



The Environmental Humanities and the Challenges of the Anthropocene

Serpil Oppermann and Serenella Iovino¹

In ‘Thinking through the Environment, Unsettling the Humanities’, Deborah Bird Rose and her colleagues explain that in the Environmental Humanities:

we are able to articulate a ‘thicker’ notion of humanity, one that rejects reductionist accounts of self-contained, rational, decision making subjects. Rather, the environmental humanities positions us as participants in lively ecologies of meaning and value, entangled within rich patterns of cultural and historical diversity that shape who we are and the ways in which we are able to ‘become with’ others. (Rose et al. 2012, 2)

If we cohabit this trans-corporeal site of knotted agencies and encounters, and if it is impossible to get disengaged from this turbulent *oikos*, we can begin thinking of it as the site of unremitting becomings, meetings, transformations, representations, and narratives, which constitute the research objectives of the Environmental Humanities. Conceived this way, ‘the whole world, at all scales, is a “contact zone”’. The deepening environmental and social crises of our time are unfolding in this zone where the nature/culture divide collapses and the possibilities of life and death for everyone are at stake’ (2). It is thus important to reiterate that ‘humanistic disciplines may help us understand and engage with global ecological problems by providing insight into human action, perceptions, and motivation’, as expressed in ‘Humanities for the Environment—A Manifesto for Research and Action’ (Holm et al. 2015, 978). This 2015 Manifesto stresses the significance of the ‘human factor’ in investigating the ‘biogeophysics of global change’ (Holm et al. 2015, 979) as it is not included in scientific calculations. In Sörlin’s words, ‘[i]t seems this time that our hopes are tied to the humanities’ (2012, 788). Or, espousing LeMenager and Foote’s passionate claim, ‘[a]t the risk of sounding grandiose, Earth needs the humanities’ (2012, 575).

It is in this framework that the Environmental Humanities seek to develop new convivial partnerships between the humanities, natural and social sci-

¹ Tratto da: “Environmental Humanities: Voices from the Anthropocene”, a cura di Serpil Oppermann e Serenella Iovino (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017). serenella.iovino@unito.it

ences, the fine arts, and other fields in order to devise and practice new critical humanisms. In producing ‘sustainable artifacts and socialities’ (LeMener and Foote 2012, 574), these transdisciplinary crossings are indeed a way to reaffirm critique ‘as a kind of making’—almost an ‘infrastructure’ (574) for building inclusive forms of citizenship and projects of ‘multispecies ecojustice’ (Haraway 2015, 161). Offering new conceptualizations for the contact zones of human and more-than-human natures and environments, as well as new directions, posthumanisms, for example, are key modes of these critical forms of the Humanities. Rosi Braidotti’s ground-breaking reflections on the role of the ‘posthuman Humanities’ are here a mandatory reference. Posthumanism, Braidotti argues, provides the humanities with ‘a new set of narratives about the planetary dimension of globalized humanity; the evolutionary sources of morality; the future of our and other species; the semiotic systems of technological apparatus; ... the role of gender and ethnicity as factors that index access to the posthuman predicament and the institutional implications of them all’ (2013, 162–163). Developing on these insights, in ‘Four Problems, Four Directions for Environmental Humanities: Toward Critical Posthumanities for the Anthropocene’ (2015), Astrida Neimanis, Cecilia Åsberg, and Johan Hedrén present four specific directions to address what they delimit as four problems: ‘alienation and intangibility; the postpolitical situation; negative framing of environmental change; and compartmentalization of “the environment” from other spheres of concern’ (67). In order to tackle these problems, the authors suggest that we need to formulate ‘diverse environmental imaginaries’, rethink the field in terms of ‘naturecultures and feminist posthumanisms’, develop the field ‘in a specifically transdisciplinary and postdisciplinarity vein’, and create a ‘citizen humanities’ (70). All these spheres must be thought in terms of interconnected entanglements rather than homogenous connections that project a ‘blanket humanity’ (Vansintjan, 2016)¹.

¹ Aaron Vansintjan, ‘Going beyond the “Ecological Turn” in the Humanities’. 1 March 2016. See online at <http://entitleblog.org/2016/03/01/going-beyond-the-ecological-turn-in-the-humanities/>.