



PROVOCATIONS

Mapping Common Ground: Ecocriticism, Environmental History, and the Environmental Humanities

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ABSTRACT The emergence of the environmental humanities presents a unique opportunity for scholarship to tackle the human dimensions of the environmental crisis. It might finally allow such work to attain the critical mass it needs to break out of customary disciplinary confines and reach a wider public, at a time when natural scientists have begun to acknowledge that an understanding of the environmental crisis must include insights from the humanities and social sciences. In order to realize this potential, scholars in the environmental humanities need to map the common ground on which close interdisciplinary cooperation will be possible. This essay takes up this task with regard to two fields that have embraced the environmental humanities with particular fervour, namely ecocriticism and environmental history. After outlining an ideal of *slow scholarship* which cultivates thinking across different spatiotemporal scales and seeks to sustain meaningful public debate, the essay argues that both ecocriticism and environmental history are concerned with practices of *environing*: each studies the material and symbolic transformations by which “the environment” is configured as a space for human action. Three areas of research are singled out as offering promising models for cooperation between ecocriticism and environmental history: eco-historicism, environmental justice, and new materialism. Bringing the fruits of such efforts to a wider audience will require environmental humanities scholars to experiment with new ways of organizing and disseminating knowledge.

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Why We Need the Environmental Humanities, and Why We Need Them Now

More and more environmental historians and ecocritics are coming to see their work as part of a broadly interdisciplinary enterprise labeled “the environmental humanities.” Spearheaded in the early 2000s by scholars in Australia, the movement has since spread worldwide.¹ Dozens of environmental humanities initiatives have sprung up over the last five years, including new research centers and networks anchored at leading universities on four continents, and the new international journals *Environmental Humanities* and *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities*. These initiatives are transforming how humanities scholars conduct research, how they relate to the natural and social sciences, and perhaps most importantly, how they conceive of their roles in a time of accelerating global environmental change.

The readiness with which so many scholars have adopted the new label may seem to suggest that it functions as a catchall term for something whose general outlines are already settled and perfectly familiar. After all, the conviction that the humanities should respond to global ecological degradation is not new. A half century ago and more, public intellectuals such as Lewis Mumford, Rachel Carson, and Barry Commoner articulated the complex human dimensions of what they were among the first to recognize as a global ecological crisis. Notably, many of these thinkers were natural and social scientists who turned to cultural criticism in mid- or late career. These pioneers served as trailblazers for the first generation of environmental historians and environmental philosophers in the 1970s, and then again for early ecocritics two decades later. But while environmental historians, environmental philosophers, and ecocritics (and those doing related work in neighboring disciplines) have enjoyed considerable success in academic settings, they have failed to reach a wider audience. When policy makers and mainstream media outlets seek expertise on the environmental crisis today, they seldom turn to environmental historians and philosophers, much less to ecocritics.

This state of affairs is all the more perplexing as those working in the so-called STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), which attract the lion’s share of public attention and funding, have come to recognize that scientific know-how by itself is insufficient to successfully address climate instability, soil erosion, freshwater shortages, and a host of other chronic social-ecological afflictions.² Clearly, the ecological crisis is not only a crisis of the physical environment but also a crisis of the cultural and social environment—of the systems of representation and of the institutional structures through which contemporary society understands and responds to environmental change (or fails to do so: hence the crisis). Many historians, literary critics, and philosophers have explored these issues. The result, unfortunately, has been a fragmented discourse about the nature of environment and the

¹ See Deborah Bird Rose and Libby Robin, “The Ecological Humanities in Action: An Invitation,” *Australian Humanities Review* 31-32 (2004); Tom Griffiths, “The Humanities and an Environmentally Sustainable Australia,” *Australian Humanities Review* 43 (2007); Deborah Bird Rose et al., “Thinking Through the Environment, Unsettling the Humanities,” *Environmental Humanities* 1 (2012): 1-5.

² Poul Holm et al., “Collaboration Between the Natural, Social and Human Sciences in Global Change Research,” *Environmental Science and Policy* 28 (2013): 25-35; Mike Hulme, *Why We Disagree About Climate Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Sverker Sörlin, “Environmental Humanities: Why Should Biologists Interested in the Environment Take the Humanities Seriously?” *BioScience* 62, no. 9 (2012): 788-89.

complexities of environmental concerns. Environmental historians frequently draw on the results of the natural sciences, but they rarely cite ecocritical scholarship or work in environmental philosophy. Ecocritics continue to invoke the virtues of interdisciplinary research, but the invoking has always been somewhat ritual in character and, when it comes to conducting the actual research, the execution rather limited; as a whole, the field now risks becoming complacent and hidebound thanks to its hard-won and newfound respectability as a branch of literary studies.³ Respectability of this sort can have unintended consequences: it can entail the abandonment of innovative lines of inquiry that not only cross disciplinary boundaries, but may also challenge core beliefs about literature, culture, and—let us not forget—nature along the way.

