



# Thinking Through the Environment, Unsettling the Humanities

**Deborah Bird Rose<sup>a/b</sup>, Thom van Dooren<sup>b</sup>, Matthew Chrulew<sup>b</sup>, Stuart Cooke<sup>c</sup>,  
Matthew Kearnes<sup>b</sup> and Emily O’Gorman<sup>d</sup>**

*Macquarie University (a), University of New South Wales (b), Griffith University (c), University of Wollongong (d)*

Welcome to the first volume of this new, international, open-access journal. *Environmental Humanities* aims to support and further a wide range of conversations on environmental issues in this time of growing awareness of the ecological and social challenges facing all life on earth. The field of environmental humanities is growing rapidly, both in research and teaching. In just the past few years, a number of research centres and undergraduate and postgraduate programs have emerged at universities all around the world: in the USA, the UK, Scandinavia, Taiwan and Australia, to name just a few places. In each area, this broad domain of scholarship is being taken up and developed in a distinct way.<sup>1</sup> In general, however, the environmental humanities can be understood to be a wide ranging response to the environmental challenges of our time. Drawing on humanities and social science disciplines that have brought qualitative analysis to bear on environmental issues, the environmental humanities engages with fundamental questions of meaning, value, responsibility and purpose in a time of rapid, and escalating, change.

The emergence of the environmental humanities is part of a growing willingness to engage with the environment from within the humanities and social sciences. While historically both fields have focused on ‘the human’ in a way that has often excluded or backgrounded the non-human world, since the 1960s, interest in environmental issues has gradually gained pace within disciplines, giving us, for example, strong research agendas in environmental history, environmental philosophy, environmental anthropology and sociology, political ecology, posthuman geographies and ecocriticism (among others). Indeed, in many of these fields, what have traditionally been termed ‘environmental issues’ have been shown to be inescapably entangled with human ways of being in the world, and broader questions of politics and social justice.

But recent interest in the environmental humanities, as a field and a label, is a result of something more than the growth of work within a range of distinct disciplinary areas. Rather, the emergence of the environmental humanities indicates a renewed emphasis on bringing

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<sup>1</sup> Some of this diversity is showcased in the profiles of members of our editorial board, available at: <http://environmentalhumanities.org/about/profiles>

various approaches to environmental scholarship into conversation with each other in numerous and diverse ways.

In general terms, the approaches coalescing under the banner of the environmental humanities have explicitly rejected the way in which humanities work on the environment has frequently been cast as 'non-science', with the primary role of mediating between the natural sciences and 'the public'. In addition, work in the environmental humanities has tended to eschew the focus of many of the approaches that have dominated the political uptake of social science and humanities scholarship on the environment that have their grounding in behavioural economics and cognitive psychology. As is increasingly being shown, at the core of these approaches is an impoverished and narrow conceptualisation of human agency, social and cultural formation, social change and the entangled relations between human and non-human worlds.<sup>2</sup>

Given this backdrop, the need for a more integrated and conceptually sensitive approach to environmental issues is being increasingly recognised across the humanities and the social and environmental sciences.<sup>3</sup> The development of the environmental humanities might therefore be understood as a response to this need; an effort to enrich environmental research with a more extensive conceptual vocabulary, whilst at the same time vitalising the humanities by rethinking the ontological exceptionality of the human.

The humanities have traditionally worked with questions of meaning, value, ethics, justice and the politics of knowledge production. In bringing these questions into environmental domains, we are able to articulate a 'thicker' notion of humanity, one that rejects reductionist accounts of self-contained, rational, decision making subjects. Rather, the environmental humanities positions us as participants in lively ecologies of meaning and value, entangled within rich patterns of cultural and historical diversity that shape who we are and the ways in which we are able to 'become with' others.<sup>4</sup> At the core of this approach is a focus on the underlying cultural and philosophical frameworks that are entangled with the ways in which diverse human cultures have made themselves at home in a more than human world. In short, there is now a recognition that the whole world, at all scales, is a 'contact zone'.<sup>5</sup> The deepening environmental and social crises of our time are unfolding in this zone where the nature/culture divide collapses and the possibilities of life and death for everyone are at stake.

