

The Moveable Type Podcast- Environmental Humanities, Anthropocene Unconscious Part 2 (Episode 6)

Transcript

Roxie:

Hello and welcome back to the Movable Type podcast brought to you by University College London, movable type is a graduate peer reviewed journal edited every year by PhD students from the English department at UCL. Please be sure to follow us on social media to stay up to date on our latest issue, new episode releases and more. We are on Twitter at movable type UCL Instagram at mobile type under score, UCL and Facebook as mobile type or at empty UCL. And if you want to browse our latest issue while you listen, head on over to UCLA. Asked movable hyphen type. This month we looked at the fascinating multidisciplinary field of environmental humanities. We understand the concept of environmental humanities is in itself quite complicated and encompasses countless areas of research. Therefore we have aimed to provide a broad overview of some of its infinite possibilities. Though far from comprehensive, we hope the conversations in this episode will inspire many more and be of interest to both people already familiar with and completely new to the topics covered.

Our first segment looks at the question what is environmental humanities? What does the field look like today and where can you go? To learn more, we asked 3 academics at different stages of their careers whose varied approaches offer a glimpse into current research in the field. Although their work does not always fit neatly under the environmental humanities label. They each engage with critique and even push back against environmental topics and questions through their research.

First, we'll hear from Kate Rigby, a well established figure in Ecocriticism and the environmental humanities. In 2021, she was awarded an Alexander von Humboldt Professorship at the University of Cologne, where she directs the Center for Multidisciplinary Environmental Studies in the Humanities.

Up next will be Christine Accot, lecturer English turn, cultures of the Black Atlantic at King's College London, having recently completed a position as research fellow in the English department at the University of Warwick. She is currently writing a book about ecology, extraction and contemporary literature.

Finally, we have Peter Riley who is associate professor of poetry and poetics at Durham University. His book strandings was released by Profile Books earlier this year. His academic research examines 19th through 20th century poetry in relation to labor history, Marxism, and archival studies.

How would you define environmental humanities?

Kate:

Well, in a very broad sense, I think the environmental humanities are concerned with the historical, cultural, ethical, aesthetic, affective, spiritual dimensions of human relationships with other living beings and with our shared earthly environs. But that's a very sort of general definition. My favorite sort of thumbnail sketch of the environmental humanities is actually from the inaugural issue of the Environmental Humanities Journal and it's the editorial introduction, which is called thinking through the environment unsettling the humanities. I really like that, because the implication is that this is a challenge to certain kind of assumptions and practices in the humanities as well as kind of bringing something new to more scientific understandings of environmental problems, so part of their sort of definition reads. The environment humanities engages with fundamental questions of meaning,

value, responsibility, and purpose in a time of rapid and escalating change. At the core of this approach is a focus on the underlying cultural and philosophical frameworks that are entangled with the ways in which diverse human cultures have made themselves at home in a more than human world. And you can sort of unpack every phrase of that, and you will actually have a very rich understanding of the environmental humanities. But there it is in a nutshell.

Christine:

That's a really fascinating question, because to me I'm still kind of in the process of defining what it means to work in environmental humanities. And I think that's also part of the kind of excitement of working in this field is that it's constantly developing and going into a number number of different direction. And but at the moment this is a kind of like state of my thinking. In this very moment, environmental humanities is a way of understanding how people have kind of shaped their relationship to what is extraneous to them and their being and how they've then in turn shaped that extraneous world according to their ideas of how society should be structured. So as you can probably tell, I'm kind of a terrible environmental humanities person because I care so much about people. And my interest in environmental humanities also came from an interest in thinking about social hierarchies and how they are reflected both in literature and in the world that we live in and because of that, I would say that what fascinates me about environmental, environmental, humanities and the field is that it gives us a way to think materially about the construction of social hierarchies and that it doesn't, it's it's very attached to the world out there. And the way that we make it. And that's always helped me.