The effort to reframe our work as part of the emerging environmental humanities thus presents an opportunity to address several problems of definition, delivery, and scope. By bringing scholarly work from across a broad spectrum of disciplines together under a new conceptual umbrella, the environmental humanities may finally allow that work to acquire the critical mass and popular appeal it needs to have an impact in the public sphere. Before that happens, however, ecocritics, environmental historians, environmental philosophers, and other humanists need to be jolted out of disciplinary ruts and mindsets, which should prompt them to reassess the character of their own work and its relationship to the work done by other scholars and thinkers interested in environmental issues. And this really does require pushing that work not just across disciplinary boundaries, but into the world, too. However, the environmental humanities need to beware of the trap into which so many other academic enterprises with interdisciplinary aspirations have been lured: to avoid being marginalized as eccentric specialties or subfields within their home disciplines and the university at large, they have in turn marginalized the kinds of scholarship that fail to conform to established protocols, and thus they have betrayed the heterodox impulses and category-busting ambitions that gave rise to them in the first place. Almost inevitably, what was heterodox becomes orthodox and conformist, is institutionalized as part of the academic woodwork, and loses its polemical, freebooting spirit. In short, it becomes yet another variety of received wisdom. The history of literary and cultural theory since the 1980s vividly illustrates how this demoralizing—albeit professionalizing—process works.

A genuinely inclusive and adventurous approach to the environmental humanities might also facilitate collaboration with partners outside the academy, where much of the work of adaptation to environmental change, mitigation of ecological damage, and transition to new social structures must take place. If the environmental humanities gain enough traction, they could initiate a renovation of the university with far-reaching consequences for how knowledge is organized, produced, disseminated, and understood. Whether this potential is realized will depend on how we take up the challenge. Drawing up lists of desirable coalition partners, as some scholars have done, is a useful exercise, but it will not get us very far.⁴ The dearth of useful dialogue between the disciplines that would constitute the environmental

³ A notable exception to the narrowing of ecocritical focus is the Rachel Carson Center's online journal *Perspectives* (www.environmentandsociety.org/perspectives), which regularly publishes issues co-edited by ecocritics and environmental historians.

⁴ Jennifer Wells and Carolyn Merchant, "Melting Ice: Climate Change and the Humanities," *Confluence* 14, no. 2 (2009): 13-27.

humanities is not a caprice of intellectual history, or an outcome of bad management, but the result of diverging trajectories and substantial differences in attitudes, interests, and methods. These are often compounded by regional differences. The relationship between environmental history and ecocriticism, on which we will focus in the remainder of this paper, does not look quite the same when approached from an Australian, a British, Chinese, German, North American, Spanish, Swedish, or Taiwanese perspective, as the authors of this essay have had the opportunity to confirm.

What is needed, then, is for the different disciplines and traditions to begin to explain themselves to each other, so that they can map common ground. In order for such an enterprise to be successful, it needs to keep disciplinary specificities in sight, even as it aims to articulate a broader vision and move beyond merely intradisciplinary concerns. This was the original rationale for the workshop where this essay was drafted: to put a group of environmental humanities scholars from different countries and different disciplines (literature, history, and geography) in the same room and ask them to share their understanding of what the environmental humanities are, what opportunities they hold for us, and what the lines of convergence and the common problems seem to be. The views we express here are the outcome of this process of interdisciplinary and transnational negotiation.

In the following pages, after discussing what we regard as the distinctive features of a humanistic approach to environmental issues, we briefly take stock of the historical development of ecocritical scholarship, identify areas where disciplinary cross-fertilization with environmental history has already borne fruit, and sketch some avenues for future cooperation. In limiting ourselves to ecocriticism and environmental history, we do not mean to imply that these disciplines enjoy any sort of primacy within the environmental humanities. We are simply trying to explain what this new metadiscipline or superfield looks like from where we stand—in the hope that scholars from neighboring disciplines will recognize themselves in our views or, better still, will take their disagreements with our views as an occasion to present maps of their own. Some of our arguments may strike, say, environmental philosophers as old news. Should this be so, we look forward to being set straight: to establish what the various disciplines within the environmental humanities deem worthy of debate, and what they take as their givens, is in itself a crucial part of the interdisciplinary conversation. For that matter, so is establishing the chokepoints where border crossings and conversations between disciplines are likely to prove especially challenging.

