

## CHAPTER I

*Introduction: Climate Change/Changing Climates**Stephanie Foote and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen***What Is Environmental Humanities?**

Over the last three decades, humanities scholars working on environmental matters have moved beyond field-specific and well-delineated descriptors such as “environmental history” or “literature and the environment,” subdisciplines that had often been outliers in the curricula of History and Literature departments. These scholars produced groundbreaking interdisciplinary work that challenged the primacy of standard narratives of the cultural reproduction of the vexed category of nature, and helped to usher in what we now label the environmental humanities (or EH). EH is a lively and capacious domain of inquiry that includes researchers and writers in Literature, Languages, History, Anthropology, Urban Planning, Philosophy, Political Science, Education, Religion, Classics, Creative Writing, Geography, and Landscape Architecture, as well as scholars of Race and Gender Studies. Working within and across conventional disciplines, over the last decade or so EH has spun out a dazzling set of conceptual and theoretical problems, drawing on feminist, queer, postcolonial, urban, oceanic, posthuman, nonhuman, elemental, prismatic, geologic, digital, indigenous, new materialist, energy, and object-oriented ontology theories. In each of these riotous theoretical inquiries, EH scholars have challenged the disciplinary conventions that have shaped and limited how we understand and can talk to one another about key terms such as “nature,” “culture,” “matter,” and “representation.”

Environmental humanists share neither a single method nor a determinative object of analysis. Indeed, they often dispute among themselves the meaning of key terms such as “human,” “environment,” “nature,” “agency,” and “matter.” Yet precisely because of the lack of consensus about how to approach and define such foci, EH has emerged as a throng of collective intellectual concerns; a convergence (though not a unity) of recurrent themes; and a melding of analytical and public-facing

practices, and ethics with activism. More than anything, what unites the environmental humanities is a sense of shared and open endeavor addressed toward the remediation of environmental harm, and a powerful conviction that scholarship in the field must revisit its foundational assumptions and engage with a broad constituency. EH is not easily reducible to its component parts; it gathers a heterogeneous community of scholar-activists concerned about pressing ecological issues across time and across the globe. This Cambridge Companion offers students, researchers, and an interested public an entry into a field that stresses its diversity, its global reach, its intellectual range, and sometimes its internal quarrels about its own key terms.

Aiming not for dispassionate study but for intervention and change (cognitive as well as worldly), work within the environmental humanities is nothing if not ambitious. Its varied projects have examined slow geological time in its relation to swift human crisis-making; connected the disproportionate burden inflicted upon minority communities in the wake of superstorms to the enduring legacies of racism, enslavement, and colonialism; and followed the devastating impact of energy choices made on one continent to the receding shorelines of others. EH scholarship has experimented with new ways to coordinate the relationships between human and nonhuman bodies, and proposed new theories about the liveliness of objects and matter. EH scholarship asks how we can understand the intimacies between small, precise examples and sprawling, interlocked systems, pressuring the conventional methods humanities disciplines use to order and classify their objects of study.

But if anything anchors the diversity of EH projects within its wider discipline of the Humanities, and unites the chapters in this book, it is a commitment to the world-making power of narrative, and especially its commitment to how stories mediate different registers of power and how narratives have historically managed the manifold vitality of the cultures, bodies, and objects that shape and are shaped by them. EH scholars have especially focused upon the narrative coordination of different registers of knowledge and experience around central questions of climate change and ecological crisis. EH demands that we return to first principles when we rely on the explanatory force of story: what is the materiality of metaphor? Whose story is being related, and from what point of view? What other narratives are possible? How does narrative work as both an exclusionary and a community-building device? How does narrative handle plot or time when it confronts matters not amenable to ordinary (anthropocentric) perception and

*Introduction*

3

ordering? How does language furnish a technology for understanding inhuman magnitudes and wholly alien phenomena? How does the relation of narrative to reality-making vary across cultures, languages, and histories? Do only humans possess story? How does narrative come to reside in bodies? Are bodies texts?

