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The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities, edited by Ursula Heise, Jon Christensen, and Michelle Niemann, is one of the first comprehensive volumes to offer an introduction into the emerging, highly interdisciplinary academic field of the 'environmental humanities'. The volume's scope is impressive, bringing together established experts in areas such as animal studies, art history, cultural geography, environmental anthropology, environmental history, film and media studies, food studies, philosophy, and postcolonial studies. Many of the 45 essays assembled in the volume take their main impetus from subjects such as the interrelationship between the environment and human imaginative world-making and literature (the traditional focus of ecocriticism), the role of the non- or more-than-human in history (a central focus of environmental history), and the reflection of humanity's place in the world as well as how 'nature' influences systems of human thought, organization, and cultural expression (questions that have riddled philosophy from antiquity onwards). While these subject matters have long been established in humanities disciplines, the volume offers much more: There is, on the one hand, the felt urgency to tie the highly specialized debates back to a more general discourse on environmental policy and politics, re-situating the role of the humanities in society as a whole. There is also, on the other hand, the tendency of entering into a debate with fields like climate science, medicine and biology, architecture and engineering. The goal of this outward move is to show that our environmental problems and climate crises cannot be solved by science and policy-makers alone. Most of the current environmental debates revolve around questions of alternative, more sustainable lifestyles in the face of limited natural resources, coordinated transnational politics prompted by climate change, and questions of conservation and wildlife protection in an age of unbridled human and economic growth. Needless to say, these issues are controversial and it is neither the goal of the environmental humanities in general nor of the volume in particular to offer easy solutions. But since all of the named issues involve aspects such as human creativity, justice, reflection, and values, they are deeply immersed in debates that have traditionally occupied humanist thinking. *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*'s strength

lies exactly in reinforcing this point and in illustrating, with great clarity and original vision, how and what the humanities can contribute to the central environmental questions of our time.

To date, there is no agreed upon definition of what the environmental humanities are. As it is the case with many umbrella terms, there is the danger that it becomes a catch-all phrase assembling an array of divergent approaches with differing methodologies and theoretical frameworks under one common banner. Yet, as the volume's essays show and as Ursula Heise convincingly argues in the Introduction, "the environmental humanities do not so much propose a new object of study, a new humanistic perspective on a nonhumanistic field, or a particular set of new methods, as they combine humanistic perspectives and methods that have already developed in half a dozen or so disciplines" (1). As Heise further points out, this involves more than uncovering the role of history and culture in anthropogenic environmental impact, while pointing to technoscience as the root cause (2). Rather, the environmental humanities reverse this perspective, since they

> envision ecological crises fundamentally as questions of socioeconomic inequality, cultural difference, and divergent histories, values, and ethical frameworks. Scientific understanding and technological problem-solving, essential though they are, themselves are shaped by such frameworks and stand to gain by situating themselves in the historical and sociocultural landscape. (2)

This comment alone makes clear that the environmental humanities reject a decidedly hegemonic Western tradition of the humanities (that was, after all, complicit in equating technological advancement with cultural superiority during the early modern age), but owe a great deal to postcolonial theory as well as feminist studies and environmental justice activism. Connected to this is a second aspect: If "the environmental crisis involves a crisis of the imagination" (1995: 2), as Lawrence Buell famously argued, the environmental crisis likewise involves a crisis in the humanities themselves. In fact, humanities departments all over the world find themselves under increasing pressure to stand their ground in the midst of a highly competitive academic climate, where terms such as applicability, profitability, or usefulness loom large and are actively propagated by research funds, educational policy makers, and the general marketplace. The environmental humanities can be seen as an attempt to offer a humanistic perspective on environmental issues where economic profit is likewise present as a key influencing factor. The environmental humanities are an intellectual intervention by an increasingly marginalized field, with a highly politicized agenda. But this goes both ways: The deep-seated and deeply felt sense of crisis in humanities' disciplines has probably made this academic field especially sensitive to the global

environmental crisis. This entails far reaching consequences for how the humanities have to be conceptualized. As Linda Nash rightfully points out in her essay in the volume, "In approaching society, culture, and language as entities that exist apart from an environmental and material context and so can be studied independently, [humanists] have written the environment out of tens of thousands of narratives" (403). At the same time that the environmental humanities bring humanist perspectives to bear on environmental debates, they re-integrate the environment and matter into the analytic and imaginative fabrics of the humanities themselves. *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities* masterfully exemplifies this double move and impressively shows how the environmental humanities are making themselves felt in the world.