“Slow Scholarship” for the Anthropocene

The very notion of the “humanities” is fraught with human exceptionalism; its German equivalent, “Geisteswissenschaften,” implies a stark division between the human domain and nature as a “spiritless” world of inert matter. Ecological thinking has long been wary of such ontological divisions, but recent debates about the notion of the Anthropocene have lent a new urgency to the effort of overcoming them. Some discount Anthropocene discourse as yet another expression of the sort of anthropocentric hubris that originally got us into the mess that the discourse now claims to dispassionately describe.⁵ Others fault it for obfuscating social

⁵ Eileen Crist, “On the Poverty of Our Nomenclature,” *Environmental Humanities* 3 (2013): 129-47.

differences and underplaying the importance of the cultural malleability of our species.⁶ Yet it should be plain enough that neither humanism nor naturalism alone will be of much help in the effort to make sense of our current predicament.⁷ What the environmental humanities bring to the table is not a traditionally “humanist” perspective on the ecological crisis; rather, it is a different mode of thought, one better suited for grappling with the mind-bending ambiguities forced upon us. The conditions the Anthropocene names are not going to go away; they present us with difficulties that will not be resolved just by carrying out statistical analyses, writing better books, slashing carbon emissions to the bone, and planting millions of trees.

The sciences proceed by breaking a problem down to a set of tractable questions that they hope to address using a method whose general outline is well understood from the outset. By contrast, the enterprise of the humanities is hermeneutic and much less straightforward methodologically—it involves shuttling back and forth between the whole and its parts, between the past, the present, and the future, and in the case of the environmental humanities, between the environment and culture. The humanities insist that we need to understand not only what and where we are, and how we got here, but also that humans have never been without answers to these questions—so that in order to answer them for the present, we must attend to how they were asked and answered in the past.

This emphasis on reflection and interpretation means that the humanities are, by their very nature, slow to progress—perhaps even incompatible with the very idea of “progress.” The skills of narration and of careful reading demand that we pay attention to texts and contexts until we can reveal their deeper implications, ambiguities, and blind spots. This is why so much of the most important humanities scholarship is disseminated via the monograph rather than the journal article. The book is an ideal space for fully realizing the possibilities of an argument. In the humanities, reading and writing (though it is often unclear where one ends and the other begins) define the process of discovery, which has more to do with the forging of insight than with the formulation of new knowledge. Humanities research therefore runs counter to current demands on academia for speed, for large quantitative outputs and for focusing on the “cutting edge.” Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to claim that patient reflection and serendipitous insights are the special remit of the humanities alone. Many areas of science, too, cannot always generate results so quickly and are not necessarily geared towards technological solutions—most relevant here are the ecological sciences, where research may take decades to complete, and development of new products is rarely if ever the goal. We need only consider recent concerted efforts by British scientists to protect “blue-skies” research in the face of government threats to fund science based on criteria of economic impact and industrial utility.⁸ Such pressures originate in a caricature of science as technoscience and of research simply as results. Combined with a market-oriented vision of universities as competitors in a knowledge economy, they are as damaging to the scientific

⁶ Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg, “The Geology of Mankind? A Critique of the Anthropocene Narrative,” *The Anthropocene Review* 1, no. 1 (2014): 62-69.

⁷ Bronislaw Szerszynski, “A Response to Bruno Latour’s Lecture ‘Gaia: The New Body Politic,’” *Holberg Prize Symposium 2013: From Economics to Ecology*, Bergen, 4 June 2013.

⁸ The Royal Society, *The Scientific Century: Securing our Future Prosperity* (London: The Royal Society, 2010); see also Zoë Corbyn, “Dark Clouds Threaten UK Prosperity if Blue-Skies Research Not a Priority” *Times Higher Education* 11 March, 2010.

enterprise as they are to the hermeneutic assumptions that lie at the heart of research in the humanities.

