

USES OF ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES: BETHANY WIGGIN

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Series, Uses of Environmental Humanities

The Uses of Environmental Humanities series explores diverse and creative ways of thinking with the Environmental Humanities in responding to socio-environmental challenges. Contributors address the influence of the Environmental Humanities and ways in which we might use this field of study, offering insights into the interactions between societies, science, politics, and culture. The series is curated by Samantha Rothbart.

“Environmental Inhumanities”

By **Bethany Wiggin**

A Freudian slip opens this essay on the uses of the environmental humanities, and it also introduces the EH program that I direct at the University of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia), the Penn Program in Environmental Humanities (PPEH). Inspired by many others, EH at Penn fosters research collaborations with scientists as well as with collaborators whose environmental expertise may not be readily translated into academic norms of either the humanities or sciences. A good definition of EH foregrounds its intent to “inhabit a difficult space of simultaneous critique and action.”^[1] This space lies beyond the research university’s existing disciplinary and other corporate structures: more welcoming, more fluid—better attuned to the people it systemically excludes with knowledge structures predicated on centuries of black and brown oppression. This essay highlights the Philadelphia place-based projects I know best. They’re often on water; they try to imagine and invite other relations to land. What we make together in these liquid spaces often does not look like conventional “research.” That’s precisely the point.

In spring 2018, I had to give a short “Ben Talk” to alumni and prospective donors introducing our new-ish **EH program, PPEH**. (Our university’s patron saint is ur-American Philadelphian Benjamin (Ben) Franklin.) You can **watch this would-be Ted talk**; it ends with a story about a boat and EH lab sunk by climate change. A little slip backstage illuminates

how the term, EH, asks English-speaking humans to rethink how we know the environment and diverse humans' (and so too nonhumans' and more than humans') relations to it. As instructed by the event planners, I found my way to one of Lincoln Center's smaller stages. I regularly get the jitters before talks, but when I found that my name badge identified me, correctly, as a German professor, but then also as the "Founding Director, Penn Program in Environmental Science," I turned a paler shade of green.

The Penn Program in Environmental Humanities (PPEH) emerged alongside the work of a strategic committee in the University's School of Arts & Sciences convened to develop research strengths in energy, sustainability, and the environment. I was the lone humanist in a fractious group; two year later, the mistake on my name badge short-circuited a case of nerves and returned me instantly to committee's meetings at Penn. There, some plain assertions were loudly proclaimed, "the humanities are not even supposed to be on this committee." With the sight of the name tag in the green room, I went from jitters straight to imposter syndrome.

But we are not back in the **science wars**, although "the environment" remains considered an object proper to scientific inquiry rather than also, simultaneously, a subject of humanistic or post-humanistic ways of knowing. In the twenty years since *Social Text* published its *Science Wars* issue, and as atmospheric CO2 levels have gone from around 360 ppm to (as of April 2019) around 415ppm,^[2] we are, as Jonathan Foley wrote in a widely circulated essay,^[3] in the midst of a war on science, born of climate denialism peddled by merchants of doubt and war profiteers.^[4] Nonetheless—or perhaps because of—this war on science and its adversaries working for science, EH programs have sprouted on many campuses. They often aim to foster collaboration with scientists, and many are terrific partners.

PPEH was born directly from an interdisciplinary course on speculative and realized utopias, and I think others might be tilting similarly.^[5] At its best, EH offers generative spaces for rigorous experiments *beyond* the sciences and humanities, i.e., in transdisciplinary, collaborative inquiry about—or, even better, *with*—the environment. For if transdisciplinary inquiry queers what we talk about when we talk about the environment (and I think it does), it also changes *how* we talk about it. In other words, EH work often looks very different from a conventional journal article, whether appearing in the pages of gold-standard publications, such as *Nature* for scientists or the *Publications of the Modern*

Language Association (PMLA) for humanists. It encourages speculative practices and processes, from walking-reading groups to program building.

A book I've been working on with two co-authors and editors, Dr. Carolyn Fornoff and Dr. Patricia Kim, both PPEH alumnae, is soon forthcoming with the University of Minnesota Press. In *Timescales: Ecological Temporalities across Disciplines*, a mix of humanists, scientists, and artists collectively attempt to think with the temporal disjunctions that are one signature of our times. An experimental academic volume with three artistic interludes, it is nevertheless one of the more conventional academic "outputs" I have made as an environmental humanist.

We also are assembling an *Ecotopian Toolkit and Catalogue* to distribute public tools designed to respond, creatively but concretely, to lines drawn in and around Philadelphia and the Delaware River watershed between the wet and the dry in the ongoing Anthropocene experiments with uninformed participants in this cradle of global petromodernity. Dried lands in Philadelphia and along the Delaware Bay and River are home to the east coast's largest oil refining complex and port; Philadelphia's oil refineries have been in operation since the late 1860s. They are not well regulated. A proposed 2016 expansion to this public and environmental health hazard was the immediate impetus to form the informal research collective, the Schuylkill River Research Corps. (Even in the space of writing this essay in June 2019, the refinery has had two fires, the second apparently so damaging as to finally force the facility's closure.[6]) A river runs through the complex, and you can **take this short tour** from a kayaker's-eye perspective.

