



COMMENTARY

Understanding of and Vision for the Environmental Humanities

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Science is a liberal art and should be taught as such.

—American Association for the Advancement of Science, *The Liberal Art of Science*

The first step is to tell the truth—about the danger we face, about its causes, and about the measures that must be taken to turn back the threat. In a time of universal deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act.

—Ian Angus, *The Myth of 'Environmental Catastrophism'*

It is only through fundamental change at the center of the system, from which the pressures on the planet principally emanate, that there is any genuine possibility of avoiding ultimate ecological destruction.

—John Bellamy Foster, *The Ecological Revolution*

A defining quality of the ecological or environmental humanities (EH) movement is its persistent resistance to being nailed down. To be sure, this resilience is by design. As Deborah Bird Rose and colleagues point out in their 2012 introduction to the journal *Environmental Humanities*, the program has three main facets, and all operate to challenge or counter the late modern status quo.¹ The three facets are:

- 'Thinking through' (or 'reading off'²) the environment;
- 'Unsettling' dominant narratives through critique and other forms of resistance; and
- 'Bridge-building' between disparate narratives (i.e., community-building).

¹ Deborah Bird Rose *et al.*, "Thinking Through the Environment, Unsettling the Humanities," *Environmental Humanities* 1 (2012). See also Robyn Eckersley, "The Death of Nature and the Birth of the Ecological Humanities," *Organization & Environment* 11 (1998); Deborah Bird Rose and Libby Robin, "The Ecological Humanities is Action: An Invitation," *Australian Humanities Review* 1 (2004); Cathy N. Davidson and Theo Goldberg, "A Manifesto for the Humanities in a Technological Age," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* February (2004); Samuel Day Fassbinder, Anthony Jay Nocella, and Richard Kahn, eds., *Greening the Academy: Ecopedagogy Through the Liberal Arts* (Boston: Sense Publishers, 2012).

² John Barry, *Environment and Social Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

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Whereas the first aspect concerns re-thinking, re-imagining or re-storying³ the world in light of ecology and environment—that is, critically attending to one’s ecophilosophy, ecocosmology or worldview—the latter two largely involve EH participants and others *acting* on those new stories.

Importantly, these two forms of action, unsettling and bridge-building, are neither necessarily concomitant nor simpatico; nevertheless, the two increasingly exist today in a paradoxical state of conflict or tension. Indeed, it is under these tenuous circumstances and in this harsh light—what Ulrich Beck calls “world risk society”⁴—that the Environmental Humanities becomes *necessarily* “an effort to inhabit the difficult space of simultaneous critique and action.”⁵ Put another way, the essential tension in EH exists between the need to unsettle and “the dire need for all peoples to be constructively involved in helping to shape better possibilities in these dark times.”⁶

It is the primary task of the Environmental Humanities to foster critical examination in and of all three aspects, equally. Going forward, however, effort must increasingly be made to move beyond ecocriticism to ecoaction, mobilizing (radical) change “on the ground,” be it in the form of actively spreading counternarratives or (re)building healthy communities and places.⁷ This is, of course, no small undertaking.

My personal vision for the Environmental Humanities is to see increased focus in three overlapping areas: (a) *holistic critical theory*, specifically the union of natural and cultural “critical heritage studies”⁸; (b) *critical pedagogy*, particularly the merging of natural and cultural heritage pedagogies, including efforts toward recognizing teaching as action and the classroom as “the field”⁹ and “decolonizing”¹⁰ the classroom via holistic and critical

³ Marcia McKenzie, Paul Hart, Heesoon Bai, and Bob Jickling, eds., *Fields of Green: Restorying Culture, Environment, and Education* (Cresskill: Hampton Press, 2009). See also William Cronon, “A Place for Stories: Nature, History and Narrative,” *The Journal of American History* (1992); Ursula K. Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2008); Lawrence Buell, Ursula K. Heise, and Karen Thornber, “Literature and Environment,” *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* (2011); John Harlow, Aaron Golub, and Braden Allenby, “A Review of Utopian Themes in Sustainable Development Discourse,” *Sustainable Development* (2013).

⁴ Ulrich Beck, *World at Risk* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009).

⁵ Rose et al., “Thinking Through the Environment,” 3.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ See, for example, Lee Anne Bell, *Storytelling for Social Justice* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Jo-Ann Episkenew, *Taking Back Our Spirits: Indigenous Literature, Public Policy, and Healing* (2009); John Bellamy Foster, *The Ecological Revolution: Making Peace with the Planet* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009).

