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Editorial: The Environmental Humanities in the Asia-Pacific Region (and Beyond)

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The environmental humanities, or EH, is a multifaceted, relatively new and swiftly evolving field of scholarship that amalgamates the theories and methodologies of heterogeneous disciplines—from anthropology, art, communications, cultural studies, philosophy and ecology to history, literature, media, music, performance, politics, sociology, theology and theater. Practitioners of this remarkably syncretic field set out to address and, even, confront today's pressing ecological and cultural challenges, namely climate change, urban sustainability, biodiversity conservation, species decline, energy policy, the exigencies of the Anthropocene, environmental activism, and Indigenous peoples' justice. Inter- and, even, transdisciplinary in emphasis, the environmental humanities sheds light on the crucial place of the arts, humanities and social sciences in the future of the biosphere, ecologies, human society and non-human communities (see, for instance, Hubbell and Ryan). To be certain, the environmental humanities offers a highly adaptable framework for rethinking longstanding divisions between nature and culture, environment and society, human and animal, plant and animal, native and naturalized, and multitudinous other dichotomies that structure Western thinking as a whole.

Recent developments in the environmental humanities highlight its multiplicity and topicality as scholar-activists-artists from a spectrum of disciplines turn intensively to human-nature relational issues in the Anthropocene epoch. Emerging in the last decade in particular, these specializations include animal and plant studies; Arctic and Antarctic humanities, Asian environmental humanities, blue humanities, emergency humanities, empirical ecocriticism, energy humanities, extinction studies, medical-environmental humanities, paleoenvironmental humanities, Symbiocene studies and wetland studies. On the one hand, fresh areas of interest such as the emergency humanities and medical-environmental humanities have gained traction in response to the Covid-19 pandemic beginning in early 2020 and extending well into 2022 (and beyond). On the other hand, some areas of EH focus on the formulation of alternatives to Anthropocene malaise and the imagining of possibilities for biocultural justice. Positioned as a transdisciplinary meta-field—one that accommodates various fields yet moves gracefully

across disciplinary chasms—the environmental humanities strives to energize global and local biocultural transformation, devising novel approaches to rendering culture sustainable at a time of dramatic ecological deterioration globally.

As a discrete field, the environmental humanities has emerged principally from North American, European and Australian academic institutions and, in particular, English, history, geography and anthropology departments. In Australia, for instance, the field is known as *the ecological humanities* and has advanced to a significant extent as a response to researching Aboriginal Australian cultures. In 2004, anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose and historian Libby Robin released one of the earliest articles to delineate the field as it pertains to Australia. Nonetheless, much like environmental literary studies, or ecocriticism, the environmental humanities has been slow to gain stable footing in the Asia-Pacific—a mega-region usually regarded as comprising Oceania, East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia and the Russian Far East. Nonetheless, an example of the burgeoning of the Asia-Pacific environmental humanities is the collection *Chinese Environmental Humanities: Practices of Environing at the Margins*, published in 2019 and edited by Chia-ju Chang. The landmark work comprises fourteen chapters on ecocriticism, ecotranslation studies, ecocinema and ecomedia studies, sustainability and Buddhist multispecies ethics.

Not restricted to Anglophone contexts, the environmental humanities of the future will embrace cultural, geographical and ecological diversities in their fullest. Global momentum in the environmental humanities will be marked by cross-fertilizing, transcultural critical inquiry. The present issue of *RILE: Revista Interdisciplinar de Literatura e Ecocrítica*, the official journal of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, Brazil, contributes to this overarching aim of internationalizing the environmental humanities. Through research articles and ecopoems, the issue showcases the diverse modes of scholarship falling within the ambit of the Asia-Pacific environmental humanities.

