trying to express the moment and to draw upon individual skills,« Liz told me after she had listed some of these examples. »Writing may not be everyone's skill, and maybe other visual arts, music, other ways of telling stories [are].« But, importantly, for Liz, this form of creative expression tied back into her vision for a future of environmental humanities »based on education« that could provide a common language, a way of naming the trouble,³⁹ and finding creative pathways to new possibilities.

Many of the scholars I spoke with came back to the important role that creative (self-)expression played in environmental humanities teaching and its significance for a wider world. For instance, Katie Ritson shared that »allowing students to connect their personal circumstances, themselves and their political and personal development with much bigger topics« had been pivotal for environmental humanities pedagogy. Her students had experimented with video essays, podcasts, and even a live stream from a frog pond. In the same way, Lesley Green spoke of encouraging students »to bring their whole selves into the classroom,« while Paul and Rachel described collaborative student projects that had produced podcasts and documentaries on polar bears. »Environmental humanities,« Rachel insisted, »is

39 A key text, for Liz, was Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble*.

something that is not just taking place in the classroom and in an academic setting.«

In this sense, working with students and encouraging their own creative expression also helped many I spoke with to widen their own perspective of the field and of the public role it could perform. »[T]hese experiments I've been doing in class,« Liz reflected, »actually have been teaching me a lot about other possibilities [...] We're trying very hard to create more interdisciplinary programs, but we're limited by our training, we're limited by our own modes.« Thus, working with students meant confronting the limitations of her own perspective, both conceptually and methodologically. I heard a similar perspective on the capacity of teaching environmental humanities to reveal the field's blind spots from Paul. »Our students,« he observed with a smile, »[are] very good at keeping us grounded.«

One of the most common shortcomings that my interlocutors raised—one they shared having discussed it in their teaching—pertained to environmental humanities' largely Anglospheric focus. For someone trained in modern languages as he was, Paul mused, the strong Anglophone slant still predominant in environmental humanities was a large »blind spot« for the field. Paul remarked that its development »in an Anglophone context, but particularly in an Anglophone postcolonial context, so in Australia and Canada, [...] continues to shape in some ways the concerns of the field.« In this sense, his concern was that »questions of indigeneity and coloniality and the relationship to the environment [...] are sometimes kind of globalized in a way that [risks] universalizing what are very specific Anglo-colonial conditions.« Reflecting on his experience conducting research in the Latin American context, Paul observed that the Latin American postcolonial experience had a different timescale and character than the Anglophone postcolonial experience. And going beyond the *postcolonial*, Paul saw how Latin American perspectives on environment—which he observed involved a

much stronger political ecology tradition—were obscured in much of the dominant environmental humanities dialogues. Concluding his remarks on the subject, Paul noted, »Ursula Heise has written, and written a while ago, you know [...] about the need for a comparative environmental humanities. And I don't think that really happens yet.«⁴⁰

Others, too, advocated for a more robust geographic plurality in environmental humanities' attentional orbit. Jamie Wang shared with me that she was »interested in seeing more EH work grounded in the Asia context«; alongside her colleagues Zimu Zhang and Karmen Zheng at the University of Hong Kong, she had initiated an exploratory symposium for emergent Asian environmental humanities perspectives in Asia in 2024.⁴¹

Marco Armiero also echoed these concerns, telling me rather matter-of-factly that environmental humanities was »still too white and too Anglosphere-centric.« Echoing Paul's

»The moment you imagine something different, you're already preparing the ground for the world you want to live in.«

Marco Armiero

concerns with language and the thought silos it could promote, Marco insisted that going »beyond the Anglosphere and its academic culture in the environmental humanities« was an important shift that still largely needed to happen in the field. Moreover, he highlighted that the Anglo-centric lens on environmental humanities needed deliberate deconstruction: »we really need to interrogate what's going on. Why is that the case? What can other traditions tell us? What would an environmental humanities perspective look like from the Global South, but also from the European South?« Drawing on his experience leading research initiatives

40 See Heise, »Globality, Difference, and the International Turn in Ecocriticism«; and Heise, »Preface: The Anthropocene and the Challenge of Cultural Difference.«

41 Zhang, Wang, and Zheng, »Conferencing as Environing with Care: Organising an Environmental Humanities Symposium in Hong Kong.«

in both Sweden and Spain, Marco observed that environmental humanities looked quite different in both locales. »And I hope it's clear that I'm not saying, ›Barcelona is good and Stockholm is bad,« he added, »I'm just curious.«

Importantly, Marco also articulated how the concern with language was one about justice, including in teaching, rather than »only« about representation and diversity: »Native English speakers are usually more confident in speaking up, asking questions, commenting. And often it's also a class issue—learning English isn't equally accessible everywhere, especially for people from working-class backgrounds.« Conversely, offering opportunities to debate environmental humanities issues in other languages and contexts opened up new perspectives. Reflecting on the *Occupy Climate Change!* schools Marco had run together with Rob Gioielli and Anja Moum Rieser in Quito, Ecuador and in Rome, Italy, he also shared that discussions in each context had deepened his own perceptions on guerrilla narratives and alternative possibilities. The conversations in each school, and especially the students' work on the *Atlas of Other Worlds*, had highlighted the importance of noticing: »noticing is central—what's happening in your city, where you live [...] What really matters is learning to notice what usually goes unnoticed.«

Returning to the more general point of environmental humanities' public engagement, I also heard from a few scholars how teaching environmental humanities led them to interrogate the field's framings of who an environmentally engaged public *is* or should be. Rachel Murray spoke about the need to think »beyond a focus on environmental questions that is still rooted in a certain kind of set of assumptions about who we are as environmentalists.« She saw students' work on queer ecological perspectives as

»Environmental humanities is something that is not just taking place in the classroom and in an academic setting.«
Rachel Murray

particularly generative in this context, but observed this to be an enduring blind spot for the field.

