HYPERALLERGIC

ARTICLES

How the Environmental Humanities Can Heal Our Relationship to the Planet

Connecting the humanities — especially the arts — with current scientific research relating to ecology and non-human life is direly needed.

Ben Valentine March 13, 2018

Janine Antoni, "2038," (2000) (image © Janine Antoni; courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York)

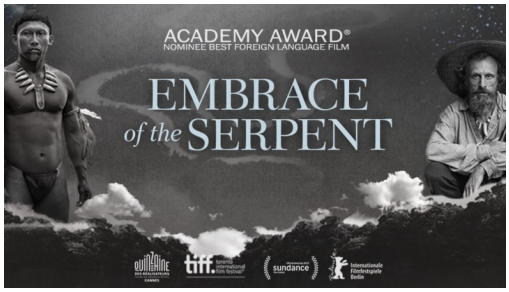
"Breathing in contemporary times reveals a deep vulnerability to the outside world."

– Heather Davis

In her essay, "To Breathe in the Cosmos," Heather Davis poetically repudiates our imagined separateness from the environment. We breathe in our environment, and thus it pours itself into us. Our pores and lungs take in the world, and through the transformation of oxygen to carbon dioxide, leave it changed too. As in Davis's writing, the boundaries between humans and our surrounding ecology, are increasingly blurred by new scientific findings.

The nature/culture divide is a faulty and dangerous dichotomy: an old belief that posits a universalized Homo sapiens as somehow outside, and most importantly, *above* the messy entanglements of ecology. As theorist Donna Haraway writes, "human beings are with and of the earth, and the biotic and abiotic powers of this

earth are the main story." A reductive binary, neatly dividing nature and culture as two separate categories, is illusory, and we are starting to see its dangers now, as the sixth great extinction event comes into focus.



Movie poster for El Abrazo de la Serpiente (Embrace of the Serpent) (2015), directed and written by Ciro Guerra

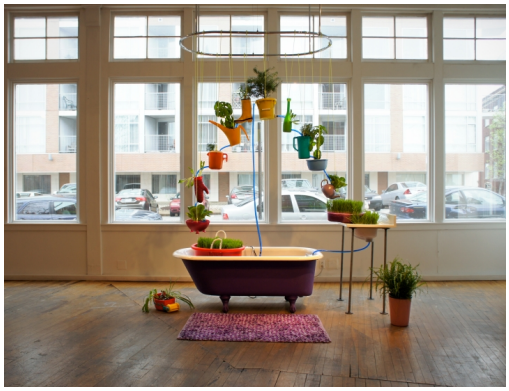
The evidence of this emerging extinction is undeniable. Global carbon emissions are rising again, even as pollution kills nine million annually. Increasing desertification, caused by poor land management and loss of forest cover, threatens crops. Insects are disappearing, the effects of which will ripple through the entire food chain. The average surface temperature has risen roughly two degrees Fahrenheit, with "16 of the 17 warmest years on record occurring since 2001." Last year, 15,000 scientists signed a dismal letter begging for action on climate change. As all this comes into view, the climate change debate continues to reach absurd lows. The US president has moved to dismantle the EPA, and has approved the removal of the terms "climate change" and "global warming" in order to silence debate.

These environmental changes have very serious and unequal effects on human populations. Disparities of wealth and economic status correlate with vulnerability to environmental illnesses. As Davis notes, economically disadvantaged black and brown bodies often inhale different worlds than their wealthier, whiter kin. According to reports from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, while "nearly one out of every ten" of US children has asthma, "for black children, it's even worse — one out of every six." Lower socioeconomic position correlates to a greater likelihood of exposure of pollutants. Inner-city traffic, closer proximity to polluting factories, and substandard housing have often left poorer neighborhoods (often primarily populated by people of color) more exposed to air-borne pollutants such as carbon monoxide and dioxide, benzene, and sulfur dioxide. This racialized difference in exposure reflects an imbalance of "approximately 7,000 deaths a year from heart disease"— in the USA alone.