EH scholars are thus particularly invested in teasing out the relationships between affect and intellect, a flowing together of head and heart that produces the historical shape of the stories that mediate our relationships with environmental change. With its binocular focus on daily, lived experience as well as on large-scale and seemingly impersonal events that either barely register on or suddenly exceed human comprehension, EH bridges potential divides in how disciplines articulate and define the cultural scope and effects of ecological crisis. The images, sounds, words, and even smell and taste (EH embraces the full sensorium) that propel narrative make clear why climate is both “out there” (long-term weather patterns that exist in an external atmosphere and impact human populations from that vast exterior) and fully within (“climate,” “atmosphere,” and even “air” are not by coincidence the very words we use to describe the emotional feel of a room, a community, a text, a heart).

Perhaps, then, what really defines the loose, still-evolving EH community of scholars is not its methods, nor its analytic focus, but its gregariousness, its insistence that the practices of making and communicating ecological knowledge should be collective, should proceed in conversation with and across other disciplines, and should test the limits of disciplinary methods. The environmental humanities cannot be a solitary practice: wide collaborations (across discipline, period, and specialization) are its lifeblood. Whereas many disciplines seem satisfied to sharply demarcate their realm of expertise from other fields and embody prestige within a few key and revered authorities, EH welcomes newcomers and does not guard access to its expertise or to its community. We note as well EH’s conviction that the knowledge generated through such capacious endeavors must not be locked away. If its conversations and conclusions are incomprehensible to or remote from a wider world, then the environmental humanities will have failed. EH privileges access and readability, gathering as wide a commons as possible, often by employing nontraditional channels for the dissemination of its work. The *Cambridge Companion to the Environmental Humanities* embraces this charge by making EH work widely comprehensible to anyone with an interest.

### The Shape of the Field

Humanists writing about environmental matters have generated a rapidly evolving, increasingly interdisciplinary conversation. The production of articles and monographs in the environmental humanities has increased exponentially over the last few decades and can now sustain several book series at presses including Duke, MIT, and Minnesota, as well as at least three major journals (*ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment*, *Environmental Humanities*, and *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities*). Just as essential to the vitality of EH have been the rapid proliferation of edited collections and introductory volumes. The speed at which EH absorbs and transforms theoretical schools and methods has meant that edited volumes in particular have become a key arena for collaboratively thinking about the field's contours and content, as well as what it can offer scholars across national and disciplinary lines. Groundbreaking collections such as Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's 1996 *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (University of Georgia Press) and Laurence Coupe's 2000 *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism* (Routledge) introduced scholars to the idea that the study of the environment was not limited to representations of a static vision of nature in literary and historical texts. These were supplemented by landmark volumes such as Lawrence Buell's *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Blackwell, 2005), which surveyed much of the work already undertaken to envision what might come next. More recent collections such as *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment* (edited by Louise Westling in 2014), and introductory texts such as Greg Garrard's *Ecocriticism* (Routledge, 2012), Timothy Clark's *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* (Cambridge, 2011), and Robert S. Emmett and David E. Nye's *The Environmental Humanities: A Critical Introduction* (MIT, 2017) helpfully guide general readers through the key terms and debates that ground EH.

The last few years have seen the publication of *Ecocriticism: The Essential Reader* (edited by Ken Hiltner; Routledge, 2015), *Global Ecologies and the Environmental Humanities: Postcolonial Approaches* (edited by Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Jill Didur, and Anthony Carrigan; Routledge, 2015), *Environmental Humanities: Voices from the Anthropocene* (edited by Serpil Oppermann and Serenella Iovino; Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), and *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities* (edited by Ursula Heise, Jon Christensen, and Michelle Niemann, 2017). Along with

## Introduction

5

*Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory Beyond Green* (edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen; Minnesota, 2013), *Keywords for Environmental Studies* (edited by Joni Adamson, William Gleason, and David Pellow; NYU, 2016), *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water, and Fire* (edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert; Minnesota, 2015), and *Veer Ecology: A Companion for Environmental Thinking* (edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert; Minnesota, 2017), this newest crop of collected essays has charted a more imaginative theoretical path through the field, taking up the nonhuman turn, the new materialism, object-oriented ontology, animal studies, energy humanities, and globalization.