In the same line of thinking about environmental humanities' blind spots, especially where it came to its public engagement, Sebastian Lundsteen remarked that it would be »very, very interesting« to pose the question of environmental humanities »as not necessarily a university construction«:

What would a research center outside of university structure actually look [like] in the environmental humanities? [...] What would an environmental humanities, let's call it an NGO or a research institute, actually be like? [...] How can we create things that can also capture these people who don't want to work at the university, who don't think teaching is activism [...] but want to do environmental humanities as a fundamentally society-engaged practice?

This question—what environmental humanities might be when the academy is *not* involved—remains, to me, open. But it is a question that touches upon the wider difficulty of transposing environmental humanities from the conceptual to the structural—a difficulty that, even within the context of university work, the field still faces.

II. Architectural metaphors of environmental humanities: Building interdisciplinary institutions

In my introduction, I briefly touched on a long-standing debate about defining environmental humanities as either a meeting space for many perspectives or a distinct discipline with its own distinct themes, approaches, and methods. This debate is far from being settled; indeed, a wide-sweeping report on environmental humanities from 2019 described the quandary as »one of the central tensions that characterizes the emergent field.«⁴²

Unsurprisingly, this discussion emerged again in many of my conversations. As Ursula Münster told me, there »have always been debates. Should environmental humanities stay in the disciplines? [...] Or some argued that we should dissolve the boundaries altogether.« Her own perspective on this, as an anthropologist, tended toward keeping environmental humanities as a meeting point, as »the rootedness in one field actually matters.« Likewise, when I spoke to Rob Gioielli, he expressed his view that disciplinary knowledge mattered deeply even within interdisciplinary perspectives: »we construct this set of disciplinary knowledge for a reason [...] So we need to] really understand it and *then* think about how to critique it, and think about how to use it.« At the same time, as Ursula also told me, environmental humanities provided its visitors with an important intellectual freedom »to do more interesting work that is inspired by many traditions.«

42 O’Gorman et al., »Teaching the Environmental Humanities,« p. 443.

I heard a similar account from Christof Mauch, who could reflect on a wide-spanning observation of the field's development in his years of directing the RCC:

One could say that the environmental humanities have appropriated topics and developments that were originally located in other disciplines. On the other hand, this development can also be described in reverse: the dialogue with environmental humanities themes was a catalyst for developments in a variety of disciplines that have reinvented themselves: literary studies have become increasingly eco-critical, religious studies have addressed issues of sustainability and environmental ethics, ethnology and philosophy have opened up to environmental topics, and art and architecture have found a [productive] liaison with the environmental humanities.

Since many of my interlocutors were senior academics who had been part of the field's founding, I heard many accounts like Christof's: That is, accounts that saw environmental humanities predominantly as a meeting space between pre-existing disciplines. To some of them, the field's ability to grow into its own disciplinary silo was also a question about time: Susanne Knittel told me, for example, that Utrecht did not yet have many »environmental humanities scholars who were sort of born and raised in environmental humanities« but that this was changing.

Who are these scholars »born and raised«—trained—in environmental humanities? In our conversation, Sebastian Lundsteen introduced himself as a »second-generation environmental humanities« scholar—a designation I felt that I instinctively shared. Together, we discussed the difficulties we both had experienced in grappling toward understanding what environmental humanities *is*. »Our seniors,« Sebastian remarked, »were all trained in disciplinary [traditions]. They came from

environmental history or they had the history background. They came from cultural studies, they came from anthropology. They came from literature.« Yet this has not necessarily been the case for the second-generation scholars, many of whom (including myself) have had a genuinely interdisciplinary training. The long-standing question that Sebastian and I shared having grappled with—a question that he told me he had been »keeping very close to [his] thinking«—was about the nature of the field as such:

Is [environmental humanities] a place that you are being raised academically? Or is it an interdisciplinary field [where] you come with your own disciplinary background and you bring something to the field and you take something from the field?

This question is particularly salient for the »second-generation« environmental humanities scholars, for whom it is more than an intellectual concern. The field's status carries implications for the professional development of its junior scholars, who have widely been encouraged, or even urgently tasked, to take up interdisciplinary approaches to the environmental crisis. As I will shortly show, this was a concern that many others shared. Thus, I felt that discussing the status of environmental humanities was no longer a debate *only* about intellectual space. Instead, across many interviews, it seemed to have grown into a debate about *institutional* space and how to claim it. Even as the field's conceptual engagements informed how different research centers, networks, or teaching programs were set up, these institutional arrangements ended up informing, in return, how environmental humanities was practiced and developed in each context. Accordingly, this second part of my text deals with that complex discussion and the many intersections between the conceptual/intellectual and the institutional/material.