In other parts of the world, we are already seeing the horrific beginnings of climate change producing perilous conditions where the likelihood of disastrous floods or droughts are greatly increased, disasters that overwhelm state or social

support when they do occur. Climate refugees are now appearing in Syria, and perhaps in the Caribbean where natural weather disasters are increasing in frequency and severity. We must recognize these climatically destabilizing trends as bundled *violences,* (to borrow from Rebecca Solnit) — for while they are anthropogenic, the people most responsible for generating the conditions for these violences often bear the least weight of the repercussions. For instance, Exxon has known about climate change since July 1977: that the policies and practices pursued by their company were dangerous to the world. Instead of changing course, Exxon actively sought to disprove climate science, because recognizing its validity would be bad for business. In the meantime millions of humans, not to mention much more nonhuman life, have suffered or died, and Exxon executives have grown wealthy. This is violence.

What to do? As the very air and water upon which we rely grows polluted and toxic for so many, what can we possibly do?

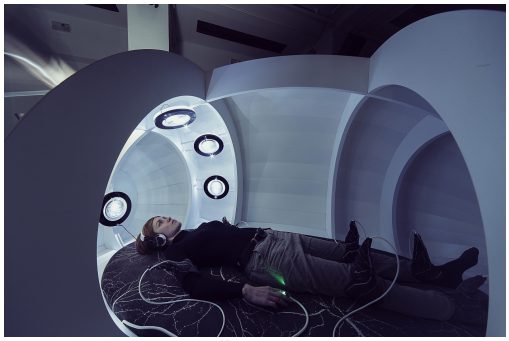


Amy Youngs, "Building a Rainbow," (2011) (image courtesy the artist)

Connecting the humanities — especially the arts — with current scientific research relating to ecology and non-human life is direly needed. This is not *the* answer, but it is an important step. In the academy this need is starting to be met by an exciting proliferation of what is called the environmental humanities, research and practice programs that investigate the complicated intermingling between human activities and the environment. The typical products of the humanities — visual art, literature, poetry, audio and visual documentaries — are created and critiqued with an expanded lens where ecological discourse is placed on equal ground with philosophy, sociology, and even art theory. In doing so, these programs offer a vision of a future different from the one we are currently heading toward. As climate change becomes an increasingly deadly force, these new fields of study coupling scientific rigor and creative practice are necessary for thinking through how to live well on a damaged planet. The environmental humanities can make the facts of environmental disaster and human displacement come alive, to enter public discourse in new ways so that these issues are more deeply felt and understood.

T.J. Demos, director of the Center for Creative Ecologies, University of California Santa Cruz, which is significant for its emphasis on art, culture, and the environment as expansive and entwined subjects, writes that the

> Environmental Humanities represents an urgently needed interdisciplinary movement of speculative, impactful research — one challenging the myopic knowledge siloing that depoliticizes the sciences and denudes the arts of ecological wisdom.



Saša Spačal, Mirjan Švagelj, Anil Podgornik, "Myconnect," (2013) (image courtesy Damjan Švarc / Kapelica gallery photo archive)

UCSC is not alone. There are other notable programs such as the Environmental Humanities at UNSW in Sydney, with their fantastic eponymous open access journal. Aarhus University Research on the Anthropocene, has groundbreaking conferences, and a fantastic array of visiting professors. The University of New Mexico's Art & Ecology program takes the American Southwest as a pedagogical site for art and ecological study. While there are many programs and events in the Global South that are tackling these issues, the University of Cape Town's Environmental Humanities South, is one of the few programs outside of the West focusing exclusively on these questions. These programs are beginning to show what truly interdisciplinary pedagogy can look like, in service to the most pressing questions of our age.

Indigenous scientist and founding Director of the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment, Dr. Robin Wall Kimmerer argues that an interdisciplinary approach is necessary for understanding the interconnections of "culture" and "nature." Subjects that she explores — non-human intelligence, inter-species communication, holobionts, or symbiotic relationships — could provide new models for working together within an environment, to find ways of being in the world that aren't so destructive.

Kimmerer's research demonstrates the ethos of the environmental humanities. In her exceptional book, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Kimmerer writes, "It's not just land that is broken, but more importantly, our relationship to land." Building an intimacy to the land,

through investigations carried out through both scientific and cultural lenses, is necessary to fill the emotional gaps that cold facts and numbers leave behind; for whatever stories we tell, we are co-creating the world.

Demos writes “we require horizon-shifting, out-of-the-box thinking to imagine and realize the necessary transition from our present destructive system toward environmental wellbeing and social justice.” Within the tragedy of the sixth great extinction event, the humanities can, and must, step up to meet the demands of today’s world, as broken as it is. As Heather Davis says, we remain deeply vulnerable to this world, not because it is cruel, not because it is morally elevated, but because the world too, is us.

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