

2-1-2018

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Pamela Banting
University of Calgary

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Recommended Citation

Banting, Pamela (2018) "Environmental Humanities: Voices from the Anthropocene by Serpil Oppermann and Serenella Iovino," *The Goose*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 2 , Article 18.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol16/iss2/18>

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Thinking about and Thinking with the Environmental Humanities

Environmental Humanities: Voices from the Anthropocene by SERPIL OPPERMAN and SERENELLA IOVINO
Rowman and Littlefield, 2017 \$57.95

Reviewed by PAMELA BANTING

I offered to review this anthology of primarily critical-theoretical essays in the hope of learning what European ecocritics were thinking about the Anthropocene, compared with their Canadian counterparts in such anthologies as Liza Piper and Lisa Szabo-Jones' *Sustaining the West: Cultural Responses to Canadian Environments*, Rob Boschman and Mario Trono's *Found in Alberta: Environmental Themes for the Anthropocene*, and Ashlee Cunsolo and Karen Landman's *Mourning Nature: Hope at the Heart of Ecological Loss & Grief*. The co-editors, Serpil Oppermann and Serenella Iovino—from Turkey and Italy, respectively—are very active voices in European and material ecocriticism. To my surprise, though, most of the contributors to *Environmental Humanities: Voices from the Anthropocene* live in the United States, the UK, Europe, and Australia.

Given the predominance of the North American presence in the book, the fact that there are no Canadian voices in it is a bit odd, overlooking as it does the important contribution Canadian bitumen makes to the world's carbon budget; our internationally-prominent activist-writers, such as David Suzuki, Naomi Klein, Maude Barlowe, Andrew Nikiforuk, and Margaret Atwood, and the scholarship of the editors and contributors to the three Canadian anthologies listed above; as well as those published in related scholarly and literary

anthologies. Fair enough, though: there can be only so many pages in a book, and editors are free to make their selections as they see fit.

As the title suggests, *Environmental Humanities: Voices from the Anthropocene* is roughly divided between articles on the discipline of the environmental humanities and articles more particularly about responding to the challenges of the Anthropocene.

Scott Slovic's thoughtful meta-reflection, "Seasick among the Waves of Ecocriticism: An Inquiry into Alternative Historiographic Metaphors," usefully charts the stages of development of the field of environmental humanities while simultaneously self-reflexively interrogating the metaphors—stages, phases, waves, palimpsests, fractals, and (my personal favourite) "a vast intellectual drainage system or watershed" (109)—by which academics tend to set up such chronologies and trendlines. His essay, one of five in "Part I: Re-Mapping the Humanities," exemplifies what this anthology does best, mapping orientation points and networks of scholarly advance: how far have we come, where are we now, and from where are the voices coming?

Greta Gaard reminds us that 'the personal is the political' and that ecocritics, feminists, and ecofeminists alike must keep a bead on the risk inherent in the universalizing tendencies of Anthropocene scholarship, namely, of losing sight of the activist work of constituencies such as the *Black Lives Matter* and the *#IdleNoMore* movements. She also draws attention to the investments of institutional environments in suppressing or even eradicating powerful alternative voices; Gaard admirably interweaves into her essay her own personal experience of persecution in the

academy, a situation in which an important, hardworking, politically engaged ecofeminist voice very nearly got eliminated from the academic chorus.

The chart and the testimonial, however, are not our only modes of self-expression in these times. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen writes, carbon is “our newest mode of autobiography” (25), our Anthropocene signature. In order for the earth and us to have half a chance, we need to shift our awareness away from our selves and toward a posthuman ecomateriality by attending to the agency of what we normally regard as merely inert objects or things. In “Posthuman Environs,” Cohen persuades us to reawaken to the materiality and agency of stone, because “[w]ithin its native temporality the geological is just as restless as the arboreal” (29).