The fortress and the tent

With environmental humanities' growing popularity, the question of the field's institutionalization has inevitably long stood on scholars' agenda. Just as in the case of sustainability science before it—indeed, as in the cases of most new and/or interdisciplinary fields of study—becoming part of established academic structures can be an important prerequisite for teaching the field formally, for securing sustainable careers working in it, and for increasing its perceived legitimacy in general.⁴³ Establishing environmental humanities more firmly within university structures was accordingly a central theme in my work at the Rachel Carson Center over the last seven years. Equally, it was a recurring conversation amidst environmental humanities scholars at meetings, workshops, and conferences I attended during that time. And it was one of the key lines of questioning I raised in my interviews.

»Institutionalization,« in the encyclopedic sense, denotes »the action of establishing something as a convention or norm in an organization or culture,« as well as of »authorizing, mandating, or making something official.«⁴⁴ In practice, however, institutionalization can mean different things in different contexts and present many unique challenges. As we will see throughout this chapter, the process has geographic variety, one that manifests itself across both material *and* intellectual space.⁴⁵ As such, there can be no singular or simple path to institutionalization. This

43 See Yarime et al., »Establishing Sustainability Science in Higher Education Institutions: Towards an Integration of Academic Development, Institutionalization, and Stakeholder Collaborations.«

44 Oxford English Dictionary, »institutionalization (n.),« September 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2974188276>.

45 And across the many ways that physical space and conceptual constructs mapped onto that space are related to each other. This is where we could already dive knee-deep into Lefebvre (*The Production of Space*), but let us go gently into that night—this chapter goes through enough theory as it is.

chapter outlines some of the many considerations, challenges, and successes that have defined environmental humanities' quest to establish itself formally—as seen through the perspective of my interlocutors.

Academic institutions, much like the disciplines they represent, are more than buildings, faculties or administrative departments. Instead, very much in line with a Latourian view of the world,⁴⁶ they also reflect the societal norms and shifting expectations that underpin scholarly legitimacy. These, in turn, vary greatly across both academic contexts and geographic regions. To some I spoke to, this ordering principle of academic disciplines felt restrictive when they considered integrating environmental humanities within its boundaries—in ways that evoked Foucault's postulation of discipline as the exercise of power through a series of daily, mundane practices that ultimately shape identity.⁴⁷ Marco Armiero, for instance, had already once written about the intellectual dangers of submitting to pre-defined disciplines: »Disciplines share with nations a sense of belonging and a passion for borders [...] Disciplines do not order only office space in the university buildings, but the very reality that they should help understand.«⁴⁸ When we spoke in the Fall of 2025, we revisited this piece (which I had always found particularly insightful). And in doing so, we discussed precisely the danger of *discipline* in the Foucauldian sense, as something that shapes meaning and identity. »For me,« Marco said, »the problem with disciplines isn't just how they organize knowledge—it's that they try to organize the world. That's what scares me.«

46 Latour's actor-network-theory emphasizes the fluidity and social construction of organizations (see, for example, *Reassembling the Social*).

47 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*.

48 Armiero, »Environmental History between Institutionalization and Revolution: A Short Commentary with Two Sites and One Experiment,« p. 46.

For a natural scientist, perhaps, it would be puzzling to read that establishing a set of organizing principles for the world and its reality could be scary. But Foucault first exemplified his theory on discipline through the institution of the prison. And in this sense, defining environmental humanities as a *discipline* could limit its possibilities, not only relegating its scholars to a particular building on campus but also reducing their ability to commit intellectual trespass. With respect to the long-standing debate as to the nature of environmental humanities, it seemed clear that institutionalization would ultimately impose a choice one way or the other.

For many I spoke to, pinning down environmental humanities to a defined discipline was not necessarily preferable. The danger, as Marco expressed it in our conversation, could be expressed by the metaphor of the »green ghetto«: »The risk of institutionalization is [in] creating a green ghetto, or maybe a gated community. A place where we all agree with each other but remain isolated.« This concern of isolation echoed across several of my conversations. Rob told me he feared some environmental humanities research was too »self-referential,« even as he recognized the difficulty of both speaking to »the complexities of human, social, historical, ecological relationships« and translating these insights outside the academy. Similarly, Paul wondered:

How do we make sure we don't just become—and I think, in a sense, I think it has already become this in some ways—a kind of very inward-looking group of people who are talking, that we're just talking to ourselves, right? [...] I do worry about that.

Opposing the isolating image of the ghetto, in Marco's view, was the Greek Agora, the Greek city central plaza that »embodied the idea of public life itself—a space where people would come together to discuss matters of common concern.«

Spatial and architectural metaphors like the ones Marco deployed appeared often in my interviews. Of course, ever since Dipesh Chakrabarty's reflection that »[t]he mansion of modern freedoms stands on an ever-expanding base of fossil-fuel use,«⁴⁹ architectural thinking has seemed generative for the field. That *space* should serve to illustrate their systematic thinking seems only apt, considering how deeply Lefebvrian thought has influenced many in the field.⁵⁰ Accordingly, a veritable city of architectural imagery and metaphors proliferated in my conversations—and especially whenever the scholars I spoke with reflected on the institutionalization of environmental humanities.