In taking up these topics, the work of thinking through the environment also offers fresh provocations to the humanities. As Dipesh Chakrabarty has noted, the radical alteration of the world in which we live as a result of climate change, biodiversity loss and numerous other anthropogenic factors, requires us to rethink many of the concepts and ideals that have been central to our understandings and aspirations.<sup>6</sup> For example, Chakrabarty notes that while

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Shove, "Beyond the ABC: climate change policy and theories of social change," *Environment & Planning A* 42, no. 6 (2010).

<sup>3</sup> For example, see the recent Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes' (CHCI) *Humanities for the Environment* initiative and the European Science Foundation's *Responses to Environmental and Societal Challenges for Our Unstable Earth* (RESCUE) initiative. For broader discussion of the importance of the environmental humanities for the natural sciences, see Sverker Sörlin, "Environmental Humanities: Why Should Biologists Interested in the Environment Take the Humanities Seriously?," *BioScience* 62, no. 9 (2012); John Urry, *Climate Change and Society* (London: Polity, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*.

<sup>5</sup> Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009).

‘freedom’ has been thought in numerous ways—one might even say that it “is a blanket category for diverse imaginations of human autonomy and sovereignty”—“the question of human freedom [is today placed] under the cloud of the Anthropocene.”<sup>7</sup> The logic is inescapable: through taking the environment seriously, this pillar of western thought and value is currently being unsettled. This is to say that the Anthropocene unmakes the idea of the unlimited, autonomous human and calls for a radical reworking of a great deal of what we thought we knew about ourselves and the humanities as fields of enquiry. This matters profoundly for all branches of the humanities insofar as they struggle to explore the implications of new narratives that are calibrated to the realities of our changing world.

At the same time, an important tension is emerging between, on the one hand, the common focus of the humanities on critique and an ‘unsettling’ of dominant narratives, and on the other, the dire need for all peoples to be constructively involved in helping to shape better possibilities in these dark times. The environmental humanities is necessarily, therefore, an effort to inhabit a difficult space of simultaneous critique and action. And so, we are required to re-imagine the proper questions and approaches of our fields. How can our accumulated knowledge and practice, built up over centuries, be refashioned to meet these new challenges, and to productively rethink ‘the human’ in more than human terms?

Environmental historians have been making strong efforts in this direction for decades now, highlighting the fact that the ‘natural world’ is not a passive background to human dramas. Rather, traditional human histories are situated dynamically within broader earth histories. For example, considerations of deep time draw on geology, evolutionary biology and climate science to recast human stories within the context of larger synergetic time frames and processes. For almost as long, ecocriticism has been revealing how many of our poems, songs and stories are deeply reliant on interactions with larger, nonhuman landscapes and climatological patterns. At the heart of ecocritical enquiry is an *ecophilosophical* motivation to explore fundamental questions concerning the relationship between human thought, language and the wider environment.

A key figure in analysing some of the major parameters of this growing field of research has been the Australian philosopher Val Plumwood. She identified two central tasks for the ‘ecological humanities’.<sup>8</sup> These tasks are to resituate the human within the environment, and to resituate nonhumans within cultural and ethical domains.<sup>9</sup> Both tasks aim to overcome the nature/culture binary that positions humans outside of nature and thus implicitly posits that we are free to control our own destiny within a broader ‘natural’ world that is devoid of meaning, values, and ethics. Plumwood was part of a larger tradition of environmental philosophy that over the past few decades has addressed issues as diverse as the moral status of non-humans, modes of ethical thought such as biocentrism or ecocentrism, ecofeminism, the mindfulness of matter, and numerous other areas of analysis. This tradition brings these great humanities questions of meaning, value, and human responsibilities to bear both on how we understand ourselves and how we understand the nonhuman world. How are human identities and responsibilities to be articulated when we understand ourselves to be members of multispecies communities that emerge through the entanglements of agential beings?

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<sup>7</sup> Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History,” 208, 12.

<sup>8</sup> Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> ———, “Animals and Ecology: Towards a Better Integration,” *unpublished article* (available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/1885/41767>) (2003): 2.