Peter:

I'm I'm torn on this one because, you know, on, on the one hand. It's a it's a term that signals you know, the the basic proximity of humans and environment and you know brings that brings them in dialogue, but I you know on the other I'm I'm not sure that it's really a term that gets to work as immediately as I as I maybe want it to come, you know, and I thought. I I thought I keep returning to and you know, however broad and maybe imprecise this thought is. You think you think about the the first stirrings of the industrial Revolution, not the first stirrings, but you know when the Industrial Revolution really took hold. Maybe let's locate it in the middle of the 18th century. You know, at the same moment you suddenly have. As almost a kind of a flight impulse or an inverse projection. The Romantics coming along with with their conception of nature of this, of this environment, a space in which you know that the sovereign masculine privilege self can suddenly project themselves into. And I I really like that idea, I think it's a really useful animating thought when thinking about the categories of humans and nature, because is it the case that you know some of our fundamental conceptions of the environment and nature are born out of, in a kind of a, you know a reflexive sense, the moment of most the most intense kind of industrial production that the world had hitherto seen. So nature as you know, a kind of event like a fantasy evacuation and escape from the dark satanic mills. Nature environment as dialectical rebound right. Uhm so. So yes, you know environmental humanities. But but maybe you know the point for where I'm coming from it in terms of my own thinking, maybe I'd I'd, I'd want to think of it more akin to like a fantasy inversion of the various stages of capitalism. Ah, so not necessarily something that you know, pristine that can still be saved, but rather a category that's continually modified in relation to political economy.

Roxie:

Where do you see your research fitting into the field of environmental humanities and how did you get there?

Kate:

Currently, I would say that my research is situated at the intersection of environmental, literary, historical and religious studies, and I have a particular interest in decolonial and multi species

approaches. Uhm, my way into the environment humanities I've been making my way towards the place I am now for a very long time. And I've come at it along a few different routes and, at the core of it is passion actually it's a passionate love of the natural world. Combined with a perception, a concern that it's being wrecked for no very good reason or for reasons that end up sort of providing advantages to a minority at the expense of the majority. And then thirdly a desire. To try and understand what are the deeper underlying sociocultural drivers that kind of brought us to this place, and what sociocultural opportunities are there for taking a different turn, taking a different direction? So that's kind of that was my starting point, and that really came into focus for me as a postgraduate student in Melbourne. First, the University of Melbourne, then at Monash. A long time ago, back in the mid 1980s, I suppose in the field of German studies and Comparative literature and critical theory and I was hanging out with a lot of people who were interested in contemporary forms of theory, mainly francophone, and at the time I didn't find them particularly helpful for thinking about environmental crisis and where I ended up being drawn to was Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of the domination of nature in their extraordinary dialectic of enlightenment from the 1940s from towards the end of the Second World War, when they were in exile. From Nazi Germany and I kind of revisited their analysis of this dialectic of enlightenment through feminist and ecological and postcolonial perspectives in my doctoral thesis. So that was kind of one of my ways in was through German thoughts German Literature and German thought. Then I had the amazing, wonderful opportunity to meet and become very close friends with a very eminent Australian eco philosopher, Freya Mathews, right at the time when she was offering a crash course in Eco philosophy for free in a grungy pub. In downtown Melbourne called The Rainbow, so I did this crash course in Echo philosophy and I found myself particularly drawn to sort of forms of, I suppose deep, deeper ecology in a wide sense. Come to critical ecofeminism, particularly the work of another eminent Australian philosopher Val Plumwood, and also eco spirituality. These were both personal and academic pursuits. I would have to say and then I discovered I mean. I'm probably best known as an eco critic, but I came to ecocriticism after I'd already been deeply immersed in kind of echo philosophy and finding my own way to to practice a kind of theoretically informed ecocriticism. Without ever having discovered Ecocriticism, then I discovered ecocriticism in the late 1990s, nineteen 90s, and I was so thrilled because I suddenly discovered I had a tribe. There were other literary scholars who were doing this doing this kind of crazy thing that I've been trying to do all of my lonesome. In German studies in Australia.