Each architectural image for environmental humanities as an embedded piece of academia represented a new perspective on the structural role that the field could play. Marco, for example, juxtaposed the images of the fortress and the tent:

The fortress stands for the proposition to build a stronger discipline, with thick walls and people at the door to check who is allowed to enter. Personally, I am more inclined toward the tent model. With it, I mean an idea of something very flexible, light, with no wall, actually built with the mission to welcome everyone who might pass by it. If academia is often a desert, well a tent should be the space for restoration, care, and exchange. The tent model does not imply strong disciplinary identities; you are not required to show that you are an authentic environmental humanities scholar.

In the *fortress* metaphor, Marco seemed to imply, environmental humanities would become less permissive. And indeed, I heard from Liesbeth van der Grift that in her opinion, leaning into a

49 Chakrabarty, »The Climate of History: Four Theses,« p. 208.

50 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*.

more theoretical definition for the field ran a real risk: »that we're also losing people.« Scholars who were less interested in theory, who had simply found the relevance of the environment for their work and wanted to include it, in Liesbeth's view often found that »the network is not necessarily a place where they can do this best.« Thus, building an intellectual fortress risked locking out scholars who would be interested in contributing to debates across the environmental humanities.

Conversely, to many, the idea of the academic »fortress« was precisely what environmental humanities had been created to contest. To Kate Rigby, the field's attempt to open the gates—or storm the walls, as it were—was the source of its difficulty institutionalizing in contexts where the disciplinary traditions were strong. Speaking on the German context, Kate remarked that her impression was that environmental humanities stood »poised to take off, but there are a lot of institutional rigidities that actually mitigate against not only—well, certainly against interdisciplinary research, let alone transdisciplinary research.« She spoke of disciplinary boundaries as being much more impermeable—the word she used was the German *undurchlässig*—than she had experienced them in either Australia or the UK. This meant, to her, that the »innovative generators« of thought that environmental humanities had produced (that is, some of the field's leading scholars) would find it difficult to »break through« a system built on disciplinary fortresses.

A closely related danger of the *disciplining* nature of institutionalizing emerged from my conversation with Ursula Münster. Speaking of her experience leading an institutionalizing environmental humanities initiative at the University of Oslo, she reflected that the demotion of what had initially been a cross-university effort—the Oslo School of Environmental Humanities—had ultimately ended up as a department-based *Center of Environmental Humanities*. This transition, she told me, was about more than how environmental humanities

was seen at the university; instead, it »came down to, again, disciplining the university rather than *undisciplining* [it]« (my emphasis). Students, Ursula told me, were always happy to hop across disciplinary boundaries and explore new perspectives— »much more so than the professors.« It follows, I thought, that interdisciplinarity can get trained out of us, *disciplined* out of us in the Foucauldian sense. By contrast, metaphors like Marco's tent symbolized environmental humanities' commitment to create more permeable, fluid spaces.

The *tent* was a metaphor evoked also by Lesley Green, independently from Marco, to emphasize the structure's capacity to lift up and hold space open for those standing inside the tent. In particular, Lesley described her own work at Environmental Humanities South as a »tent [she] managed to open up and [thus] lift up a space [...] where people could think.« With the space lifted and filled by many, she told me that she felt that »the central tent pole can withdraw,« giving her the comfort to give up the co-directorship to her colleague Nikiwe Solomon.

A similar metaphor for environmental humanities as a meeting point, yet one conveying a much less pronounced sense of permanence, was that of the umbrella. It was evoked, independently and variably, by Christof Mauch, Ursula Münster, and Rob Gioielli when describing the field. As they did so, they all employed the metaphor of the umbrella in a similar sense to that of Marco's tent: Namely, as a place that can shelter many under the same overarching concept; a shelter that can welcome and be home to many. Rob wondered out loud whether environmental humanities' umbrella was a place »where we bring together different approaches in different constellations [...] a space for you to pull in different disciplines, different disciplinary approaches in creative ways.« For Christof, the »umbrella« also represented the field's reach across different *types* of institutions, through themes that could »lend themselves to displays in museums and art galleries.«

Considering the significance of the field's public role, this function was worth retaining.

Hence the umbrella, tent, or Agora, across many of the accounts I heard, represented an all-important in-between status. It meant higher independence and intellectual flexibility. Intellectual trespass, many of my interlocutors insisted, is crucial for the tasks of environmental humanities. »I come to the socio-ecological crisis with my tools,« Marco observed, »but the crisis isn't defined by my tools.« Thus, as I heard also from

»I come to the socio-ecological crisis with my tools, but the crisis isn't defined by my tools.«

Marco Armiero

Liz DeLoughrey, for researchers who did interdisciplinary work, providing them with a meeting space within the otherwise rigidly organized academy was vital. Speaking of the Rachel Carson Center's long-standing interdisciplinary

nature, she observed that »It has kept so many scholars afloat, you know, when they're doing interdisciplinary work that is absolutely critical, but their own departments may not recognize it.« By contrast, anchoring environmental humanities at an academic institution could come with the danger of buying into the rigidity of existing structures and disciplinary boundaries.