In order to give an idea of the manifold debates in which the environmental humanities are involved and in order to show how they reset the standards of humanist thinking, the volume is structured into six overarching parts. Part I, "The Anthropocene and the domestication of Earth", takes on one of the most captivating as well as controversial catch-phrases of our time. The 'Anthropocene' concept, developed by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer (2000: 17–18), gives expression to the idea that humankind has turned into a geological agent and that the scale of anthropogenic environmental impact can be likened to geomorphological shifts in the deep time of Earth's history. As Libby Robin puts it in her contribution to the volume, "The concept of the Anthropocene unsettles ideas about time and place" (46). On the one hand, this has to do with the question when the 'Anthropocene' actually began. Oftentimes, the period around 1800 and the dawn of the Industrial Revolution are invoked as critical watersheds, with variations of up to 200 years (1600 or 1945 respectively). Then again, the Industrial Revolution did not take place at the same time everywhere and different regions of the world have been stronger impacted by anthropogenic influence than other areas. Moreover, it is not quite clear, who the '*anthropos*' in Anthropocene refers to. The individual contributions all challenge and revise the concept in manifold ways, contending especially with the ethical implications of formally declaring a new, human-dominated world epoch. While the 'Anthropocene' concept helps render the (often unintended) effects of humankind on the planet, it nonetheless is a problematic notion in so far as it depicts human force as somewhat separate from the rest of Earth when we are, in fact, only co-inhabitants in a vast network of material agents and other species.

There is another reason why the humanities would do well not to embrace the 'Anthropocene' all too unequivocally: our humanist sources naturally date back to a time when the first human sign systems evolved tens of thousands of years ago. We can think of the cave paintings like those of the Chauvet cave from the Stone Ages, or we can think of the first truly, if only fragmentary texts of world

literature, the epic of *Gilgamesh* – a text that gave the first true expression of what human domestication of the world entails, and why it may not to be wished for after all. The fact that we can still communicate with these texts over a vast distance in time and space is a remarkable feature of our own species and attests to the sustainability of culture. Many of the essays assembled in the *Routledge Companion* address issues of genre, memory, and media – aspects that constitute the humanist raw data, our cultural deep time, to be constantly revisited and re-interpreted. So far, it has been one of the drawbacks of the environmental humanities in general that they do not take their own disciplinary history serious enough, often turning a blind eye to the pre-modern or early modern time periods as if the scientifically determined timespan of the 'Anthropocene' would demarcate the limits of our own attention span. In fact, we do need the long cultural memory of our sign systems to understand what humanity's place is in the world and how it has changed over the centuries. If we, for instance, take narratives like *Gilgamesh* serious enough, we will see that, in a cultural sense, the anthropogenic dream of mastering the world (if only through narrative) has forever occupied the minds of our species. We would also see that our cultural texts are imaginative resources in their own right – not necessarily because they are useful, but rather because they have opened themselves up, time and again, to the immense richness of the world, where we are only one of numerous factors or forces. In cultural terms, we cannot truly escape anthropocentrism but we can nevertheless challenge, re-negotiate and reinvent the stories we like to tell about ourselves and our place in the world. Stories are one the true powerful instruments the environmental humanities have when reaching outside the academy. They are our natural DNA.