⁸ For example, Colin Long and Anita Smith, “Cultural Heritage and the Global Environmental Crisis,” in *Heritage and Globalization*, ed. Sophia Labadi and Colin Long (New York: Routledge, 2010), 173-91. For discussion of critical heritage studies, see Andrea Witcomb and Kristal Buckley, “Engaging with the Future of ‘Critical Heritage Studies’: Looking Back in Order to Look Forward,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 19 (2013).

⁹ Peggy Tripp and Linda Muzzin, eds., *Teaching as Activism* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005).

environmental education; and (c) *heritage stewardship*, including critical analysis of “resource management” and the development and implementation of alternative approaches.¹¹

Towards this, the term *heritage* is used here to mean that which is “inherited,” and is principally about the present/future. Specifically, heritage, both “natural” and “cultural,” refers to that which is recognized thus remembered and/or memorialized, (re)affirmed through naming and place-making.¹² As such, heritage is integral to one’s identity and is inherently social and political. By *stewardship* I simply mean to “care for” (i.e., to “steward”). This is in opposition to top-down bureaucratic, state-sanctioned “management” (resource management, heritage management)¹³ because stewardship implies a personal connection to a “grounded” and “healthy” heritage.¹⁴ This vision, I believe, both reflects and builds on a tradition rooted in holism, critique and action.

Holistic critical theory: Critical theory is knowledge that aims at reducing domination,¹⁵ an undertaking that requires “the redemption of the hopes of the past.”¹⁶ From my vantage, this

¹⁰ See Lisa Korteweg and Connie Russell, “Decolonizing + Indigenizing = Moving Environmental Education Towards Reconciliation,” *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education* 17 (2012). See also Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society* 1(2012). See also Marie Battiste, “You Can’t Be the Global Doctor if You’re the Colonial Disease,” in *Teaching as Activism*, ed. Peggy Tripp and Linda Muzzin (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005), 121-33.

¹¹ See, for example, Fikret Berkes, *Sacred Ecology* (New York: Routledge, 2008). See also Libby Robin, “Global Ideas in Local Places: The Humanities in Environmental Management,” *Environmental Humanities* 1 (2012).

¹² David A. Greenwood, “Place: The Nexus of Geography and Culture,” in *Fields of Green: Restoring Culture, Environment, and Education*, ed. Marcia McKenzie, Paul Hart, Heesoon Bai, and Bob Jickling (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2009), 271-81.

¹³ For a short outline of the problem, see James M. Acheson, “Institutional Failure in Resource Management,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35 (2006). For an accessible overview of the American situation, see Thomas F. King, *Our Unprotected Heritage: Whitewashing the Destruction of Our Cultural and Natural Environment* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2009). See also Derek Armitage, Fikret Berkes, and Nancy Doubleday, eds., *Adaptive Co-management: Collaboration, Learning, and Multi-Level Governance* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007). For a detailed analysis of top-down cultural resource management (CRM), see Laurajane Smith, *Archaeological Theory and the Politics of Cultural Heritage* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

¹⁴ Key readings here include Glenn Albrecht, “Solastalgia, A New Concept in Human Health and Identity,” *Philosophy Activism Nature* 3 (2005); Glenn Albrecht et al., “Solastalgia: The Distress Caused by Environmental Change,” *Australasian Psychiatry* 15 (2007); Bruce Alexander, *The Globalization of Addiction: A Study in Poverty of the Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008). Recent examples from the United States and Australia include: Jewell Praying Wolf James, “The Search for Integrity in the Conflict over Cherry Point as a Coal Export Terminal,” *Whatcom Watch* August (2013); Mary-Jean Sutton, Jillian Huntley, and Barry Anderson, “‘All Our Sites are of High Significance’: Reflections from Recent Work in the Hunter Valley—Archaeological and Indigenous Perspectives,” *Journal of the Australian Association of Consulting Archaeologists* 1 (2013).

¹⁵ Andrew Biro, “Introduction: The Paradoxes of Contemporary Environmental Crises and the Redemption of the Hopes of the Past,” in *Critical Ecologies: The Frankfurt School and Contemporary Environmental Crises*, ed. Andrew Biro (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 3.