Yet, on the other hand, being the tent in the desert, the umbrella in the storm, or the raft on the tumultuous water emphasized the uncertainty of interdisciplinary work against which institutionalization ought to preserve environmental humanities. When we discussed the process of institutionalizing environmental humanities, Rob also spoke about the challenge of sustaining this shelter in the long term: »the problem of the interdisciplinary center [is], it has no home.« For Christof, too, the interdisciplinary character of environmental humanities was a »prominent challenge« in the institutional sense: centers like the Rachel Carson Center where scholars from many different perspectives could meet were, as he conceded, the first likely victims of »administrators' budget cuts.« For both of them,

much as for Sebastian, a risk for the field's interdisciplinary status pertains to the stability and future it can offer its members. »[I]t is an umbrella chiseled as a tool,« Rob remarked. But, he continued, »what does that do in terms of how we train people?«

At the same time, others expressed the concern that as interdisciplinarity becomes more common, environmental humanities runs the risk of becoming too *disciplined*. This was a danger that several of the scholars I spoke with also saw when contemplating the junction of environmental humanities-as-field-or-meeting-ground. »[A]nalogous to other interdisciplinary fields,« Jamie Wang mused, »there is a risk that [environmental humanities] might become too broad, or somewhat distracting.« One risk with institutionalizing the field, therefore, was that »situating relationships/kinships within an institutional framework, even for the best intentions, may radically, unwittingly simplify them in the process.«

Both Francesca Tarocco and Katie Ritson voiced similar opinions. »There's always a risk with interdisciplinary discourses and practice,« Francesca observed, »that once it becomes appropriated either by the mainstream or the institution, then it's no longer cool.« She made a parallel with the digital humanities, which she felt had lost their appeal for funders after digital practices became better adopted and much more commonplace. In the same vein, Katie remarked, one could see environmental humanities »becoming a victim of its own success.« As its mainstay arguments—the importance of the environment, climate change as a cultural issue rather than a purely scientific one—grow more »commonplace in other subjects,« the field's exclusive competence may decline. Yet Katie saw this as »a good thing«:

It has succeeded and that doesn't mean that it would need to never be formalized anywhere—maybe a bit like gender studies, which did a lot of work outside of its disciplinary

structures and still does—I guess environmental humanities should be like that, see itself like that. It's not really about the infrastructure, but about the scholarship that's being done wherever it crops up.

Having their key concerns grow more pervasive, to Katie, did not mean that either gender studies or environmental humanities were past the need to institutionalize. »Don't think we won the war yet,« she observed tartly. However, the propagation of either gender studies or environmental humanities themes across wider conversations meant a balance point: perhaps both fields did not need »to keep growing and growing and growing,« but equally they did need institutional bastions:

I still think it's good that there are departments [...] where [these fields] can be studied, and there are curricula and people who have professorships in that specifically, because there still is some holding to account to be done.

Ultimately, as I heard from several interlocutors, navigating institutionalization was about navigating the ethics and responsibilities of organizing environmental humanities structures in the contemporary world. »There's a self-reflexiveness that we need as scholars,« Liz observed, »that we produce our work in a global system and in a capitalist system.« The choices each institute, scholar, or group of scholars made toward institutionalization, in that sense, needed to align with the field's wider goals.

However, retaining a clear view of the field's moral horizons did not mean eschewing institutionalization altogether. On a very prosaic level, I heard confirmation from many that establishing environmental humanities was important to provide at least some security to the early career scholars it had produced. »We need more jobs,« Ursula Münster succinctly stated. Francesca Tarocco

agreed: She hoped that the efforts she and other colleagues were putting into promoting and strengthening the field would eventually translate into positions: »Where are the jobs? You know, we need to generate more jobs, not just to train people interdisciplinary, but also to give them jobs.« And indeed, this concern pertained not only to ensuring the availability of a career ladder but also to environmental humanities' wider work. Even Marco—who joked that his colleagues would expect him to speak up for revolution rather than institutionalization—observed that »[t]o change things, you need organization [...] In that sense, institutions can be very useful—if they think of themselves as platforms for change.« But, he added, »we don't need to make endless compromises just to be institutionalized.« And here he unknowingly aligned with Sebastian, the self-proclaimed »second-generation« environmental humanities scholar, who told me that he was taking a very pragmatic approach to the precarity of being part of such an institutionally uncertain field. Despite having invested a lot of his identity in environmental humanities' mission, Sebastian shared, he tried to always keep in mind that ultimately »the university is a factory.« As a result: »I'm trying to unlearn how I became completely swallowed by this job.«

Olympic infrastructures of environmental humanities

While reporting on the more pragmatic sides of environmental humanities' present and future, I would venture here on an architectural metaphor of my own. As I write these words, preparations are underway for the 2026 Winter Olympic Games in Milano-Cortina, twenty years after the 2006 Winter Olympics in Turin. The timing of northern Italy's recurring hosting prompts reflection, and Turin seems to embody the duality for which the Olympic Games are known with respect to their host

cities: Raising hopes of urban and regional revitalization yet often leaving mixed legacies of abandoned infrastructure and debt.⁵¹ It is a well-known story, one not confined to the Olympics. Once the targeted funding to create all that spectacular infrastructure has been spent, and the closing fireworks peter out, it falls to the taxpayers' much more limited resources to maintain and integrate the structures left behind into the city's quotidian life for decades to come.