The value of the environmental humanities, we suggest, lies precisely in their resistance to such bottom-line imperatives and to the allure of the “cutting edge.” Finding better ways of living on our planet requires both long-term experimentation of the sort favored by ecological researchers and what Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht has called “risky thinking:” thinking that suspends our moral certainties, disregards the guardrails of polite public discourse, and tarrys with complexity.⁹ It is essential to take stock of ideas as they evolve and come to be couched in common parlance, even—or especially—when things seem most urgent. Such crucial ideas as “climate change,” “bioengineering,” and even “the environment” refer to distinct material entities and phenomena, and to social practices, too; but they also help shape our sense of what it means for humans to live on Earth. It takes “slow scholarship” to bring this human dimension into view. This is at once a matter of substance and one of style, too. If the protocols of close reading that played such a key role in the professionalization of literary scholarship are worth retaining, it is because they help us resist the drive towards “opportunistic utilization and reduction to commodity value” that dominates much of contemporary culture.¹⁰ Understanding where we are requires that we allow ourselves to be surprised by the apparently familiar. As Greg Garrard writes: “Slow down, and the landscape changes: tempting byways appear; curiosity is given a chance to supplant urgent strategy.”¹¹ And we would add: the opportunity for more painstaking and riskier thinking is enlarged, even as the time in which such thinking might prove effective appears to be growing shorter.

“Slow scholarship” is not mere dalliance, bourgeois self-indulgence, or belletrism. It opposes the “attention regime” of the news media, particularly in their current digital incarnation.¹² As Rob Nixon has argued, the catastrophic effects of environmental change on the global poor seldom make the headlines because they do not satisfy the media’s need for fast-paced drama, clear moral resolutions, and visual spectacle.¹³ The inundation of New York during Hurricane Sandy in October 2012 was attended by a deluge of images, but we have seen few pictures of the victims of the ten-year famine in the Horn of Africa—a tragedy which claimed, in order of magnitude, more lives than Hurricane Sandy, and is just as much a harbinger of what anthropogenic global warming will mean in the twenty-first century. Climate change and the slow but accelerating violence it wreaks are out of sync with the 24-hour media cycle.¹⁴ To make matters worse, climate change like other forms of environmental transformation is notoriously not in sync with *any* of the cycles of time that we usually rely on

⁹ Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht, “Misere der Meisterdenker,” *Der Freitag*, 1 January, 2011.

¹⁰ Richard Kerridge, “Ecocriticism and the Mission of ‘English,’” in *Teaching Ecocriticism and Green Cultural Studies*, ed. Greg Garrard (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 21.

¹¹ Greg Garrard, “A Novel Idea: Slow Reading,” *Times Higher Education*, 17 June, 2010.

¹² Rudi Laermans, “The Attention Regime: On Mass Media and the Information Society,” in *In Medias Res: Peter Sloterdijk’s Spherological Poetics of Being*, ed. Willem Schinkel and Lisbeth Noordegraaf-Eelens (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2011), 115-32.

¹³ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2011).

¹⁴ Miyase Christensen, “Arctic Climate Change and the Media: The News Story That Was,” in *When the Ice Breaks: Media and the Politics of Arctic Climate Change*, ed. Miyase Christensen, Annika Nilsson, and Nina Wormbs (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 26-51.

when we think about life on our planet, which is why ecological researchers find establishing historical “baselines” so very hard to do. In order to understand such issues, our thinking needs to run on a different clock, one calibrated to novel and innovative time scales.¹⁵ That is what makes the notion of the Anthropocene useful.

The environmental humanities must be concerned with the question of what it takes to sustain a vigorous public debate on environmental issues. While the mental habits shaped by the media may in many ways be inimical to the forms of patient, open-ended deliberation we espouse, we cannot afford to ignore them.¹⁶ We need to actively explore how the media can help us to translate our “slow scholarship” into public terms. In this regard, close collaboration with the emerging digital humanities will be of crucial importance. At the same time, we must engage with the divergent “civic epistemologies” that guide political decision-making in different national communities.¹⁷ For the majority of humanities scholars, the classroom will probably remain the most important venue for such work, but we should also collaborate with partners outside the academy. Museums are well-placed in this regard. In the short term, they can sponsor dialogue and host public forums, but their galleries, exhibitions, and collections are there for the long term. Museum displays cannot afford to be merely “sensational.”¹⁸ They must stimulate the visitor’s imagination in ways that survive the first moment of encounter, invite repeat visits, and allow issues to be aired and discussed but not necessarily resolved.

Environing, Assembling, and Historicizing

Underlying our vision of the environmental humanities is the recognition that “the environment” should not be addressed as exclusively material. It is not simply something that surrounds human societies, but is also the product of social practices of “environing”¹⁹—of the multiple processes through which human beings (and other species) modify their surroundings as they make their living from and in the natural world, and of the symbolic transformations which configure “the environment” as a space for human action.²⁰ We highlight the fact that environmental crises can be caused by and affect societies in very different ways, and suggest that the humanities should address the peculiarly human dimensions of this “environing” dynamic.