¹⁶ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1987), xv.

conceptualization places history and heritage at the center of the conversation, a view supported by important ongoing discussions about shifting baseline syndrome.¹⁷ A *critical* heritage studies, then, simultaneously and holistically examines issues of knowledge and power in light of a culturally (socially, historically) constituted nature and an environmentally constituted culture. The union¹⁸ of cultural and natural critical heritage studies involves drawing on the expertise and experiences of theoreticians and practitioners working in all corners of the arts and sciences, and beyond. In this way, EH carries forth its mission of interdisciplinary understanding.

Critical pedagogy: Pedagogy is of utmost importance to the Environmental Humanities.¹⁹ In thinking about *critical* pedagogy, I am drawn to two sets of observations that can serve both as reminders and points of departure. The first comes from Riane Eisler's (2005) work on "partnership education."²⁰ Eisler focuses specifically on domination and aims for an education that "prepares young people for democracy rather than authoritarianism and fosters ethical and caring relations." In challenging what she terms the dominator model, Eisler places emphasis on human *relationships*, the "fourth R."²¹ Eisler identifies three goals for education in the twenty-first century:

- Helping children grow into healthy, caring, competent, self-realized adults.
- Providing them with the knowledge and skills that can see them through this time of environmental, economic, and social upheavals.
- Equipping them to create for themselves and future generations a sustainable future of greater personal, social, economic, and environmental responsibility and caring.

The second set of observations come from environmental educator David Orr's unsettling essay *What is Education For?*²² Orr begins by identifying "six myths about the foundations of modern education"; these include, for example: "With enough knowledge and technology we can manage planet Earth" :: "Knowledge is increasing and by implication human goodness" :: "The purpose of education is that of giving you the means for upward mobility and success" :: "Our culture represents the pinnacle of human achievement." Orr argues that these dangerous tropes must be replaced, and offers these six principles in their stead:

¹⁷ For discussion of shifting baseline syndrome (SBS), see Jeremy B. C. Jackson, Karen E. Alexander, and Enric Sala, eds., *Shifting Baselines: The Past and the Future of Ocean Fisheries* (Washington, Covelo, and London: Island Press, 2011). For other perspectives on the late modern "past," see Sophia Labadi and Colin Long, eds., *Heritage and Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

¹⁸ John P. Clark, "It Is What It Isn't: A Defence of Dialectic," *Review* 31 (2014).

¹⁹ Richard Kahn, *Critical Pedagogy, Ecopedagogy and Planetary Crisis: The Ecopedagogy Movement* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010).

²⁰ Riane Eisler, "Tomorrow's Children: Education for a Partnership World," in *Holistic Learning and Spirituality in Education*, eds. John P. Miller et al. (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005). See also Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998).

²¹ Eisler, "Tomorrow's Children," 47-8.

²² David Orr, "What Is Education For? Six Myths about the Foundations of Modern Education, and Six New Principles to Replace Them," *In Context* 27 (1991).

- All education is environmental education.
- The goal of education is not mastery of subject matter, but of one's person.
- Knowledge carries with it the responsibility to see that it is well used in the world.
- We cannot say that we know something until we understand the effects of this knowledge on real people and their communities.
- The "minute particulars" are important and there is power in language.
- The way learning occurs is as important as the content of particular courses.

Orr's short essay goes a long way as a point of departure for thinking and talking about the nature and meaning of the Environmental Humanities.

Heritage stewardship: My greatest hope is to see the Environmental Humanities developed through direct engagement with environmental practice. Toward this, EH must embrace the concept of stewardship, unsettle top-down "resource management" and support alternative strategies. Importantly, this endeavor entails gaining a better understanding of the political nature of *cultural responses* to late modern socioenvironmental change.²³

A useful ending/beginning to any discussion about the Environmental Humanities is this point from Rishma Dunlop's artful essay *Alphabet for a New Republic*: "Curriculum is found in the human eyes, in rivers, in animals, in the language of music, poetry, art, science, history, anthropology, in what is public, intimate, beloved. These are stories lodged in the house of the earth and in your body."²⁴

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²³ For example, Liza Piper and Lisa Szabo-Jones, eds., *Sustaining the West: Cultural Responses to Western Environments, Past and Present* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier Press, 2014).

²⁴ Rishma Dunlop, "Alphabet for a New Republic," in *Fields of Green: Restorying Culture, Environment, and Education*, ed. Marcia McKenzie, Paul Hart, Heesoon Bai, and Bob Jickling (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2009), 16.

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