In many ways, this observation finds its nuanced expression in the essays of Part II, "Posthumanism and multispecies communities". One of the most powerful theoretical trends to lastingly influence the development of the environmental humanities are so-called posthuman approaches to systems of social organization (especially Bruno Latour's Actor-Network-Theory) that put emphasis on the co-presence and, in turn, the co-constitution of the world through human as well as non-human agents (e.g. animals, objects, or matter). Human agency and identity are thereby depicted as evolving in concord with or as a reaction to the non- or other-than-human world. Subjectivity is thereby often seen as a collective entity laying outside of or prefiguring what we traditionally understand as the human subject. That means that we are already more than human and that our interactions with the world are not to be conceptualized as the interactions of an autonomous organism, but rather as a constant exchange process between sensory systems, material entities, and discoursive assemblages. It is an interesting paradox that the hierarchical "Anthropocene"-concept (with humankind on top

of an evolutionary pyramid) is emerging at the same time with these horizontal ontological models of co-existence. As *The Routledge Companion* in general shows, the environmental humanities may be situated somewhere in-between this system of co-ordinates with variables approaching either of the two axis. This "productive tension" (5) enables a re-definition of what being human means, from the normative and cultural sign systems all the way to bodily presence. The challenge exists in taking seriously the multispecies and material realities of the world, while nonetheless focusing critically on the human decision-making processes, sociopolitical forms of organizations, and moral responsibilities that make and re-make our environments. This latter aspect makes up the focus of the essays in Part III, "Inequality and environmental justice" that deal with the problem of holding collective groups or political decision makers ethically accountable for ecological damage in a world where non-human agents are likewise present. (Post)colonial debates loom large in this context, since (post-)Industrial nations have continued to exploit natural resources on a global scale and have relocated harmful industries into developing countries. Environmental pollution patterns and ecological change are as unevenly distributed as economic growth, they are, as the essays show, two sides of the same coin. At the same time, indigenous knowledge and environmental practices continue to challenge and to address environmental injustice and socioeconomic inequality. It is no wonder that especially anthropologists and ethnographers have pointed to indigenous cosmologies as useful models for thinking about the interrelationship between humankind and the 'natural' world. The environmental humanities are therefore constantly questioning and shifting a binary take on the world, inherited from Enlightenment philosophy, between 'culture' on the one hand and 'nature' on the other. What once figured as a central backbone to universalist thinking is now coming under increasing critical scrutiny – not only because debates around 'culture' and 'nature' have been used to justify the colonization of the world (and of whole continents that were seen as culturally backward in Western epistemologies), but also because there are ever more nuanced and hybrid forms that make it difficult to assess what exactly counts as 'culture' and what as 'nature.' As Heise sums up: "The environmental humanities, then, are defined by the productive conceptual tension between humans' agency as a species and the inequalities that shape and constrain the agencies of different kinds of humans, on one hand, and between human and nonhuman forms of agency, on the other" (6).

This "conceptual tension" can also be seen in Part IV, "Decline and resilience: environmental narratives, history, and memory". The essays in this part deal with some of the most prevalent narrative patterns that have contributed to our environmental debates and that, in many ways, make up the thematic backbone of the environmental humanities. Although a 'metahistory' in the vein of

Hayden White (1973) still needs to be written about contemporary ecological and environmental literature and theory (we would find everything, ranging from pastoral to tragedy, comedy, and epic to religious redemption stories, and finally to the ever-present apocalyptic story modes), it is clear that descriptions of humankind's place in and relationship with the nonhuman world are necessarily framed within cultural modes of sign and meaning. Especially decline narratives have gained a powerful political presence in the context of environmental movements all around the world. They sometimes make it hard to reflect on alternative environmental visions and are often rather fatalistic in nature – an aspect that the environmental humanities have to critically engage with, the more so as "degradation narratives" are often un- or ahistoric themselves, painting distorted images of ecological balance and harmony between premodern humans and 'nature'. The question of time consciousness, cultural conceptions of time, geological time and deep time is far from being resolved in this context and will likely become a much discussed research topic in the near future. Not only because these aspects re-envisions humanity's role within geological history, but also because they bring phenomena of the 'simultaneity of the non-simultaneous' into view. Thinking about the past necessarily entails a thinking about the present and likely also a vision of the future. In order to depict and imaginatively visualize different temporalities and environmental impact, we rely on different media analyzed in Part V, "Environmental arts, media and technologies". "The challenge for the environmental humanities in this context", as Heise makes clear,