Christine:

For me I think I arrived there in what can only be described as like the most meandering way ever I hope. And when I was writing my doctorate. He says I just wanted to understand how very recent and hyper contemporary literature and by immigrants to the United States from Africa represented what we might call raced against the backdrop of more liberal regimes of kind of multiculturalism, right? And so I wanted to think about how do they see the difference in racialization? How do they see race on a global scale and how is that even represented in literature? Because it's it's so difficult to try and represent something that is so carefully constructed and so deeply historical. Or on the level of form. And at first I thought it was all about the law and the state and the way that the state regulates people and at that gave me a language to talk about something that isn't really over exclusion but is actually embedded in ideas of a state needs and requirements. So the idea of value, right? Rather than this idea of expulsion or or rejection of people, and I think there's also room conversation to have all the time, because I I had that conversation with people in my PhD in now and having to have it again around various crises, so-called crises. that are produced by kind of long wars and conflicts. But by the end of the thesis, I'd actually written this chapter that didn't quite fit into this argument, and a very smart friend, Floyd, was like. You'll see it'll take over the entire project, and lo and behold, here we are. It was not about the law, it was about recycling and the idea that sustainability is maintained by the notion of infinitely reusable racialised. Labor, it was just weird to me that there was this novel that made a similar argument about the effect that recycling

labor has. And that made it through a comparison or a formal comparison to mining labor. Which I thought. Was just like such an odd way of thinking about it. Especially because sustainability and recycling, and I've written about this in kind of public forums. Is such a kind of morally unambiguous thing like it's always seen as being just a good thing? And to encounter attacks in which it was very clearly not, I was just thinking it made me think. A lot about like how race is produced through environment and work and labor. And this really appealed to me, since I'm always interested in kind of theories of race that try to make connections but then don't flatten history. And I've never really liked theories that suggest that nothing ever changes and race is always the same, and so in that case I felt that extraction was doing something more than describing actual mining. It was. Describing mining, but it was also describing a process that had a conformal element, a formal literary element, and that was intertwined with the exploitation of racialized workers so by the end of the thesis I got into this stage where I loved this chapter. I didn't know what to do with it, and then I started my postdoc at the University of Warwick, which I mean, it's just a fantastic place to work in environmental humanities because you skip all the steps, all the kind of liberal traps and then just end up. That, like a really robust understanding of what you want to do and what kind of political commitments you have and and I arrived there wanting to think about extraction and what it means when we think of race in terms of extraction. And and for me, it's not just that racialized people are turned into commodities or raw materials that can be extracted, which is kind of a simplistic way of thinking about this historical relationship, but I wanted to develop a different way of thinking about how that works. So what does it mean, for instance, that? In the case of South Africa. You've got this development of a very clearly. Kind of racial capitalist state against the backdrop of massive kind of mining and colonialism that is so tied to mining. And by that point I'd written this chapter and I arrived at the University of Warwick as a postdoc on Mike Nibler and Chris Campbell. Fantastic project about commodity frontiers. And that completely just changed everything I thought I knew about the relationship between race and environment.

Peter:

Well, I see my work as as maybe aligning with those of us who are maybe making sure that that the environment. That category isn't allowed to float around. Uh, with with any sense of, you know, kind of autonomy or any pristinist delusions? Let's say I, I think, you know like someone like Jason Moore's work on ecology does this really well? You know, his emphasis on dialectical, bundling, entanglement. You know that's where. Maybe I get my my strandings metaphor from, or one aspect of my strandings metaphor. You know this this sense that you cannot extract the categories of nature and the environment out. From you know society, politics, economy and. And you know, I, I think, really. I you know, I worry about the ongoing fetishization. Of the natural world. Uhm, you know whether that's the the nature writing industry? Whether that's the various nature programs available on mainstream television. And I think you know with the book I've. I've just published strandings I. I just wanted to. I wanted to foreground a sense of absolute complicity contamination. I wanted to be in it. I wanted to be guilty in Donna Haraway's terms, I wanted to stay with the trouble. I mean, maybe one of the things that I want to say is I I started my PhD in 2008 and I finished it in roughly 2012, so the political economic terrain. Backdrop informing what I was doing fundamentally shifted, right? You know more or less coincided with the. With the financial crash. And then in the wake of that, you know, living through the 1st stirrings of austerity, the introduction of student fees, now the dismantling of pensions. And I think. Mapping my strandings metaphor onto that very turbulent. Period of economic history. That's that's that's that's maybe why I saw stranded whales. Kind of reassert themselves or assert themselves in a very particular way during that time you know the nation, nation, state floundering on a beach. You know this huge upsurge in post Imperial nostalgia surrounding, you know the whole the whole Brexit thing. And interestingly, I you know I found out during the course of my research on stranded whales that Brexit anxiety continually projected itself in terms of a series of beached and rotting whale carcass metaphors, so, in in a sense, though, you know these stranded whales or or the stranded whales

