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Networking Networks and Constellating New Practices in the Environmental Humanities

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ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES BEGAN IN THE EARLY 1990S, AND SINCE 2000 THE FIELD HAS grown rapidly because of infrastructural support and because of funding for curricular innovation and programming.[1] The environmental humanities include historical, philosophical, aesthetic, religious, literary, filmic, and media studies; they are informed by the most recent research in the sciences of nature and the anthropogenic factors that contribute to increasingly extreme weather events—drought, fire, hurricanes, melting glaciers, and warming and rising oceans (see Adamson, "Humanities" 135; Nye et al. 22–28).

Currently, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which was formed to study accelerating environmental change, has over two thousand natural scientists, very few social scientists, and less than a handful of humanists contributing to its research and reports. Future Earth, a global research platform also operating under the auspices of the United Nations, has also been dominated by scientists.[2] But both bodies have been spurred to remedy this imbalance, by documents such as "The Future We Want" (*Future*), the outcome of the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (dubbed Rio+20), which calls for more equity-focused definitions of *sustainable development*. In a recent position paper, "Changing the Intellectual Climate," a group of noted environmental humanists and social scientists observe that, to date, "big science" has tended to provide facts and data about earth systems but offers little sense of the importance of social equity or "of humans as diverse, interpretive creatures who frequently disagree about values, means, and ends" (Castree et al. 765). They call for greater recognition of the role of the humanities and its potential to contribute to work at the international level that provides insight into human motivation and behavior, into how diverse groups and individuals make decisions, and into possibilities for a multiplicity of responses that are "relevant to different constituencies" (765–66). Responding to calls such as this, international researchers are now advocating the

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integration of humanities insights into codesigned and coproduced knowledge about anthropogenically caused change (see Hartman).

But what forms will this integrated or transdisciplinary codesigned research take? Can the humanities, which typically are characterized as weakly tooled to address social and environmental crises, catalyze the imagination of new ideas, narratives, frameworks, alternatives, demands, and projects that will enable people to envision different, livable futures? One of the most ambitious humanities efforts to emerge from calls at the international level for more equity-focused definitions of anthropogenic environmental change and sustainable development is an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation–funded project called Humanities for the Environment (HfE). It seeks to model programming and research that integrates the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences.[3] Local and regional work began in the summer of 2013; in the summer of 2014, HfE principal investigators and key researchers from the United States, Europe, and Australia met in Hong Kong to hone the project's aim and mission. As one of the principal investigators and a lead developer for the project's *WordPress* Web site, I joined other international and regional leaders in this three-year project to pilot what we have termed the Anthropocene humanities. Articulating the purpose and need for this initiative on the Web site's "About" page, we wrote, "Humanities *for the* Environment is animated by questions about the role of the humanities in the Anthropocene, a concept being accepted by a growing number of scientists, which suggests that we have entered a time in which human activity is significantly reshaping the geological future of the planet."[4] We agreed that our projects, audiences, methods, practices, and arguments would be guided by a set of common threads but be regionally distinct and shaped by local researchers and interests. The first "Common Thread" states, "We hold that the human sciences—the wide range of academic disciplines in the humanities—are a largely untapped resource of insight into human motivation and agency that should inform how we interpret and stimulate change."[5]

With the planetary image of "Future Earth" in mind, HfE principal investigators chose the descriptor *observatory* for the formal mechanism they would use to build new networks of researchers and institutions and to connect existing networks that had been forming around the environmental humanities since the 1990s. The word was chosen also to quicken the imagination of the humanists who were being called on to think outside the box of traditional humanities research protocols, such as the single-authored monograph, and to engage in more collaborative, interdisciplinary, or Web-based projects and research. *Observatory* also aligned well with research platforms and scientific initiatives by evoking a sense of a humanities laboratory or a tower offering a greater perspective on both human and nonhuman activity and phenomena from the cosmic scale to the microscopic.