The Ecotopian projects, like the other place-based EH projects documented in the Schuylkill River Archive, point to the **multiple temporalities as well as the incommensurate timescales** of the carbon cycle, as PPEH Fellow Rose Nagele explores. Another Ecotopian Toolmaker, artist Ellie Kennedy, a member of the collective **Environmental Performance Agency**, was channelling Isabelle Stengers and Greta Thunberg at once when she described this collective work as a response to "the urgent need to slow down." [7]

And we in the academy also urgently need to do more to share our work with those outside and to invite non-traditional experts into its making. Other expertise is urgently required. I believe the most powerful uses of EH lie in its insistence that the right to research, including research on the environment, is a human right.[8] Its use might best be measured in its efficacy to ally with and contribute to the ongoing work of decolonization

in the academy and beyond. Research outcomes in public and engaged scholarship pose notorious difficulties for tenure and promotions committees, and environmental humanists (and allies in science outreach, public history, and elsewhere) have heavy lifting ahead to make these outcomes more legible and valued in the research academy. Here's an example: Since 2016, PPEH has been co-organizing public research projects that aim to influence the life cycle and habitat of public climate and environmental data. While they have been written about in both *Nature* and in *PMLA*,^[9] the **Data Refuge projects** are hard to measure in conventional academic terms. Should work on such public-facing projects count toward tenure and promotion? Who will evaluate it, according to which norms?

This spring semester 2019, I've been teaching an introductory EH seminar for twelve teachers chosen from 214 public schools operated by the School District of Philadelphia. They are designing innovative and inspiring curricular units in the environmental humanities for their students in math, chemistry, physics, as well as history classes.

Nearly all of these twelve teachers teach in schools where, they report, "the trouble with wilderness" has hardly gone away.^[10] In our city, nearly one in four of our children (37%) lives below the poverty line.^[11] In our seminar, teachers repeated time and again that for their students, "the environment" holds no connection to their lived experience. Instead, "environment" remains a wilderness preserve for latter-day Aryans from Derian, created by and for wealthy white people, rather than also, among other things, a matter of access to quality education, decent housing, nutritious food, and safe living conditions.

So it is simply not enough for environmental humanists to insist that "the environment" must no longer be divorced from history, culture, languages, and value. It's true that the humanities can be "environmental" as well as the sciences, and so I corrected my title on my mistaken name tag. But that's only a beginning. EH, to borrow from inhuman geographer Kathryn Yusoff, must trouble geologic relations "predicated on the deformation of black and brown bodies."^[12] Environmental humanists are also doing environmental justice work at home, creating spaces for EH work well beyond the research academy—and so getting at the structures by which universities, not unlike "nature," so often remain elite preserves, perhaps particularly in the United States. EH can continue to their democratization and capacity for radical welcome. EH asks not only whose environment comes to matter, but whose humanity.

^[1] Ursula K. Heise. 12 Jan 2017, Introduction from: *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities* Routledge. Accessed on: 30 Oct 2018.

[2] The levels were reported by the Scripps Institution of Oceanography's CO2 Program from the Mauna Loa observatory.

http://scrippsco2.ucsd.edu/data/atmospheric_co2/mlo

[3] Jonathan Foley, "The War for Science."

<https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/guest-blog/the-war-for-science/?redirect=1>

[4] Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway, *The Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2010. See also the companion digital platform

<https://www.merchantsofdoubt.org/>

[5] Speculative worldmaking is a mainstay of ecocriticism. EH draws from utopian theory and experiments. As ecocritics J. J. Cohen and Lowell Duckert describe the use of utopianism in their essay, "'What If' We Were Told to 'Hold It'?", their tour guide to Soleri's utopian experiment "Arcology" told them, "utopias are no good—impossible, maybe even totalitarian—but they do accomplish some good. Spurs to thought and striving, they are full of aspirations. Heuristics. Experiments. They are not total systems, at least not the kind you ever want to live in. But that's OK because life never works according to plan." <http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2019/02/what-if-we-were-to-hold-it.html>

[6] On the announcement of early-stage plans for the refinery's long overdue closure, see "South Philly Oil Refinery to Close, City Announces."

<https://whyy.org/articles/largest-oil-refinery-on-east-coast-will-close-after-fire/>

[7] Personal communication from Kennedy at **Teaching and Learning with Rising Waters conference**. University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA. May 11, 2019.

[8] Arjun Appadurai, "The Right to Research." *Globalisation, Societies, and Education*. 4.2 (2006): 167-177. <https://www.tandfonline.com/abs/10.1080/14767720600750696>

[9] Julia Rosen, "Turbulence Ahead." *Nature* Vol. 544: 509-511 (27 April 2017). <https://www.nature.com/naturejobs/2017/170427/pdf/nj7651-509a.pdf?foxtrotcallback=true>

Wai Chee Dimock, "Climate Humanists." *PMLA* 133.1: 9-18 (January 2018).

<https://www.mlajournals.org/doi/abs/10.1632/pmla.2018.133.1.9>

[10] William Cronon's seminal essay, "The Trouble with Wilderness," is included in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995): 69-90. It is also available from the author's website at

https://www.williamcronon.net/writing/Trouble_with_Wilderness_Main.html

[11] **<https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/reports/2017/11/philadelphias-poor>**

[12] Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018. Here p.73.