This volume differs from these essential works in some important ways. It is accessible, offering through its language, framing, and conviviality a capacious welcome to all, both inside and outside the academy, and especially to students (undergraduate and graduate) first entering the field and scholars who might not yet recognize that they are already involved in EH's mission. It foregrounds scholarship from different periods, fields, and global locations, but it is organized to give readers a working context for the foundational debates. Each essay includes a history of the key terms, as well as a discussion of how those terms have evolved (and are still evolving) in scholarly and popular registers. We have also brought together a range of contributors with expertise in a number of national traditions.

This volume is predicated on the idea that EH is not a method but a disparate field composed of converging methods and conversations. As result, EH is motored by big conceptual questions that generate disciplinary and historical debate. The orientation of the field is interrogative (problem-generating more than knowledge-supplying): that is, the Environmental Humanities are more likely to unsettle what we think we know than to provide an easy answer to the ecological issues that bedevil us. Therefore, each of the chapters explains the stakes and the history of a particular analytic method and key term, emphasizing the ways that knowledge is produced about the environment, as well as how that production matters in both its own time and today. Each essay also pays close attention to the evolution of its core topic to address how it is implicated in questions of environmental justice that intimately connect the local to the global.

This Companion attempts to comprehensively introduce current debates. The field's wide scope is foregrounded by breaking the material covered into three sections: *Intellectual Foundations*, *Elemental Foundations*, and *Circulation, Contingency, Emergency*. Each of these sections represents categories for getting up to speed in the field, and includes key terms and modes

of inquiry. Every contributor has given a short history of disciplinary thinking about the topic or theme; explained what a beginner to the conversation needs to know about why this topic emerged as a category of study; explained how EH approaches the topic, stressing the questions the field raises and the collaborations it fosters to address them; described and modeled the analytic or interpretive possibilities afforded by that theme; suggested future avenues of inquiry; and considered the topic's global implications, especially those that involve environmental justice issues.

### Excavating the Future of the Humanities Now

If we have given a definition of EH that seems to stress its wide reach, its conviviality, and its affirmative possibilities in the first half of this introduction, in this section we focus on key questions that inform the work we believe must drive the humanities now. We are especially interested in foregrounding how different senses of the word “climate” have come to resonate with one another in a world that seems on the brink of collapse. Though we believe that EH is a world-building enterprise, it has emerged at exactly the moment when it seems that fossil fuel dependence, resource extraction, unevenly developed infrastructure, and resource scarcity threaten to culminate in the world's end. From Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* to recent work on climate catastrophe, EH scholarship is motivated by the accelerating threat to the intricate web of life and matter on earth. This determination pushes environmental humanists to undo and rewrite conventional distinctions between a static definition of nature and a more lively sense of culture. Virtually every contemporary example of EH scholarship insists that hard distinctions between nature and culture obscure their historically contingent and ideologically unpredictable relationship; indeed, nearly all contemporary EH scholars would argue that the emergence of a romantic idea of a pristine nature served the aims of an exploitative industrial economy.

And yet, the challenge for EH has been to find ways to address the volatility of the relationship between ideology, ecology, and culture in a world in which natural resources are in fact disappearing, and in which some human actors are themselves seen as resources to be exploited and discarded. Contemporary versions of EH, exemplified in the twenty-one chapters in this collection, aim to historicize and explore how the evolving relationships between the nonhuman and human worlds have structured large-scale political events, aesthetic production, and, perhaps most importantly, a host of ordinary ways of inhabiting a damaged world.

*Introduction*

7

Those unseen, often unrecorded or unremembered histories are records of strange intimacies between “nature” and “culture,” “matter” and “life,” that the humanities, with its capacious sense of how social and cultural narratives emerge within and against dominant scripts that govern biopolitical life, is especially well equipped to think about.

