

# Environmental humanities: A report on a symposium in the UK

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### About the author

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*Environmental Humanities: Doing Interdisciplinarity with Depth*

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Bath, UK

### Date

16 December 2016

On 16 December 2016, an inaugural symposium took place at Bath Spa University's Research Centre for Environmental Humanities, directed by Professor Kate Rigby (see <https://is.gd/NVoXGe>). The symposium was called *Environmental Humanities: Doing Interdisciplinarity with Depth*.

Presentations were dense and varied and can only be summarised very briefly. Their subjects included termites and human culture in West Africa, the new animism and its potential, ethnography and ethics in reconciling local with universal knowledge-claims, interdisciplinary German Studies, North Sea reflections, writing the past in a time of ecocrisis, practices of hydrocitizenship, inter-species connectivities, turning post-Brexit localism to good environmental account, transdisciplinary methodology, personal and natural narratives in writing, societies living with volcanoes, meta-reflections on the environmental humanities, the cultural dimensions of histories of catastrophes, a critique of models of interdisciplinarity, aesthetics and environmental ethics, putting interdisciplinary into practice in literary studies, ecopoetics, and liaising with relevant extra-academic communities.

That range gives some idea of the environmental humanities' extraordinary potential, and I applaud the evident commitment of the participants. However, some presentations also inadvertently illustrated some of the dangers that could prevent realizing that potential. Writing as a sympathetic critic, I hope I will be forgiven for taking this opportunity to flag them up. One problem was an excessive focus on methodology – questions of *how* to study things – to the point where it replaces

anything else, including the things we are supposed to be studying. In other words, methodology becomes an end in itself.

That tendency is potentially both anthropocentric and scientific. The unspoken assumption seems to be that the supposedly correct method will produce truth. This magical thinking gains a specious authority from the widespread hegemonic belief that the 'hard' sciences should be the model for all forms of enquiry, including the humanities. Its emphasis on epistemological rectitude comes at the expense of ontologies, ways not of knowing and representing but of being and understanding. As such, an over-emphasis on methodology is *already* prejudicial to an environmental humanities that is genuinely ecological and not merely environmental, that is, confined to nature as an external setting and set of resources, whether material or cultural, for us. For a discipline that is supposed to engage with others of all kinds, not only other human communities but those of the more-than-human world, that would be most unhelpful. (It is also why I would prefer the subject was rechristened the ecohumanities.)

Over-simplifying but not without truth, the matter can be put thus: no animal studies how to find its food and *then* goes out and does it. Animals learn how to find their food in the course of *doing* it (a process in which mistakes naturally play an important part). That includes humans. Anyone who studies mainly how to study something is only learning how to study its study, because that is all they are actually doing! The living world with its places and beings remain untouched.

Another, related danger is posed by excessively abstract language, pretentious

neologisms and tortuous constructions. These tend to replace actual thinking, obscure more than they clarify and fall dead on the ear, or page: to pick only a few examples, ‘inter-species connectivity’, ‘spatio-temporalities’, ‘onto-epistemologies’ and ‘material-discursive catastrophic assemblage’. In contrast, the day’s more substantive presentations – on extending urban citizenship to good practices respecting water, for example, or the effect on attitudes to the natural world of different historical realizations of the Reformation – were noticeably free of in-house academic jargon; they could have been understood by informed laypersons. They also engaged with the world rather than engaging in sophisticated meta-level acrobatics.

The combined effect of methodolatry (the worship of methodology) and esoteric language is to encourage something which

afflicts much, maybe most, of the modern academy: an excessively self-referential scholasticism practised by an inward-looking professional caste. The ideals of the environmental humanities, however – to reach out to and connect with not only other human communities but those of the rest of nature too – throw it into particularly sharp relief. Staying within existing intellectual and institutional comfort-zones will not help.

Resisting these temptations will be among the primary duties of the present and future generations of its scholars. I take heart from the fact that the symposium did in fact make room for some sparkling contributions that evinced passion, vision and insight. Furthermore, its director, Professor Kate Rigby, brings to the job an impressive record of enquiry and clear writing. That’s a very promising start. ■

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A scene in Bath, the location of *Environmental Humanities: Doing Interdisciplinarity with Depth*.