In recognizing that the environment is also a social phenomenon, environmental history and ecocriticism foreground relationships that are outside the framework of nature and

¹⁵ Michelle Bastian, “Fatally Confused: Telling the Time in the Midst of Ecological Crisis,” *Environmental Philosophy* 9, no. 1 (2012): 23-48.

¹⁶ Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: How the Internet is Changing the Way We Read, Think, and Remember* (London: Atlantic, 2011).

¹⁷ Sheila Jasanoff, *Designs on Nature: Science and Democracy in Europe and the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

¹⁸ Libby Robin, Jennifer Newell and Kirsten Wehner, “Slow Media for Cultural Futures,” in *Curating the Future: Museums, Communities and Climate Change*, ed. Jennifer Newell, Libby Robin, and Kirsten Wehner (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

¹⁹ Sverker Sörlin and Paul Warde, “Making the Environment Historical—An Introduction,” in *Nature’s End: History and the Environment*, ed. Sverker Sörlin and Paul Warde (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 23.

²⁰ Timothy Luke, “International or Interenvironmental Relations: Reassessing Nations and Niches in Global Ecosystems,” in *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 28, no. 3 (2003): 393-422.

culture traditionally associated with conservation and environmental management policy. Such a view requires us to take account of that which cannot be measured because it is intangible.²¹ Human beings cannot but act on the basis of collective memories, present convictions, and anticipated futures—the scenarios of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change being a case in point. The environmental humanities are uniquely placed to recognize and account for such “spectral” aspects of human-nature relations.

A central task of the environmental humanities is to question the normative dimensions of current environmental practices (and practices of “envirning”). They must avoid becoming a handmaiden to environmental science, serving up dollops of value while the scientists take care of the facts. Nor do the environmental sciences need us to do their public relations for them. The environmental humanities should attend to the protocols and the public reception of scientific discourse, while bearing in mind that scientific data are not simply social fabrications.

Such a reflective attitude can be profoundly political. It also foregrounds what makes us human at a time when human exceptionalism demands greater scrutiny. Rather than calling for yet another bout of consciousness-raising, the idea of the Anthropocene saddles us with the daunting task of constituting the human species as an imaginary community. This task requires sensitivity to the profound differences between culturally specific practices of enviring. As Ursula Heise has pointed out, it can therefore only be accomplished through “a patient and meticulous process of assembly—in its most craftsmanlike and technological connotations.”²² It also necessitates an awareness that such a process cannot be started from scratch, but must be understood as both a critique and a continuation of the globalizing drive that is constitutive of late modernity. As Bruno Latour puts it, the global polity has already been assembled—only without due process.²³ If we let such an understanding guide our work, we place ourselves outside the sphere of environmental activism as it is commonly understood, because we are forced to question the notions that underpin most forms of such activism (for example, the simplistic opposition of nature and culture, and the resulting conviction that nature can be “put back” and “put right” if we can somehow manage to let it alone and give it time to “heal”). What we are advocating is a greater reflexivity and a deeper understanding of human beings and their varied relationships with the world in which they have evolved—and which they have in turn altered, in ways that endanger all forms of life on Earth. On occasion, achieving this greater reflexivity and deeper understanding may put us at odds, intellectually, with the conservationist and other environmental activist communities, which do not always welcome debate that challenges some of the key terms in which they have long understood their missions.

In defining the objects and objectives of the environmental humanities in this way, and by urging environmental historians and ecocritics to view their work in terms of this larger project, we are not seeking to initiate another “turn” or “wave” in these fields—an impulse

²¹ See Lars Frers, “The Matter of Absence,” *Cultural Geographies* 20, no. 4 (2013): 431-45; Helen Whale and Franklin Ginn, “In the Absence of Sparrows,” in *Environment and/as Mourning: On Landscapes, Mindscales, and Healthscapes*, ed. Ashlee Consulo Willox and Karen Landman (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, forthcoming).

²² Ursula Heise, “Comparative Ecocriticism in the Anthropocene,” *Komparatistik* (2013): 25.

²³ Bruno Latour, *The Politics of Nature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

driven by the ever-accelerating cycle of “cutting-edge” innovation and rapid obsolescence we have criticized above. Rather, we are suggesting that environmental humanities scholars should reassess the history of their respective disciplines so as to identify connections and lines of convergence. There have been moments in environmental history and ecocriticism where a sensitivity to both historical perspective and textual complexity have enabled accounts of environment and enviroing of the kind that we recommend here. As we now try to show with regard to ecocriticism, this requires that we abandon received ideas about the field’s development, particularly the dominant historiographical narrative of ecocriticism that has emerged from the United States.