The impress of the material world upon us is also in play in Stefan Helmreich’s lovely essay on “Nature/Culture/Seawater: Theory Machines, Anthropology, Oceanization,” in which, as he argues, culture is “often imagined in a land-based idiom” (217), leaving water and the global ocean adrift as mere floating abstractions. His interest is in how to “employ water as a theory machine, when useful, and to treat both water and theories as things in the world” (227), how to submerge water into the world again.

In addition to these essays, I am also grateful for the inclusion of geologist and Chair of the Anthropocene Working Group, Jan Zalasiewicz’s essay on “The Extraordinary Strata of the Anthropocene,” for his overview of what is at stake in the deliberations of the Working Group.

Within the pages of this anthology, though, one place from which Anthropocene voices are *not* coming is indigenous scholars, artists, or activists.

Indigenous people everywhere are on the front lines, resisting environmental racism and heading up environmental justice movements—trying to halt the construction of mega-dams or have old dams removed, to stop gold mining and nuclear dumping, to revive indigenous agriculture and foodways, to slow down further tar-sands contamination of air, water, and soil, and prevent the construction of yet more pipelines.

So, it is pretty odd that, to the best of my knowledge, not one of the twenty-four contributors is Indigenous. I realize that the work of indigenous scholars is in high demand; that they may choose not to publish in such an anthology; and that the Anthropocene, as we now commonly deploy the term, began for indigenous people not in the mid-twentieth century, which seems to be the best candidate for the commencement date (127), but 400-500+ years ago with the arrival in the Americas of Europeans. Nevertheless, if the anthology consisted solely of European contributors writing about the Anthropocene in Europe, I would understand such an omission, but the fact that there are contributors from the US and Australia, where there are many indigenous scholars publishing insightful books and articles, the absence of indigenous work reads like a colonial blind-spot and seriously lessens the value of the book for research and teaching purposes. This is not to say that indigenous influence is not lovingly incorporated in Juan Carlos Galeano’s writerly “On Rivers” or Thom van Dooren and Deborah Bird Rose’s richly evocative “Lively Ethography: Storying Animist Worlds,” in which they delineate the notion of ecological animism as “an opening into a mode of encounter” (259) with a multiplicity of perceiving, striving, desiring,

sensing, adapting, and responding Others (258). However, the conspicuous absence of indigenous contributors in person only proves that there can be no averting the effects of the Anthropocene without simultaneous decolonization.

I read the essays in *Environmental Humanities* gradually over a few months, ranging in no particular order across the table of contents. This was, in part, an attempt to avoid the typographical errors and, in one case, the translation effects that plague this text like mosquitoes. After being assailed by veritable clouds of typos (often in prepositions), in so many of the essays, I came to feel as if the editors and publisher were not dealing in good faith with readers, as if the exigencies of the Anthropocene had taken a back seat to the economy of the neoliberal academy's incentives to rush work into print. Maybe the publisher's or printer's software ran amok at the last minute and created all these typos after it had been assiduously proofread. Whatever the reason for their preponderance, the overall effect on this reader is to shift the focus away from the 'wicked problem' of the Anthropocene and toward the necessity of wading through a wicked thicket of poorly edited, albeit often insightful, scholarship.

Art, literature, and scholarship in the environmental humanities have a crucial role to play in thinking *about* and thinking *with*, for example, seawater, dogs, fungi, grandfather stones, sediments and strata, plastic, bacteria, and much more, and forestalling or coping with the kinds of problems and catastrophes we are witnessing and experiencing, as the stronger essays in this book illustrate.

PAMELA BANTING's recent teaching and publications are in the areas of petrocultural studies, geopoetics, literature of the Anthropocene, psychogeography, and animality. Recent articles include "Ecocriticism in Canada" in *The Oxford Handbook of Canadian Literature* (2016); "Walking Through Lightning: A Peripatetic Bioregional Reading of a Novel," *PAN: Philosophy, Activism, Nature* (2016); and "Anim-Oils: Wild Animals in Petrocultural Landscapes," *On Active Grounds*, Rob Boschman and Mario Trono, eds., WLUP, in press.