But if this introduction is a brief for how we might understand the mobile, fugitive encounters between nonhuman and human life across histories and cultures, it is also an argument for why the work of EH is so critical now, when its world-making energy seems to be at odds with the world-ending catastrophes of modern fossil fuel capitalism. There is no doubt that even in the last decade, the term “climate change” has gone from an occasional dire warning in a newspaper article to a widely accepted campaign platform even in the United States, the country that uses most of the world’s energy but which has failed to sign any global climate treaty. EH has gained a special urgency as this book is being completed. The climate in which environmental humanists conduct their work has changed profoundly for every possible definition of the word “climate.” That is, we understand climate change as not merely atmospheric and planetary, but as political and social. The multiple kinds of changing climates in the contemporary world are, as our contributors recognize throughout this volume, not merely linked to but often directly responsible for the environmental change that has spurred so much ecological study, mourning, worry, joy, fear, anger, and activism.

Let us take two examples. As we write this introduction much of the globe is suffering the deleterious and unevenly distributed effects of the novel coronavirus (SARS CoV-2) pandemic, a state of emergency that we hope by the time you are reading these words will have been successfully addressed. Yet this pandemic is not the first of its kind, nor will it be the last. As environmental humanists well know, the spread of zoonotic diseases such as COVID-19 are in part caused by the destruction of biomes and the transformation of ecosystems into human resources by a global economy that requires ever more raw materials to fuel its endless, impersonal expansion. But at the very historical moment when the porous line between the nonhuman world and the human body is being experienced as a pandemic assault, the social and political climate around matters of structural economic, gendered, and racial inequality are also changing. Much of the globe is being forced once again to think through the historical consequences of systemic racism with an urgency made especially clear after the murder of George Floyd and the reinvigoration of the Black Lives Matter movement that long predates the violence in Minneapolis.



Meanwhile, the mortality rate for COVID-19 is disproportionately high within communities of color in the United States, a fact that is neither neutral nor just. Changing climate is ecologically always already racialized.

We can take as another example of the conjunction of ecological and racial harm the emergence of climate mega-disasters and superstorms. The superstorms that now appear with increasing regularity and intensity are caused by global warming, and they are likewise most powerfully experienced by communities of color. Hurricane Katrina is the emblem for this truth, and fifteen years later its lessons have yet to be taken seriously. Catastrophes and pandemics offer indices of the interconnectedness of a world under social and ecological duress, of an enmeshment intensified by human and nonhuman vectors. As Hop Hopkins argues about the relationship between racial justice and environmentalism: “You can’t have climate change without sacrifice zones, and you can’t have sacrifice zones without disposable people, and you can’t have disposable people without racism.”<sup>1</sup> The effects of environmental degradation, settler colonialism, and resource extraction are intimately entwined. As the pandemic has made clear, and as environmental justice scholars such as Robert D. Bullard, Beverly Wright, and David Pellow have argued, harm always falls hardest and first on communities that have already suffered the effects of colonialism and environmental racism.<sup>2</sup>

It is not just EH scholars who have noted the long-standing interrelationship between race, gender, poverty, and ecological concerns. Michael Brune, director of the Sierra Club, now in its 128th year and one of the first US organizations dedicated to preserving “nature” from the onslaught of industrialization, has recently reckoned with the racism of its founder, John Muir, and some of the invidious history of the organization he directs. He argues that “only people insulated from systemic racism and brutality can afford to focus solely on preserving wilderness. Black communities, Indigenous communities, and communities of color continue to endure the traumatic burden of fighting for their right to a healthy environment while simultaneously fighting for freedom from discrimination and police violence.”<sup>3</sup> Brune has called for a better way forward, one that does not see the environment as a space to be preserved against human contact but as one already full of human entanglements of the messiest kinds. Brune’s call for attentiveness to racialized futures, written from the position of one of the largest environmentalist organizations in the world, is meant for a popular audience, but it echoes scholar Kathryn Yusoff’s argument that we need to understand that the geologic past is also racialized. In her view, even the term “Anthropocene” to designate a geologic era