In the pilot phase of the project, the Mellon foundation funded three observatories, at Arizona State University, in the United States; Trinity College, in Ireland; and the University of Sydney, in Australia. Each observatory was asked to map environmental humanities initiatives developing in its own region and to enhance networking among regional and international sites. In this essay, I focus on three projects created by the North American Observatory (NAO) at Arizona State University and archived on the international HfE Web site. Each of these projects is innovating new constellations of digital, visual, narrative, and curatorial practice. I use the word *constellation* because, associated with astronomy, it applies well to methodologies and practices that seek to move beyond traditional contemplative or reflective humanities outcomes. None of the tools or practices being employed by HfE researchers are new in themselves; what

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is new is how they are creatively employed by collaborative teams of local and international academic and community partners.[6]

The Anthropocene Humanities: Anthropocene and *Anthropos* as Metaconcepts

Rio+20 opened with *Welcome to the Anthropocene*, a three-minute video in which a screen-size image of the globe is superimposed with an uninterrupted succession of the hockey stick–shaped graphs illustrating the "great acceleration" of human activities in the past 250 years as the narrator notes steadily rising CO2 emissions, tropical forest loss, and population growth (Di Chiro, "Environmental Justice and the Anthropocene Meme" 364). The video ends with the assurance that "our creativity, energy, and industry offer hope" to shape our future (*Welcome*). The *Anthropocene* is a neologism first proposed in a short essay published in 2000 by Paul Crutzen, a Nobel Prize–winning geologist, and Eugene Stoermer, an atmospheric chemist.[7] The term has still not gained full approval among geologists, but if accepted by the scientific community, it would signal that the earth has transitioned into a new post-Holocene age of the human. Crutzen and Stoermer likely did not anticipate that their short essay would lead researchers in once rigidly separated disciplines to cross the divide between the "two cultures" of the humanities and sciences that C. P. Snow famously described in 1959. Scholars from across the disciplines have begun pouring into symposiums and conferences to discuss and debate what Rob Nixon has called this "epochal idea" ("Anthropocene").

As Giovanna Di Chiro observes, the popular storytelling devices known as the keynote speech and the TED talk have been largely responsible for the dramatic rise in the use of *Anthropocene* ("Environmental Justice and the Anthropocene Meme" 364). In many of these talks, including those given by Andrew Revkin (the Dot Earth blogger at the *New York Times*), there is a sunny optimism projected, in contrast to the perceived (or misperceived) gloominess of some environmentalists or greens. Revkin argues that only an optimistic attitude will foster civic action on the climate problem. In one of his keynotes, he muses, "We have to accept ourselves, flaws and all, in order to move beyond what has been something of an unconscious, *species-scale pubescent growth spurt, enabled by fossil fuels instead of testosterone*" (qtd. in Di Chiro, "Environmental Justice and the Anthropocene Meme" 366; Di Chiro's emphasis). Several things are going on in this sentence. The mention of testosterone indicates that for Revkin *anthropos* is gendered as male, which suggests an obliviousness to or unwillingness to engage with decades of feminist-environmentalist and ecofeminist analyses of the rise of Western modernity and its social and ecological consequences.

Indeed, narratives about an aggregate *anthropos*, Nixon has observed, almost always fail to describe "unequal human agency, unequal human impacts, and unequal human vulnerabilities." He adds that the "Anthropocene story" arises in the early-twenty-first-century expansion of neoliberal capitalism, a time in which most societies around the world have experienced a deep and "widening chasm of inequality between the superrich and the ultrapoor" ("Great Acceleration"). So it is curious that this inequality is usually not discussed by ecomodernists such as Revkin. Nixon challenges his fellow humanists to tell not the story of aggregate *anthropos* but two different kinds of stories, both emerging in the Anthropocene: the "convergent story" of humanity's legible impacts on earth's geophysical systems now and for millennia to come and the "fractured narratives" of widening schism between the rich and the poor that are revealing the immense "inequalities in access to resources and exposures to risk" ("Anthropocene").

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Di Chiro notes that the rapid adoption of Anthropocene discourse in environmental circles has occurred primarily in particular social, cultural, and political contexts (i.e., Euro-Australo-American academic environmental studies and environmental politics ["Environmental Justice and the Anthropocene Meme" 363]). Meanwhile, the term typically "does *not* surface, nor has it gained any epistemic or political traction, in other contexts that are *equally* concerned with the social and ecological impacts of runaway climate change"—contexts such as environmental justice and climate justice organizations and social movements (364). In these arenas, narratives of the Anthropocene, both convergent and fractured, circulate, but discourses about multispecies aggregation or assemblage are also in operation (see Haraway 160). For example, delegates who gathered for the World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth in 2010 wrote the "Indigenous Peoples' Declaration," in which they state that violations of "our soils, air, forests, rivers, lakes, biodiversity, and the cosmos are assaults against us" ("Final Conclusions"). "Us" is emphasized to mean all living beings—human and nonhuman—a multispecies aggregation in the midst of multiply scaled, divergent worlds that have a right to maintain and regenerate life cycles and evolutionary processes (see Adamson and Ruffin 3–4).