Ecocriticism was recognized in the U.S. as an emergent field in the early 1990s and has mushroomed over the last two decades. American observers, borrowing from the history of feminism, have described ecocriticism’s dramatic growth in terms of first, second, and third “waves.”²⁴ The “wave” model suggests that the surf’s up and the tide is running high: that there has been a rapid succession of ecocritical approaches, and a progressive replacement of old norms as new ones have come ashore. Yet what appears to have actually happened in U.S. ecocriticism was an initial outpouring of scholarly work—supposedly, the first “wave” —celebrating nature writing and wilderness, and cast in a vein typical of American studies since the 1950s. However, this was not the whole story: other “waves” already had come ashore, and not one after another but all at once—which suggests the “wave” model doesn’t really apply. Early on, some ecocritics questioned the emphasis on nature writing and wilderness, and preferred to explore issues of gender, environmental justice, and the built environment. At the same time, others called for ecocritical approaches better informed by environmental history and science, and by literary and cultural theory; still others, for a broadening of subject matter to include ethnic and non-U.S. literatures and cultures. What the “wave” model fails to take into account, then, is the untidy, uneven character of ecocriticism’s development in the U.S. and the lack of consensus about its proper focus: just what one expects, after all, of a new field, and perhaps a better indicator of its health than the rapid growth and linear progression—or the perfect storm—posited by the “wave” model.

If the “wave” model imposes too neat a pattern on the development of U.S. ecocriticism, it applies even more poorly to ecocriticism in other parts of the world, where it emerged in relation to different matters of environmental concern, and in conversation with other intellectual and literary traditions. In the U.K., for example, the key issue was not wilderness but the prospects for the environment in highly developed rural and urban locations alike. This underpins the interest in Romantic and post-Romantic reworkings of the pastoral tradition which were informed by a recognition of the historical entwinement of social structures of domination with prevalent perceptions and uses of land as explored by Raymond Williams.²⁵ Ecocriticism came somewhat later to Australia, and was shaped from early on by the close collaboration of historians, philosophers, anthropologists, cultural theorists, and literary scholars associated with the nascent Ecological Humanities research network. Perceptions of the interrelationship of Indigenous dispossession and environmental degradation

²⁴ Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 1-28; Scott Slovic, “The Third Wave of Ecocriticism: North American Reflections of the Current Phase of the Discipline,” *Ecozon@* 1, no.1 (2010): 4-10.

²⁵ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Hogarth, 1985).

also lent ecocriticism “down under” a markedly anti- or post-colonial tendency from the outset. A still more transnational account of the ecocritical enterprise would disclose other regional variants in Asia, Europe, Latin America, and South Africa.

The problem with the “wave” metaphor is not only that it misrepresents the historical trajectory of the discipline. Perhaps more consequentially, it encourages us to overstate the novelty of current approaches, and to neglect important older work simply because it can be relegated to a “wave” that has already passed. Thus the metaphor obscures useful points of departure for the kind of rigorously contextualized environmental humanities research we propose here.

Common Ground: Eco-Historicism, Environmental Justice, New Materialism

Among important older work one would have to count a text that Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm included in their inaugural ecocritical anthology, Lynn White Jr.’s landmark article on “The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis.”²⁶ First published in *Science* in 1967, White’s account of the historical emergence, within Western Christianity during the Middle Ages, of the dominant ethos of human separation from and mastery over nature is very interesting methodologically. Linking a decisive shift in the reception of a canonical literary text (the Bible) to the development of new relations and technologies of production (the heavy iron plow) in response to particular environmental conditions (the clay soils of Northern Europe), White’s analysis opens up one possible meeting place for environmental history and ecocriticism.²⁷

While White is usually invoked by ecocritics today only in order to cudgel Christianity, his work prefigures various ecocritical attempts to engage with environmental history—for example, Jonathan Bate’s rereading of Romantic poetry in the context of the bad weather caused by the Tambora volcanic eruption of 1815.²⁸ The converse—the use by historians of literary texts as documents that shed light on social and environmental questions unrecorded elsewhere—also distinguishes a certain disciplinary tradition. Indeed, one could say that the use of literary texts as a means of clarifying historical relationships between humans and environment now dominates the emerging field of early modern ecocriticism.²⁹ Gillen D’Arcy Wood has proposed a model of such research, which he calls eco-historicism and defines as “the study of climate and environment as objects of knowledge and desire, analyzed through ‘thick’ description of specific episodes of ecological micro-contact.”³⁰ Wood places the environmental events and phenomena in their material and discursive contexts—for example,

²⁶ Lynn White, Jr., “The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis,” rpt. in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 1996), 3-14.