The metaphor strikes me as apt to the many discussions I had with scholars about the challenge of institutionalizing environmental humanities not only ethically speaking but also practically so, in a time when many original funding lines have either run out or been cut midstream.⁵² Worldwide, many environmental humanities centers (and indeed, many interdisciplinary centers in general) have experienced what I am here calling the Olympic model of funding: Spectacular inaugural investment followed by a much leaner pecuniary diet and the challenge of retaining either the infrastructure or the momentum built up during the early years. The Rachel Carson Center was first established in 2010 as a Center for Advanced Study (Käte Hamburger Kolleg) with a German Federal Ministry for Research and Education (BMBF) grant running over a total of twelve years; after that grant's end, the focus initially fell on third-party projects, at least until the end of Christof Mauch's directorship. In the case of the Stockholm Environmental Humanities Lab, an original funding from a private donor supported the institution for ten years, which had been followed by the same rate of funding from the university for another five years. But in the future, Rob told me, attracting third-party funding through research projects

51 See, for example, Mastorino's 2026 article »All the Differences between Turin 2006 and Milano Cortina 2026: The Evolution of the Winter Olympic Games in Italy.«

52 As has happened *en masse* in Trump's USA, but also in the UK under massive cuts for humanities programs.

would be crucial to keep the center going. Similarly, when I spoke to Ursula Münster, who had been tasked with leading the Oslo School of Environmental Humanities at the University of Oslo, she shared that funding had played an important role in its transformation from a cross-faculty initiative to one based in a singular discipline, something that she viewed as a »failure of economics« with respect to interdisciplinary work.

Across a number of academic contexts, then, my interviews with colleagues touched on the difficulties of the funding landscape and its impact on institutionalizing the environmental humanities. Katie Ritson shared her impression that overall, »there's now less will to institutionalize than there was five years ago—or maybe not even less will, less money.« For example, I learned from Susanne Knittel and Liesbeth van de Grift that environmental humanities funding in the Dutch context had been recently pared back. Susanne reminisced that »at Utrecht, we had for a while this fantastic moment« in which environmental humanities and ecological work more broadly had been one of the Netherlands' strategic themes for »radically interdisciplinary work.« This had meant, while it lasted, not only »a lot of funding« but also a lot of support for establishing collaborations. But new budget cuts in the Netherlands, she continued, meant that »the funding is slashed.« Thus, as Liesbeth also explained, politically negotiated strategic priorities for research undermined efforts to institutionalize environmental humanities in the Netherlands: »it means that nowhere in the Netherlands is there a specifically environmental humanities focused and also in that way legitimated institution to defend environmental humanities as a field.« Hence, according to Liesbeth, the field's institutionalization in the Netherlands had »lagged behind.«

Equally, in the UK, wide and sweeping funding cuts threatened to undermine what had been a growing momentum for the field. Kate Rigby told me that the booming of environmental humanities professorships, Master's programs, and initiatives

now evident across the UK were all established »unfortunately at a time when the humanities in general are gravely at risk and humanities' programs closing down left, right, and center.« As a result, she went on, »one has reasons to be anxious about this really fledgling but strongly growing environmental humanities push in the UK, it's really, really sad.«

Speaking about the Bristol experience, Rachel Murray shared a similar sense about the UK funding and higher education landscape:

[...] at the moment it feels like there are some uncertainties hanging over the future for environmental humanities, certainly at Bristol. As the UK higher education is increasingly facing funding challenges and lack of government support with those, there is a kind of fear that we might not be able to continue indefinitely with the work that we're doing, both as a center and on the MA.

Like Kate, Rachel felt that the funding cuts impacted the field precisely at a moment when it had gained critical momentum. Rachel herself, buoyed by the enthusiasm of students she taught in Bristol's environmental humanities program, told me that she remained generally if »quietly« optimistic about being able to continue her work even in the context of pared down funding. Nevertheless, she also observed that the uncertainty and valuation embedded in the UK's funding cuts across the humanities felt bitter:

[It] feels to me as though as soon as there is any kind of financial duress, higher education institutes immediately pivot their funding, or what remains of their funding, toward STEM, and Arts and Humanities becomes this kind of, »Ohh it was nice while we had the money,

but we don't have the money anymore, so we're gonna have it away from you.« [It feels] depressing to see that happening.

Indeed, as many others also observed, these challenges in funding were not limited to individual geographic contexts or to the environmental humanities specifically. Instead, they extended to humanities disciplines across the board. In Jamie Wang's words, humanities subjects »are facing continuous and intensifying challenges on multiple fronts (significant funding cuts in many parts of the world being a case in point). As we are at a junction where many unthinkable are being normalized, it is all the more important to bring in and center the arts and humanities in the conversations.« And when I asked Katie Ritson what she hoped for the future of environmental humanities, she also framed her answer in the context of the challenges *all* humanities disciplines would face in the

»As we are at a junction where many unthinkable are being normalized, it is all the more important to bring in and center the arts and humanities in the conversations.«
Jamie Wang

immediate future: »I would hope [environmental humanities is] still there. I would hope that it doesn't get caught in a kind of general deforestation of the university ecosystem, which feels like a lot of particularly humanities subjects are going to struggle with in the coming years.« For many, hence, the anxiety surrounding what Katie called the »deforestation of the university ecosystem« and especially of the humanities tied back to concerns about the wider political moment and the difficulty of supporting and foregrounding environmental humanities perspectives just when they might be needed most.