Novels such as Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* illustrate why a project to pilot the Anthropocene humanities might explore stories of anthropogenic environmental change, evidence of multispecies aggregations, and movements for intergenerational climate justice. Hurston's novel depicts a hurricane that kills thousands of African American migrant workers who have been put at risk by social infrastructures shaped by the histories of slavery and plantation labor (Adamson, "Humanities" 138). The hurricane tells the convergent story of natural forces that can literally change the face of the earth. But Hurston also reveals the divergent stories of African American migrants, descended from slaves, who are living in places at lower elevations (on the muck) that make them more vulnerable to extreme weather, while the plantation owners face less risk on higher ground. Hurston, like her intellectual mentors—the eighteenth-century Prussian geographer, naturalist, and explorer Alexander von Humboldt and Franz Boas, her professor at Columbia University, who was trained in Humboldtian intellectual traditions—refused to separate her artistic, aesthetic, cultural, social, and scientific understandings of human and more-than-human relations. In *Kosmos* (1845–62), written after Humboldt had lived among Amazonian peoples between 1795 and 1799, he defined *nature* as a "planetary interactive causal network operating across multiple scale levels, temporal and spatial," and warned his readers that there were links among "deforestation, environmental change and depopulation" (qtd. in Walls 11, ix). Like Humboldt, Hurston lived with the people she wrote about in her scholarship and fiction. Her novel reveals diverse forms of environmentalism that push the advent of social justice and environmental movements back to the first indigenous uprisings and slave revolts in the colonial world (see Adamson, *American Indian Literature* 29, 47, 52). Long before Hurricane Katrina, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* connected convergent and divergent histories, refusing to aggregate human beings into a universal "we."

This reading helps reveal why many environmental humanists look to forms of environmental perception and scientific literacy that have developed inside Western Euro-American contexts and outside them—forms found among the Earth's indigenous and aboriginal groups or developed in countries and regions that draw inspiration from ancient thinkers and traditions (see DeLoughrey and Handley 14–20). This approach suggests how

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the common threads of the HfE Anthropocene humanities projects might challenge the terms and concepts that sometimes obscure, in Anthropocene discourses, the social and historical information needed to address the complex challenges posed by accelerating global environmental change. It also reveals a much deeper intellectual genealogy for the environmental humanities (Adamson, "Humanities" 136–37).

The Archive of Hope and Cautionary Tales

In the fall of 2013, Di Chiro, a noted cultural geographer and environmental justice activist who has worked in academia and with community groups outside academia, led a three-day workshop for North American Observatory researchers that kicked off the project planning at Arizona State University. She covered the milestone documents of the environmental and climate justice movements that emerged in the United States in the second half of the twentieth century and then expanded globally. She explained that *environmental justice* is now a term used "to describe a global network of social movements fiercely critical of the disparities and depredations caused by the unchecked expansion and neocolonial logic of fossil fuel-driven modern industrial development" ("Environmental Justice" [Adamson, Gleason, and Pellow] 100).[8] She also referred to the work of David Suzuki, who is considered an elder statesman in the global environmental justice movement. Suzuki believes that active hope is required to imagine and make manifest our notions of intergenerational justice or caring for the future. He argues that an "imaginary of hope" must be driven by a primary commitment "to care, think, and act." Inspired by his ideas, contributors to the first of three projects created at Arizona State University drew up plans to create the Archive of Hope and Cautionary Tales (see http://hfe-observatories.org/project/hope-and-caution/).

The archive is a digital collection of six stories about frontline communities organizing to advocate for the right to meaningful, democratic participation in environmental decision making. Each story narrates the "convergent story" of humanity's legible impacts on earth's geophysical systems and the "fractured narratives" of immense "inequalities in access to resources and exposures to risk" (Nixon, "Anthropocene"). Each story models new constellations of practice in the humanities by exploring how digital curation, mapping, short videos, powerful images, and compelling narratives can be used to reach new communities of readers, government officials, policy makers, and people in other communities interested in responding in their own way to environmental change. Curating the stories on the HfE international Web site offers new forms of longevity for the best ideas and practices emerging from each community's collaboration and helps make sense of the decision making for young people involved in the project or for future visitors to the Web site. The archive also seeks to test and rethink how communities might employ digital tools to make the expertise and evidence that is the usual province of universities, museums, art galleries, and libraries more accessible to nonacademic communities. At the same time, the stories show how the arts and knowledges of stakeholder communities can be made more visible to wider publics through digital narration and visual images.