kind of icon of our moment asserted itself in my life very forcibly. And also, you know there's another thing going on here. My own subject position white privileged male, you know. I of course I am absolutely bound up with this central metaphor. Speaking as a kind of a lyric, I in this context registering all of these anxieties as they kind of flow through me, trying not to be reactionary about them trying not to reaffirm all of these fictions about sovereignty, isolationism, you know, the isolato. Trying to survive against the currents of of turbulent times. That's one aspect of stranding or strandedness may be trying to refuse those kinds of reactionary thoughts. And rebound towards another sense of the word stranding, as in inter relationship, connection, kinship reestablishing the Commons. So my life is a trafficking back and forth between the temptations of reaffirming a stranded self, a Leviathanic self. And the redemptive possibilities of dreaming up new ways of reaching out., establishing community. So that's that's that's a very long winded answer to you or to your question how did I get here? I just rode the waves of capital as we all as we're all doing

Roxie:

What do you see for the future of environmental humanities?

Kate:

I think there are a few things on the horizon. One is an expansion of the concern with environmental justice to a bio inclusive eco justice perspective and, and particularly I'm really interested in work in multi species studies and multispecies ethnography. Deborah Bird rose, the environmental anthropologist and I suppose eco cultural theorist extraordinaire, talked about trans species, justice and I think that you know in the face of escalating extinctions and dwindling numbers of free living plants and animals and fungi and even biota in the soil. It's so important to really come back to that early critique of of human supremacism. And it really understand that we are called ethically into a more than human community of concern, so that I think that's one thing. And that's that's very much already happening. I think another thing is you know it's clear the I mean it's clear in been clear in Australia for about 2 decades that climate change is already disrupting weather patterns in such a way as to cause. Infrequent, increasing frequency and intensity of extreme events and therefore disasters. That was really the focus for my book before last dancing with disaster, and so I really think that we have to reckon with disaster. We we need to develop an ethics of living with disaster of living humanely and considerately and mindfully or with disaster. So, uhm, so that's the second thing. And the third thing, the third thing I kind of gestured towards previously in talking about where my own work is, what I think is really distinctive about what's emerging in the space of the environmental humanities is. Some forms of interdisciplinarity that bring the sort of hermeneutic and historical and and ethical philosophical kind of approaches of the humanities into conversation with Social Research. The methods of Social Research, particularly ethnography. And what I'm particularly interested in in increasingly our research projects that are participatory, one of my favorite recent books in this area is participatory research with more than human others. Considering, for example, the dogs that are involved in developing sort of new technologies to help people with various forms of disabilities where it involves technologies and dogs and people. The dogs are seen as as research partners as equal research partners and. And they're, you know they're their feelings and needs and values and perspectives. You know, I kind of also have to be respected insofar as we can from within a narrow human little world. Obviously we can't fully enter in. To you know the mind and experience of other creatures, but we can. We can be. More or less attentive to where they're at, so but yeah, participatory research with more than human others. I think that this is a really exciting sort of new new terrain for environmental humanities work.

Christine:

I mean, looking into the future. In a moment of I. Don't mean to fall into any tropes. But at the moment, thinking about the. Future is a scary scary. Thing, but it can also be. I would hope. That it can also be a way to imagine something right to imagine yeah, utopic features and and. I want to say that what I want for the environmental humanities is a turn away from kind of **liberal sustainability culture that inadvertently reproduces notions about kind of pure nature. As I've just said and then just turns into silliness about population control**, I would like to shelve those arguments forever, please. They are so boring and also just not correct. And we should know better by now. It's not like I don't think that protecting the environment is a new strategy in the social hierarchy playbook, right? There are plenty of terrible people in history who have appreciated going hiking and liking the environment is not a good for a good politics mate, so I would like us to really think I would like the field really think about its political commitment and what I'm saying is that I'd like a lot less policing, both literally and like kind of figuratively. About what is and isn't a morally correct engagement with environment and more of an emphasis on some really exciting work in in other fields like queer studies, disability studies and indigenous studies which have all produced fantastic work on environment that is sometimes not properly engaged with the kind of mainstream environmental humanities I absolutely love, for instance, Nicole Seymour's work on bad environmentalism, and which which really thinks about, like how people try to be irreverent about this construction. This moral construction of a pure nature, and what strategies, marginalized people use in order to just like challenge all of all of those assumptions, and those are really the things we need to undo, and those are also the hierarchies we need to undo in order to actually live ethically in envired, alongside environments of all kinds.