> is not just the study of digital images and artifacts, but the integration of digital tools and methods with older humanistic procedures: the combination of close reading with computational criticism, for example, of thick description with newly accessible statistics about ecological processes and cultural practices, of storytelling with database creation, or of photography with zoomable maps. (7)

The essays offer a vivid impression of these inventive techniques and bring new methods in humanities disciplines like digital methods to bear on environmental issues. The environmental humanities are an apt context for further establishing and probing these measures, because they are situated at the crossroads of narrative description, scientific data, and environmental action. The role of the environmental humanities, in this context, is twofold: On the one hand, they can critically evaluate scientific statistics or policy programs from a humanistic viewpoint highlighting issues of social inequality, environmental justice, and multispecies ethics. On the other hand, they can take on the task of communicating between scientists, politicians, activists and (indigenous) communities. This becomes especially pertinent in the context of cities: The 21st-century will be the first truly urban one in world history. In an environmental sense, cities bring with

them a heap of environmental problems, but they also offer true alternatives in green planning and sustainable lifestyles. However, many so-called ecocity initiatives are managed from the top-down, without taking into account the manifold ties between city space, community life, and non-human agents that make the urban. The task of the environmental humanities would be to study, describe, critique, and eventually to revise urban planners' vision for our future cities – as task that involves different media, texts as well as people. In fact, cities, also because they are centers of learning and teaching, may be the places where the environmental humanities have the best chance of making themselves heard in the future.

As Part VI, "The state of the environmental humanities" shows, cities are indeed likely to become the natural playground of the discipline. But there are more: petro-culture and energy, globalization and transnational environmental policy, to name just a few. One of the central tasks for the environmental humanities will consist in "ecologizing humanity" while "humanizing ecology," as Greg Garrard puts it in the volume (463). This will certainly bring a lot of radical changes in traditional humanities' disciplines that will likely become more interdisciplinary as a result. "[N]ew forms of humanities scholarship are happening in response to environmental matters of concern that cannot be addressed by the skill set of a single discipline" (474) as Stephanie LeMenager writes in her contribution that closes the companion, but, as she further cautions, "Research, a commitment to thinking *long*, in community with others, remains a crucial interface between our vulnerable bodies and the asocial or even antisocial command of energy that is power" (480). In a world of instantaneous presence, limited attention spans, and acceleration in communication, it is one of the hardest challenges for the humanities to stand their ground with traditional forms of research like reflection, introspection, and critical thinking. In LeMenager's words: "Rethinking 'human tendency' [...] still requires some slow reading, slow writing, and slow talk" (480). Making connection with the world – human or non-human – takes time. The most immediate, and I would say, the most important way the environmental humanities contribute to current debates and can indeed influence behavior is through education. This is a word that is surprisingly and regrettably rare in some of the very abstract and specialized lingo (one only needs to think of some of the literature connected to the "new materialisms" – and I include my own writing in this verdict) of the environmental humanities so far. There are only very few educationalists, teachers, or pedagogues involved in the debates – *The Routledge Companion* is practically devoid of these immediate questions of impact and education. True, one may argue that the subjects, theories, and practical examples will seep into curricula anyway. But this is not enough. At the same time that the humanities are undergoing an outside turn to

the non-human world, they also need an inside turn conscious of the very qualities and traits that have made the humanities a central ingredient of human learning from antiquity onwards. This does not alter the fact that, in sum, *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities* presents groundbreaking, innovative, and forward-looking research and is an indispensable source of knowledge, inspiration, and, indeed, education for anyone interested in the field and in where the humanities will be heading in the near future.

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