One story was created by enrolled members of the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians (LRBOI) in Michigan who have designed and implemented a restoration program for a local fish, the lake sturgeon or *Nmé*, as it is called in the language of the local Ottawa, an Anishinaabek band. "Renewing Relatives: *Nmé* Stewardship in a Shared Watershed" was written by Marty Holtgren and Stephanie Ogren, with the support of Kyle Powys Whyte, a Michigan State University philosopher and member of the Citizen Potawatomi

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Nation, and NAO contributor (see http://hfe-observatories.org/blog/renewing-relatives-nme-stewardship-in-a-shared-watershed/). The LRBOI have inhabited the Big Manistee River Watershed for thousands of years and continue to depend on interspecies relationships connecting human beings, fish, plants, and land animals. Under colonization these connections were interrupted, and now in the Anthropocene a changing climate and increasing pollutants in the water are endangering the *Nmé*.

Every September, a public release of young *Nmé* brings indigenous and nonindigenous community members together for a pipe ceremony and feast. The event can attract up to six hundred attendees. Through narrative and images, visitors to the Web site can see how all these people, whether indigenous or nonindigenous, living in the local watershed come to feel a greater sense of responsibility for the *Nmé*, as each person pulls a young fish from a bucket, gently places it in the water, and watches it swim away. The story powerfully illustrates how the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians are enriching the term *sustainability* with an Anishinaabek sensibility as they model multispecies relationality.

In the Archive of Hope and Cautionary Tales, coalitional groups approach their work with hope, wonder, and awe. At the same time, its stories can be read as a warning, since no one solution is a panacea. Mike Hulme, a climate scientist who contributed research to the IPCC reports, has observed that framing complex environmental changes as "mega-problems" necessarily demands "mega-solutions," and this perception "has led us down the wrong road" (332). In contrast to research that proposes megasolutions, the archive illustrates how humanists such as Whyte are working with small community-based alliances. These alliances are seeking not one plan of action in the Anthropocene but a range of evidence-based, reasoned, scaled, and culturally diverse responses "reflective of life in a plural world" (Castree et al. 765–66).

Life Overlooked: Multispecies Aggregations

In the Anthropocene, there is an abundance of data that underscore the global scope and accelerating pace of species decline and extinction, yet many people do not have an informed or affective relationship with nonhuman species. To address this problem, NAO researchers designed an open-access, multimedia pedagogical project, Life Overlooked. Three courses were designed from a common syllabus template. First drafted by Stephanie LeMenager, at the University of Oregon, then revised by Catriona Sandilands and Joni Adamson for their specific course needs and student groups, these syllabi are available to any teacher or member of the public who visits the HfE Web site and can be adapted for students and courses at other institutions (see http://hfe-observatories.org/projects/life-overlooked/).[9] Students in each pilot version of the course were asked to create a digital portfolio that could be uploaded to the Web site. They were to forage, or, in other words, read and write fiction, poetry, and nonfiction; take pictures; make drawings or other artwork; create short performances or films; then pull these elements together on the theme of species overlooked. In her syllabus, Sandilands applied the term *life overlooked* to "any being that tends for the most part to fly (or swim or creep or crawl or tendril or flit or ooze or flagellate or sit apparently unmoving) under the radar of everyday human attention."

The foraging methodology used in the template syllabi had many inspirations. For LeMenager, it was the practice of investigating, photographing, and recording sites of interest that she had seen and participated in through the social-practice art of the Los Angeles Urban Rangers. Adamson was inspired by the cultural and scientific studies on So-

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noran desert plants by Gary Paul Nabhan in *Gathering the Desert*, Sandilands by the graduate seminar in habitat studies taught at the University of British Columbia by Laurie Ricou, a founder of the interdisciplinary approach to environmental studies. Ricou recalls assigning students to study "a single species of flora or fauna, one that surprises for having been randomly selected. . . . Each participant will . . . push [his or her] literary research into anthropology and ethnography, folk music, theatre, economic, geographical and political history, film and visual arts. But surely, and most essentially, into the sciences" (163).

The Life Overlooked project is applied humanities research, with the goal of empowering students to become citizen humanists who will disseminate local ecological knowledge and emphasize the human and cultural dimensions of ecology, which should complement statistically based or scientifically based maps of nonhuman life. The project also explores how stories of life overlooked might be employed to further affective attachment, social justice, environmental sustainability, and rights in and among the diverse species inhabiting the biosphere. One Arizona student found such a story in pigeons. Another studied how humanists can use visual images and digital tools to influence the general public's understanding of the prickly pear, an overlooked species that is vital to the Sonoran desert ecosystem.