Peter:

The degree to which we are living and working on shifting historical sands. Ah, and how the margins of possibility? Are seemingly continually being redrawn, not necessarily, definitely not in a redemptive or or or positive way and sort of in in the immediate. Sense you know. So COVID pandemic, just ongoing ecological collapse and crisis. Then the extraordinary conflagration in in Ukraine. Whatever kind of circumference of believability. That I had been living under prior to that historical moment. That's just being. It's just being expanded, it's just it's just being challenged. Yeah, the the margins of reality continually being redrawn whereby you know the unthinkable, suddenly becomes thinkable again. And yeah, in that context you can. You can certainly despair. You can rebound towards all of the conventional ways of being and working in the world, but also potentially, that's a profoundly liberating moment to redraw the parameters. How we think about relating to one another? I mean specifically in relation to the Academy. Let's say some of the some of the promises that used to define the parameters of academic work have been subtracted, so stable pension. Decent working conditions. These are continually being compromised. And so difficult, difficult to know what shaped the institution and what shape our academic labor is going to take over the coming over the coming years. But you know, I'm I'm just, I'm just genuinely interested in the kinds of spaces and opportunities for discussion. That will be facilitated by conventional university structures. Going forward, I'm I'm not really answering a question about environmental humanities, but I think I am as well because I'm drawing specific attention to. The environment that defines higher education and registering all of the ways that these are being. And compromised and how we as a community respond. Do we double down on the kind of the sanctity of our vocation and work harder because we think working harder? Will you know, secure a job, secure that promotion? Secure financial stability? Or do we start properly organizing? And resisting this ongoing marketization of higher education, if it's not the latter, then we've got huge problems going forward, I think.

Roxie:

For listeners new to the topic, where would you recommend they start?

Kate:

Well, I think the the easiest way in actually to begin with is in fact with that editorial introduction to the first issue of the journal Environmental Humanities. You know it's only a few pages, but you know there's a lot in there. It's a great place to start. It's freely available online UM, and so readily accessible, so environmental humanities issue number one came out in 2012. Then there are. There are now a couple of book length introductions to the field which are very good. One is by Robert Emmet and David Nye and it's simply called the environmental, the environmental humanities, a critical introduction. And that's kind of thematically arranged, and also has quite useful background to the emergence of the environmental humanities. So that's a great read. And then there is a brand new book which is really the first textbook in environmental humanities with some thematic chapters focusing on. Big concepts like the Anthropocene. I mean, but then also looking at the if you like the green threads that are now being woven together into the environmental humanities, the the green threads that emerged in discrete disciplines. So there's a chapter on environmental literary studies, or ecocriticism. There's a chapter on environmental history, environmental philosophy, and so on. Really terrific and that is edited by John Ryan and Andrew Hubble, and it's called introduction to the environmental humanities. So those those are. Sort of academic books that I can recommend. Another text of a very different kind that I is definitely not everybody cup of tea but I just keep on being drawn back to it again and again and again because there is so much in there that speaks to what we're grappling with. Uhm, intellectually, academically and in our world today and that's Curtis Faust. Curtis two part drama, Faust, and definitely not for everybody. But for people who are into little. You know particularly fast Part 2 really explores so many dimensions of. If you like it kind of the modern, the modern condition and aspects of. The sort of well, the domination of nature. Actually, that kind of impetus are to to sort of dominate and control, but also kind of countervailing countervailing possibilities. It's an extraordinary text. There's just one other thing that I would mention this also. So I I think you might have to pay for it online, but it's it's a, it's a very punchy article written by Co, authored by a horde of people, including myself, a little minor bit part. The lead author is Noel Castree and it's called changing the intellectual climate. And that was published in. Uhm, nature climate change. A few years back. And it's also really helpful because it's in the Science Journal and its objective is to explain why the humanities and qualitative social sciences. Are so important to considering the human dimensions of global environmental change. And and how damaging it is that those perspectives have been neglected and there are little kind of boxes with definitions of environmental, social science and environment humanities. So that's another really useful kind of starting point.