Taken together, this work has challenged and unsettled traditional approaches to the humanities, including the questions that we ask and the ways in which we explore them. In this context, a wide range of novel interdisciplinary approaches to scholarship are emerging, drawing the humanities and the natural and social sciences into dialogue in new and exciting ways. The recent emergence of ‘multispecies ethnography’ and related fields offers an important example of this potential. Drawing on anthropology, philosophy, science and technology studies, geography, biology, ethology and numerous other fields, multispecies ethnography aims to develop a research practice that is not “just confined to the human but is concerned with the effects of our entanglements with other kinds of living selves.”<sup>10</sup> This is an approach that, as Anna Tsing notes, “allows something new: passionate immersion in the lives of the nonhumans being studied.”<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Dominique Lestel’s etho-ethnology/ethno-ethnology utilises the methods of the social and animal sciences to explore “hybrid human/animal communities sharing meaning, interests and affects.”<sup>12</sup> These examples gesture towards a great range of innovative interdisciplinary work that is situated productively at the intersection of the natural sciences and the humanities, and which increasingly emphasises the importance of indigenous and local knowledges, as part of a radical reconfiguration of our understandings of the living world.

Viewed from this perspective, this work also serves to vitalise traditional concepts of ethics, care and virtue. For example, working at the intersection between continental philosophy and (non)human geography, Nigel Clark takes these themes in another direction, asking us to think in terms of a prehuman, geologic timescale. In approaching an indifferent earth he suggests that “we are gifted into an atmosphere, a biosphere, a hydrosphere, a lithosphere” and that “these pre-existing organisations of the elements retain a capacity to withdraw the support and substance they provide.”<sup>13</sup> In Clark’s account, ethics are therefore reframed by a conception of the radical asymmetry of the relationship between human existence and the environment. Drawing on Levinas, he writes of an ethics that responds precisely to this asymmetry not as a philosophical afterthought but as a condition of social life itself. So too, recent work in science and technology studies asks us to consider what it would mean to care with and for the artefacts of contemporary technoscientific culture.<sup>14</sup> Rather than relegate ethics to classic moral dilemmas or the consequentialism of bioethics, this work asks us to attend to our entanglement with both living and non-living beings.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Eduardo Kohn in S. Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich, “The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography,” *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 4 (2010).

<sup>11</sup> Anna Tsing, “Arts of Inclusion, or, How to Love a Mushroom,” *Australian Humanities Review* 50 (2011): 19.

<sup>12</sup> Dominique Lestel, Florence Brunois, and Florence Gaunet, “Etho-Ethnology and Ethno-Ethology: The coming synthesis,” *Social Science Information* 45.2 (2006): 156.

<sup>13</sup> Nigel Clark, *Inhuman Nature: Sociable Life on a Dynamic Planet* (London: Sage, 2011), p. 52; Myra J. Hird, *The Origins of Sociable Life: Evolution After Science Studies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Vicki Kirby, *Quantum Anthropologies: Life at Large* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, “Matters of Care in Technoscience: Assembling Neglected Things,” *Social Studies of Science* 4, no. 1 (2011); Annemarie Mol, Ingunn Moser, and Jeannette Pols, eds., *Care in Practice: On Tinkering in Clinics, Homes and Farms* (Bielefeld: Verlag, 2010).

<sup>15</sup> Donna Haraway, “Cloning Mutts, Saving Tigers: Ethical Emergents in Technocultural Dog Worlds,” in *Remaking Life and Death: Toward an Anthropology of the Biosciences*, ed. Sarah Franklin and Margaret Lock (Santa Fe: NM: SAR Press, 2003).

This journal aims to contribute to the development of these and other emergent conversations. Bearing in mind that there are already established journals within the various sub-disciplines of environmental humanities research, this journal has a particular mandate to publish papers that are seeking to reach a broader interdisciplinary readership, and/or that develop bold new interdisciplinary approaches to environmental scholarship. In many ways it is not yet clear what the environmental humanities are or will become. On one level, the environmental humanities might be understood as a useful umbrella, bringing together many sub-fields that have emerged over the past few decades and facilitating new conversations between them. On another, perhaps more ambitious level, the environmental humanities also challenges these disciplinary fields of inquiry, functioning as a provocation to a more interdisciplinary set of interventions directed toward some of the most pressing issues of our time. Both approaches are currently cohabiting under the one banner. This journal aims to open up a space within which contributors and readers can participate in the many lively possibilities now taking shape.

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