Dinner 2040: Maricopa County, Arizona

Will groups of human beings be able to act collectively in the future to create food systems that are more efficient and just? In a workshop held in the fall of 2014, NAO researchers met to reflect on the question that would guide their third project, "What will an environmentally sustainable, socially equitable, and culturally rich meal look like in the year 2040?" The outcome of this workshop was the project Dinner 2040: The Future of Food (see http://hfe-observatories.org/project/dinner-2040/). Dinner 2040 models new constellations of practice by pointing to the fact that there has been scant attention given to the role that the arts and humanities play in giving "tangible form to the imagination of different worlds outside of the constraints of the given present." Indeed, since Rio+20 the "arts of futurity" are fast increasing in importance in research programs that integrate the humanities, particularly in relation to risk management, disaster management, scenario building, and the planning and "production of probable, preferred, or hoped-for futures" (Yusoff and Gabrys 518).

HfE researchers gathered a diverse team of community partners from the culinary and gardening arts, food cooperative organizers, local O'odham and Navajo indigenous communities, farmers, organic farmers, public health people, and community markets. Academics with expertise in agricultural technologies, food systems, and urban planning came together with humanists representing art, philosophy, history, cultural geography, and literature. They planned a charrette patterned after a practice used in urban planning for rapid community assessment of and refinement of design. The charrette was adapted to create an envisioning session that involved brainstorming and planning for a future we want to see in Maricopa County, Arizona, 2040. The project-planning materials are available on the HfE Web site, so that they can be adapted and rescaled in other communities.

Guided through the design charrette by a professor of industrial design, the group was asked to generate as many ideas and answers as possible to questions such as, "Will there be more people living in Maricopa County twenty-five years from now? Will foods not local to the area be transported in? Who would grow and produce the food? Will working conditions be just? Will we still be using fossil fuels? Will nutrition and

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economics be the only considerations, or will pleasure, taste, and aesthetics also have a place at the table?" The group was then asked to filter their answers back through the social and environmental conditions they predicted for the year 2040, then imagine menus that would use ingredients that might be grown successfully in an even drier, hotter climate. Menus included such dishes as tacos made with mesquite flour and corn flour filled with veggies and native chilies and amaranth crepes with a verdolagas and onion salad topped with red chili mole and goat cheese.

In a second phase of the project, planned for fall 2016, a menu with some of these dishes will be served over a curated conversation among diverse community stakeholders about the policies and programs that will need to be in place, over the course of the next five, ten, and twenty-five years, if people living in Maricopa County hope to sit down to the dinners they envision in the future.

Expanding Networks and Constellations of Practice

Long-tested humanities practices, including storytelling, visual arts, and scenario imagining, can be constellated in new digital and collaborative environments to reach extended publics and to network existing and expanding initiatives. Now in a second or 2.0 phase launched in May 2015, the HfE network is expanding beyond its original funding and its first three observatories to new locations in Asia and Africa. In "Humanities for the Environment—A Manifesto for Research and Action," written to guide the second phase of the HfE project, principal investigators and key researchers affirm the expertise of the humanities for transforming human preferences, practices, and actions in a time when there is a need for radical change. They present the manifesto as an invitation for others to join the HfE open global consortium of humanities networks and organizations to continue developing a shared research agenda (Holm et al. 978).

Notes

1. For a listing of universities, formal and informal networks, and global initiatives leading the institutionalization and expansion of the environmental humanities, see Nye et al.; Hartman.

2. Future Earth is sponsored by the United Nations Environmental Programme, the International Council for Science, and the International Social Science Council.

3. This grant was given by the Mellon foundation to the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes, which divided the award among its three regional hubs in the United States, Europe, and Australia. See http://chcinetwork.org.

4. See the HfE Web site "About" page (http://hfe-observatories.org/about/).

5. See "Common Threads" at http://hfe-observatories.org.

6. The HfE Web site is an example of a new constellation of practice, since it is designed to employ digital tools and platforms to network the networks of the humanities centers and institutes around the world engaging in common or linked environmentally focused projects. The Mellon grant is titled Integrating the Humanities across National Boundaries.

7. For an authoritative and concise essay on the Anthropocene, its historical origins, and its status in the field of geology, see Zalasiewicz et al.

8. Di Chiro later turned this history and workshop into an essay, "Environmental Justice" (Adamson, Gleason, and Pellow).

9. For a detailed intellectual genealogy of this project and its outcomes, see Adamson, LeMenager, and Sandilands.

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