This is such a great question because it means that I can just like lead people down the path sets that I also went down when I did my postdoc. And just skip all the bugs. So I've already ventured Mike and Chris who are just fantastic scholars of the Caribbean and environment in literature, and I think if you're interested in that in particular that you can't start anywhere better than their edited volume, which is called the Caribbean aesthetics, world ecology, politics, and it's one of those. Text that just includes so many great contributors, but also if you go through the bibliography you're just like, yeah, you're set for the rest of your environmental humanities career and this is perhaps a more theoretical one. Also a bit later earlier. Sorry, but I recently taught the writing of Suzanne says there after some conversations for an MLA panel with Lubaba Chowdhury and Natalie Casuse, and I just cannot stop thinking about it. It's one of those texts like I just pick up. All the time and I'm like this is incredible. Every single line is just illuminating and I couldn't recommend it enough. Everyone buy and read the great camouflage, the collection of essays, prices and. So there I've also found Jennifer Vensel work on African literature and extraction extremely generative. And she also wrote alongside him, Rosie Man and the afterwards, who a special issue of textual practice that I'm in and raised some really important questions. And what I appreciate about the work. Is that it? Pays careful attention to both history and those mediating processes that take place when we try to represent the world and then read it. And I think people. I'm also really looking forward to reading are and who

I've been reading but not in book form, but who now have books coming out. Is someone like JT Rhone, whose book *Dark Aghoras* is going to be this groundbreaking? It's going. I'm so excited to teach it one day and it looks incredible. And really well situated in terms of how it will change the distinction between what we call natural and built environment. And that's often one of the ways of excluding marginalized communities from histories or proper engagement with environment, right? So people like Carolyn Finney have written about this really beautifully in *Black Faces White Faces*, so that's really something that I think some of the work that I've just talked about challenges. These divisions between built and natural and who gets to traverse all these spaces and a bit closer to home. I'd recommend everyone check out the work of Ahmed Josephine Budge and Sandy Levinson. 2 scholars and practitioners. So I really admire. I also really admire because I myself I'm not a practitioner, I am someone who just writes about these questions so. That's those are great places to start, but obviously it's like a huge field and it's a hugely exciting field to be in as well. Sometimes even very difficult to kind of follow what's happening. What's new.

I've been doing a bit of reading of history recently. I've returned to the work of two historians. Call Peter Limbaugh and Marcus rediker. I've just I've just had a look again, I didn't. I didn't really get the full force of this. This work when I came across it during my grad grad school days, but it's called the many headed Hydra, the Hidden history of the Revolutionary Atlantic. And this is a work that that tells the story. Those peoples who well, you know, work cast aside by the dominant. Maybe you know emergence of of of modernity, capitalist modernity and who struggled to imagine a world and a relation to that world that was that was fundamentally different from. You know the recursive colonial fantasy of resource extraction, alienation, capital accumulation, and the protection of private property. So all of those castaways and runaways and slaves and militant workers who banded together? And who started dreaming up the parameters of how the world might look askance of? Well, all of those elements that continue to define our world today. And just registering exactly what we spoke about earlier this moment as a period of intense historical trauma and upset. And disorientation and realizing that in response to that disorientation. We can retreat to all of the all of the fictions of the past. We can retrench notions of selfhood sovereignty. Or we can just hold out the opportunity that another world is possible. That in the lineaments of monopoly capitalism we can glimpse alternative futures and possibilities and ways of being with one another. If there is a sudden apocalyptic jolt. We might be able to build the world again. That sounds hopelessly vague, doesn't it? But you know. That that that's all I'm able to articulate at the moment. You know, if you want something more programmatic, then don't come to A to an English literature scholar, right? That's that. That's some that's probably important.