When it comes to Olympic villages, not all stories are bleak. For the 1994 Lillehammer Winter Olympics in Norway, for example, the Hafjelltoppen media cabin village was designed explicitly for conversion into privately owned cabins and

was later considered to have altered the standard for cabin developments across Norway.⁵³ Additionally, starting in the early 1990s, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) responded to consistent criticism about the long-term impact of previous Games by introducing a series of agendas and guidelines intended to promote a focus on social, economic, and ecological sustainability.⁵⁴ Recent reports cautiously indicate that these efforts have registered positive progress on all counts—and especially with respect to »greenness«—over several successive Winter Olympic Games.⁵⁵

In this sense, my metaphor of Olympic infrastructures could also be turned to a much more optimistic purpose. The institutionalization of environmental humanities has had a number of definitive successes that will continue to influence the field in the future. Naturally, my interlocutors also spoke to those (both prompted and unprompted) in our interviews. Kate Rigby, for instance, pointed out that many funders across a variety of contexts now recognized and specifically sought out environmental humanities research. As an example, she told me that the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council had established a dedicated environmental humanities funding line. Others spoke about the field's successful institutionalization in the scholarly publishing world, particularly through the presence of multiple journals and books. »A good field,« Rob observed, involved »having four or five journals that are in conversation [and] differently defined.« Environmental humanities, in that sense, has a well-defined institutional presence: Besides the *Environmental Humanities* journal, one could point to

53 Albeit not necessarily only in positive ways. See Finn Arne Jørgensen's 2026 piece »The High-Energy Afterlives of Lillehammer's Olympic Cabins.«

54 Most recently, the *IOC Sustainability Strategy* (2017), or the *IOC Olympic Agenda 2020+5* (2021).

55 See Tang, Xiu, and Xiao, »Transforming ›White Elephants‹ into Positive Legacies for Cities: An Assessment of the Sustainability of Winter Olympic Venues and Its Implications.«

Lagoonscapes: The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities, *Ecocene: Cappadocia Journal of Environmental Humanities*, *Regeneration: Environment, Art, Culture, and Resistance: A Journal of Radical Environmental Humanities*—with the latter’s revival from *Resilience: A Journal of Environmental Humanities*, as Rob pointed out, offering its own story of institutional success. In the same line of thought, Christof pointed to the »book series published by Routledge, Cambridge University Press, or Metzler in Germany« as an example of environmental humanities’ »unique development« over the past two decades.

When it came to tracing the success of institutionalization during the same period, I heard about a number of different strategies. These approaches, in fact, often explicitly addressed the architectural challenges I outlined earlier in this chapter. For instance, in several places, local initiatives of environmental humanities’ institutionalization had taken on pragmatic pathways when it came to the fortress-or-tent debate, building on existing institutional foundations and the strengths that they could already offer. This was the case, for instance, in both Utrecht and Bristol. »What we’ve done at Utrecht,« Liesbeth explained, »is also to refrain from coming up with any kind of definition [...] but really focus on what is it actually that we have here at Utrecht University, within the Faculty of Humanities.« The Utrecht Network for Environmental Humanities, therefore, became an expression of what Liesbeth called »a particular manifestation of environmental humanities« that emphasized questions of justice, memory studies, heritage, and conflict. In the same way, Paul told me on behalf of the University of Bristol’s Center for Environmental Humanities that »we absolutely don’t have any sort of pretensions to being comprehensive, I don’t think that would be possible and I think I would say we place a lot of emphasis on plurality of perspectives and approaches.« As a result, what the Center for Environmental Humanities had been particularly successful at was integrating different environmental

humanities themes into its teaching as they emerged by involving its different scholars.

For other centers, too, the key to building the metaphorical tent was to build out its poles. At the RCC, for example, this had occurred through an emphasis on teaching. »Establishing a Master's degree program or other study programs like doctoral programs or certificate programs,« Christof shared, »is the best way to get a university to provide funding in the longer term. Study programs anchor the field in the institution.« Thus, »anchoring« the RCC at LMU Munich had involved establishing a doctoral program, a certificate program, and later a Master's program—steps that led the university to supporting the center with its spaces and with the establishment of a formal professorship, the Chair in Environmental Humanities, to steward the center and its programs in the future. For this process, Christof also told me, nestling the interdisciplinarity of the RCC within an established department had a definitive advantage:

In Munich it helped to be based in a faculty where people had little or no idea about what the Environmental Humanities actually are. What the Rachel Carson Center did was highly exotic for literary and language scholars. This ignorance sparked curiosity. There was no envy, no competition. This led to the acceptance of new programs.