## Introduction

9

implicates colonized people as biopolitical, raced subjects of an extractive geologic epoch.<sup>4</sup>

In deep ways, then, the chapters in this volume are linked not simply by a focus on histories – geologic or fugitive, suppressed or dominant – but by a paradoxical focus on the *urgency of future histories* when the future looks like it is narrowing to extinction. The global pandemic. Environmental justice. Catastrophes such as super storms and wildfires. Political upheaval. Each of these broad categories branches off into more local events, all of which seem to interrupt the smooth, orderly flow of daily life. They are emergencies, but they diagnose rather than produce systemic and interconnected historical crises. Emergencies and catastrophes demand an immediate response, the concentration of resources to fix something *right now*. But they also give us opportunities to remind ourselves of the long histories of exploitation of resources and people that resulted in crises. Indeed, part of the emergency of catastrophe is the sudden recognition that the ordinary progress of life has been built on the ruins of another kind of future, that the luxury of forgetting those other histories is in part because the promise of ordinary, daily life under capitalism has been built on the quiet immiseration of people, the destruction of sacred places, the extinction of other species, the proliferation of accidents that, in the words of J.T. Roane, reveal that “the very infrastructures that create the conditions for the accident themselves embody inequality.”<sup>5</sup> The local opens to the global, and is underwritten and sponsored by its planetary immensity.

The expansiveness of the problems of environmental ruin and climate change, their expression in every form of political and economic life, have often led environmental humanists to conceptualize their work in terms of scale. That is, we think about the interconnection between local and global events, objects, histories, forms of knowledge. We think about the uneasy way that large systems and daily habits of life coordinate, how they challenge one another’s presuppositions. We think about the unrepresentability of Timothy Morton’s hyperobject, the quiet, undramatic unfolding of events that constitute Rob Nixon’s “slow violence,” of the invisible granular, molecular changes that are entailed by Stacy Alaimo’s transcorporeality. The use of scale here presses us to imagine intimacies and expansive systems that seem to defy attempts at representation or narration.<sup>6</sup> But those models are not just about scale; they are also about *time*, and it is here that the humanities can be most useful in helping scholars to conceptualize the multiplicity of stories that have been obscured by the forward march of industrialization and modernization, the voices of human and nonhuman actors who together inhabit worlds large and small,

who can reveal that the geologic time of rocks and the quotidian time of human decisions might be coordinated in a story about oil, or about garbage, or about ice. The humanities can excavate lost histories, can find the patterns of once-possible futures. They can hold in one analytic pattern the time of extinction and ruin, the stratigraphy of imagined futures, the stories from objects and actors whose voices have not been heard.

### Notes

1. Hop Hopkins, "Racism Is Killing the Planet," *Sierra: The National Magazine of the Sierra Club*. June 8, 2020. [www.sierraclub.org/sierra/racism-killing-planet](http://www.sierraclub.org/sierra/racism-killing-planet).
2. See, for example: David Naguib Pellow, *What Is Critical Environmental Justice* (Polity Press, 2017), Robert D. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), and Robert D. Bullard and Beverly Wright, *The Wrong Complexion for Protection: How the Government Response to Disaster Endangers African American Communities* (New York: NYP Press, 2012).
3. Michael Brune, "Pulling Down Our Monuments," July 22, 2020. [www.sierraclub.org/michael-brune/2020/07/john-muir-early-history-sierra-club](http://www.sierraclub.org/michael-brune/2020/07/john-muir-early-history-sierra-club)
4. Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).
5. J.T. Roane, "Black Ecologies, Tidewater Virginia," August 5, 2020. [www.transformationnarratives.com/blog/2020/08/06/black-ecologies-tidewater-virginia](http://www.transformationnarratives.com/blog/2020/08/06/black-ecologies-tidewater-virginia)
6. See, for example: Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013); Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).