²⁷ Kate Rigby, “Ecocriticism,” in *Introducing Criticism at the 21st Century*, ed. Julian Wolfreys (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2002), 155-158.

²⁸ Jonathan Bate, “Living with the Weather,” *Studies in Romanticism* 55, no. 3 (1996): 431-48.

²⁹ See Ken Hiltner, *What Else is Pastoral? Renaissance Literature and the Environment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011); Jennifer Munroe and Rebecca Laroche, ed. *Ecofeminist Approaches to Early Modernity* (New York: Palgrave, 2011).

³⁰ Gillen D’Arcy Wood. “Introduction: Eco-Historicism,” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 8, no. 2 (2008): 3.

by showing how the Tambora eruption also reshaped the colonial ideology with which the British attempted to dominate the East Indies.

Beyond identifying the many complex interfaces between environmental history and ecocriticism, it is worth considering the ways in which environmental justice has acted, and continues to act, as a unifying principle for the two fields as multidisciplinary intellectual projects. As a concept, environmental justice certainly identifies overlapping territory where social, cultural and environmental challenges must be confronted all at once. In the 1990s, environmental justice entered ecocriticism and environmental history as a critical concept, borrowed from the sociologist Robert Bullard and local movements opposed to siting garbage incinerators and toxic industries in poor, predominantly African American communities.³¹ Unequal exposure to risk, land dispossession, and the role of class conflict in the history of conservation began to receive scholarly attention.³² Outside the U.S., the term “environmental justice” most often refers to the struggle of local, often indigenous communities against resource extraction by transnational corporations and complicit national governments.³³ The relatively recent (but remarkably prolific) alliance of postcolonial and ecocritical approaches is centered on this political nexus. It highlights the political agency of writer-activists and communities erased from official memory, and confronts social inequalities on a planetary scale. Such scholarship merges social analysis and critique with close attention to textual detail and political advocacy—a combination that, as Rob Nixon’s already-mentioned book *Slow Violence* has demonstrated, can have tremendous power and even popular appeal.

Another development that opens up new avenues for interdisciplinary research, and which can profitably be linked with theories of environmental justice, is the emergence of new materialist and material feminist approaches to bodies, things, animality, and agency. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman have proposed focusing on singular material substances, instead of adopting the perspective of particular social groups, as a way to reach a more comprehensive understanding of social and environmental injustices.³⁴ This radical challenge to anthropocentrism has methodological implications for the environmental humanities. New materialists enrich the environmental justice framework by questioning the tendency to gloss over the agency of matter in our everyday lives.³⁵ While the ethical and political consequences of acknowledging the agency of things (Styrofoam cups, birch trees, coal dust) remain to be spelled out (and are unlikely to be comforting), such a view clearly posits new forms of analysis

³¹ Robert Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1990).

³² See Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein, eds., *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics, and Pedagogy* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2002); Andrew Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race and Industrial Pollution in Gary, Indiana, 1945-1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Karl Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

³³ Al Gedicks, *Resource Rebels: Native Challenges to Mining and Oil Corporations* (Cambridge, MA: South End, 2001).

³⁴ Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, eds., *Material Feminisms* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 9.

³⁵ Carl Knappett and Lambros Malafouris, eds., *Material Agency: Towards a Non-Anthropocentric Approach* (New York: Springer, 2008).

and enables new ways of narrating environmental history, especially the history of environmental injustice.

Any attempt to combine environmental history and ecocriticism along these lines must deal with the central question of the place of texts and the function of textual interpretations. Clearly, historians and literary scholars tend to read in different ways. For historians, the relevance of a text lies primarily in its capacity to exemplify or illustrate a larger historical development; they are prone to treat texts as documents. Literary scholars, by contrast, are more likely to emphasize the singularity of a particular text, the uniqueness of how it says what it says, and the distinctive experience that it affords its readers. But these different interpretive practices are, in the last instance, continuous with and dependent on each other. Aesthetic objects and historical documents do not occupy different ontological planes. The aesthetic dimension of any literary text must be historicized in order to be properly appreciated; conversely, historical documents remain mute unless we grasp the aesthetic structures that allowed them to affect their audiences in the first place. Historical and literary interpretations are mutually illuminating, even if they do not altogether coincide or start from the same places.