In this sense, in Christof's account, leaning into the exoticism of environmental humanities' interdisciplinarity was actually an advantage that allowed the »tent« to stand stronger. Liz agreed, speaking about the RCC's institutional impact beyond its own context: »The Rachel Carson Center has been a beacon, you know, for doing this interdisciplinary work.«

When it came to other institutes, too, many stressed the importance of locating interdisciplinarity in the midst of the material and intellectual infrastructure that was already in

place. Several of my interlocutors spoke about the Greenhouse Institute at the University of Stavanger, which they felt had paved the way for establishing environmental humanities institutionally in the Norwegian context. Ursula, speaking further about the Norwegian context, spoke of later physically »mapping« environmental humanities on the University of Oslo's campus, situating the community's regular lunchtime talks in a markedly central location: »It was important that it was not in one department but at the library, where it was a public space. Everyone felt at home [...] [T]o me, that was important.«

Finally, a pragmatic way in which institutions approached their consolidation relied on the literal—geographical and material—foundations of their space, along with the communities that came to inhabit that space. At NICHE in Venice, Francesca told me, it helped to consider the center as »a platform for plurality« from the start. »It takes,« she observed, »of course, work and nourishing relations. So, it takes a lot of really quotidian efforts to get people to talk to each other within and outside disciplinary boundaries to create truly interdisciplinary communities.« But in Francesca's opinion, this effort is ultimately what led to NICHE's success not only in the sense of making it known as an intellectual space but also in the sense of nourishing relationships that led to it being a magnet for many »wonderful people.« As I reported earlier, Francesca thought that NICHE could be both defined and differentiated by the unique perspective of Venice and a focus on water; and perhaps it was the fluidity of this perspective that helped underpin its plurality.

But plurality, indeed, was important for environmental humanities on its own. It may become apparent, when reading all of the above, that environmental humanities' distinct geographies have demanded also a variety of distinct infrastructures. I often heard this in my interviews as well. Liesbeth, for instance, remarked that »something that is characteristic of the environmental humanities is that it's probably so different from,

you know, country to country, institution to institution and I think that's actually one of its strong features.« And indeed, this variety was, across all the accounts that I heard, the source of many virtues that environmental humanities had inherently adopted.

The field's plurality was a key reason why, as Ursula told me, »co-writing« and »working in teams« were vital modes of inquiry for the contemporary environmental humanities. Co-teaching,

similarly, was a strength of environmental humanities pedagogy that many of my interlocutors highlighted independently from one another. Moreover, everyone whom I asked about methodologies in environmental humanities agreed that these were above all multiple. »I don't think there's any standard set of methods,« Rob observed; while Christof went so far as to declare that he »would not dare to name« any methodology as central at the expense of others. Environmental humanities' methods, he insisted, have always been »highly pluralistic, experimental in part, and in any case constantly in flux.«

»Something that is characteristic of the environmental humanities is that it's probably so different from country to country, institution to institution, and I think that's actually one of its strong features.«
Liesbeth van de Grift

Coda

After all that I have written here, I must return to one key point: Environmental humanities is above all collaborative and plurivocal. Half-jokingly, one of my interlocutors exclaimed—but wishing, on this one note, to remain anonymous—»the lone white man researcher time is over.« Meaning, too, perhaps the death of the long-held myth of lonely excellence. As many of those I spoke to expressed, and as the decades of conversations of the Rachel Carson Center and other havens of environmental humanities research have shown, environmental humanities cannot be reduced to one definition, nor can it be constrained to a range of topics dictated by any singular person. The field's excellence resides in its capacity to generate productive dialogue and support an ever-evolving process of learning from one another—across disciplines and beyond the academy.

So many of my interlocutors returned again and again to the wealth of resources that environmental humanities can offer when it brings diverse perspectives together. Paul Merchant remarked that »the really defining characteristic of environmental humanities is actually as a set of methods and ways of working, particularly collaborative and creative.« Ursula Münster, similarly, saw a core feature of environmental humanities as the concern for »how you can connect debates and topics and inspire cross- [and] transnational collaborations«; in this vein, she also spoke passionately about linking with different publics and the arts sector. I would revisit here the appeals I have described in sections above to uphold alternative narratives for the world, whether these be revolutionary or quietly optimistic. To many I

spoke with, this was a key duty for environmental humanities—now and in the future.

In this sense, against the world's current precarious situation, environmental humanities *should* inherently embody a political stance in ways both narrative and active. Doing scholarly work, teaching, and taking up leadership in environmental humanities, for many I spoke to, meant at the core learning from and giving platforms to others, especially to heretofore underrepresented or suppressed voices. If the best practices of environmental humanities have involved co-writing, co-creating, and collective telling of stories across any and all spaces, then in the institutional sense, for my interlocutors, the best *centers* of environmental humanities were also those that succeeded in creating communities of learning dedicated to many voices and visions—rather than following any one person's singular narrative of the field. Upholding that plurality of the future is a vital function of the environmental humanities—especially in such a tumultuous political present.

As far as hopeful perspectives for the future go, perhaps the task of elevating different voices and narratives that I have distilled here as central to environmental humanities might come across as a relatively weak point of action. Yet I found it a powerful perspective. The strength and joy that can come from bringing together a variety of different voices resonated across all my interviews. Teaching, listening, retelling origin myths, and engaging with visions of the world we have not heard before are themselves radical—and political—acts of optimism. A hopeful future may well emerge through a guerrilla narrative—and environmental humanities, even in this difficult moment, is best poised to tell its story.

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In a world beset with multiple non-environmental crises, what should the role of environmental humanities be?

Drawing on conversations with fifteen environmental humanities scholars, this book explores different challenges, possibilities, and hopes for the field. It presents different arguments for its intellectual agenda and public duty, as well as for its institutionalization and pedagogy—not only in this difficult moment but also looking out toward the future. Ultimately, the book shares accounts of how environmental humanities can help those engaged with the field to find each other and with others, to hold space for radically resisting singular narratives and false binaries about the world, and to imagine alternative futures grounded in efforts existing today.