As should be clear from the foregoing, we do not propose a disregard for literary interpretation and close reading, nor do we wish to cast doubt on the value and interest of artistic expression of environmental ideas in whatever medium. There is and will be a place for interpretation and close reading, as well as for the even more old-fashioned practice of artistic and literary “appreciation,” in the environmental humanities; but it must make space for historical understanding and be conducted in a mode attuned to social practices of envining (rather than taking the existence of “the environment” as a given). Texts can indeed be interpreted and closely read—that is, their formal properties and structuring assumptions can be examined and explained—but so can the historical contexts in which they occur. What must matter to the environmental humanities is how texts are entangled with and address the larger processes by which societies conceptualize and manage their environment. And this means that the environmental humanities must be relentlessly and deftly historicist: they always must bear in mind that texts are historically produced and can be historically productive, too. Texts reiterate established protocols of envining, but in doing so they also expose them to our scrutiny and make it possible for us to imagine alternatives.

Conclusion: A Spirit of Experimentation

In focusing our discussion on the relationship between ecocriticism and environmental history, we may seem to have targeted the low-hanging and ripest fruit: after all, these are disciplines whose genealogies overlap.³⁶ Their substantive differences are certainly much easier to bridge than the methodological gap between either of them and the natural sciences. But this is precisely what should give us pause: even though closer collaboration between the two ought to be relatively easy to achieve, the reality appears to be that they have drifted further apart in recent years. So while we have advocated the view that the emergence of the environmental humanities should be seized as an opportunity to reverse this development, we must also, in closing our argument, offer some important caveats.

³⁶ Michael P. Cohen, “Blues in the Green: Ecocriticism Under Critique,” *Environmental History* 9, no.1 (2004): 9-36.

Interdisciplinary scholarship always involves a number of trade-offs. Disciplined work entails, among other things, the development of specialized vocabularies that enable scholars to encapsulate entire arguments in a single phrase. This allows for greater generality, precision, and sophistication, qualities essential to good scholarship. However, in order to communicate effectively across the boundaries of our disciplines and of the academy, we must sometimes be willing to relinquish or at least reopen some of these terminological black boxes, and to some extent loosen the firm grasp we thought we had on our particular discipline and its procedures. We need to be wary of the biases that are the inevitable flip side of specialization and can hinder the acceptance of intellectually adventurous, interdisciplinary approaches. While almost everyone professes to love interdisciplinarity and public engagement nowadays, the everyday realities of academic institutions still tend to discourage them. The environmental humanities possess no magic wand that could change a foundling enterprise like ours into a prince overnight. But as the developments we have sketched in this paper indicate, they can provide leverage for a gradual transformation of institutional settings that would make them more hospitable to the kind of scholarship for which we have argued here. In the meantime, we must accommodate ourselves to the unpleasant fact that it may not be possible to mint all the gains accrued from such work into the accepted coin of our respective disciplinary realms, although there are many topics where a thoroughly interdisciplinary approach is likely to generate new insights whose value will also be recognizable to specialists. Land use and climate change, for example, are issues which have been the subject of much research within the various humanistic disciplines, but whose multidimensional character demands that the results be synthesized and their relevance be spelled out for non-specialists.

So in encouraging environmental historians and ecocritics to make common cause under the banner of the environmental humanities, we do not propose to erase disciplinary boundaries or to argue for the creation of a shared methodology. But neither do we suggest a perfunctory exercise in rebranding that would spell little difference in scholarly practice. Learning to see our work as part of the environmental humanities means that we reconceive how that work relates to other scholarship and to the larger society. The exploration of these relationships calls for a spirit of experimentation, some of it of the sort that has produced this essay. The work that will be needed in order to realize the promise of the environmental humanities is principally one of translation and transmission – between the disciplines that constitute it, but also, and perhaps more importantly, to a public whose existence we can no longer take for granted, but that we must help to assemble (as Latour would insist we say). This is a task with which the humanities have little experience. We therefore need to try out new forms of dialogue, new varieties of collaborative research, new channels of communication, and new ways of disseminating the results of our efforts. It is not enough to assert that history and literature matter and are closely related; it is up to us to *make them matter and relate more fluently*. We must figure out how to articulate our insights so that their importance can be grasped by a lay audience, how to transform these insights into forceful arguments and therefore into “usable” knowledge— knowledge that can shape how people engage with the places they inhabit, and how they participate in public life and make collective decisions.³⁷ In this effort of building pathways that open up the environmental humanities to a wider audience,

³⁷ Stephen J. Pyne, “Smokechasing: The Search for a Usable Place,” *Environmental History* 6, no. 4 (2001): 530-40.

mapping the common ground on which we stand—the ground we need to occupy more consciously—is an important first step.

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