The nine article contributions to the issue exemplify environmental humanities scholarship in Australia, Indonesia, Bangladesh and India. In “Middlemarsh: The Hopkins River and Kindred Wetlands in Western Victoria, Australia,” environmental humanities scholar Rod Giblett focuses on the cultural history of the Hopkins River, the longest river in the south-eastern Australian state of Victoria. Along its serpentine course from source to sea through fertile plains, the Hopkins is accompanied by wetlands that flow into it, feeding and watering its grasslands. Giblett dubs this area “Middlemarsh”—an area rich in Aboriginal culture, language, story and contentious history, including colonization, massacres and a recent

proposal for a quarry adjacent to Aboriginal land. Giblett views Middlemarsh as a cradle of Aboriginal civilizations, including the construction of stone houses and eel traps, and the cultivation of wetlands. For Giblett, Middlemarsh is comparable to Mesopotamia, the cradle of civilizations where wetlands were also cultivated. Both places are also the sites of creation stories in Aboriginal and Mesopotamian mythology and biblical theology. The fertile crescent of Mesopotamia is regarded highly as a birthplace of western culture. Giblett's though-provoking article argues that the fertile serpent of Middlemarsh should be valued equally as a birthplace of Aboriginal cultures.

From the state of Victoria, the *RILE* issue turns to Western Australia with geographer Anna Ciuppa's contribution "Paragons of Sustainability: A Cornucopian Landscape, Governed by the Whadjuk Nyoongar People of Western Australia." The Whadjuk Nyoongar people were the Indigenous inhabitants of the Swan River Colony of Western Australia, established by British settlers in the mid-nineteenth century. Living in the biodiverse Southwest of WA, a region characterized by a Mediterranean climate with cool, wet winters and hot, dry summers, the Nyoongar communities of the settlement era were governed by Dreamtime creation narratives. The Dreamtime stories handed down to Elders by Ancestral Beings ensured that their society was grounded in a belief system affirming interdependencies between all human, nonhuman and inanimate elements in existence. Ciuppa views nineteenth-century Nyoongar culture as reflecting a systems thinking approach ensuring that the cultural landscape was used in a sustainable manner. As paragons of sustainability, in Ciuppa's terms, the Nyoongar people remained resilient despite the ravages of British settlement. Their culture was reinforced by extensive knowledge of the Swan River Colony learned from more than 60,000 years of living in the region. People maintained strong connections and obligations codified in spiritual beliefs about animals and plants. As evident through the work of Nyoongar Elders such as Noel Nannup, Nyoongar culture indeed remains robust and resilient in the present.

Western Australia is also the geographical setting of Li Chen's article "The Spatial Practices of the Chinese Diaspora in Western Australia: An Investigation of Human-Nature Interactions Influenced by Feng Shui Principles." Chen understands nature as an agent that enables humankind to assess the values of life-experiences in places while reconstructing new spatiotemporal outlooks. Different senses of places are generated through everyday sensory experiences of the environment. Anchored in the environmental humanities, Chen's article investigates the Chinese diasporic sense of place derived from individual and collective experiences of the Western Australian urban landscape of Perth. For Chinese immigrants living

in Perth, engendering a sense of place involves forging connections between homeland as experienced and host land as remembered. A diasporic sense of place emerges from embodied experiences of walking, gardening and eating. Collective spatial-environmental practices reinforce social relations and evoke a communal sense of belonging. Li's ethnographic research on Perth's Chinese diaspora and the environment focuses in particular on feng shui—an ancient Chinese environmental philosophy and spatial practice transposed to the Perth environment. The practice of feng shui is closely implicated in Chinese adaptation to Perth's natural world. Everyday spatial practices such as feng shui reflect interdependencies between people and nature within a new diasporic sense of place.

Henrikus Yulianto's "Agrarian Folklore as Local Wisdom and Ecological Resilience: An Ethnoliterary Investigation of the Sedulur Sikep Community of Central Java, Indonesia" shifts the emphasis of this issue of *RILE* to Indonesian environmental contexts. An ecopoetics scholar, Yulianto views folklore as the soul of Indigenous communities in Indonesia—an archipelagic nation consisting of more than 17,000 islands with strikingly diverse ethnic communities and ancestral teachings in the form of folklore. Yulianto's ethnographic research focuses on the Sedulur Sikep or Samin community, an Indigenous group of the Blora and Pati regencies, Central Java, Indonesia. The name "Samin" derives from the founder, a Javanese figure named Samin Surosentika who lived in the 1800s during the period of Dutch colonialism in Java. In the modern age, Samin communities implement traditional values in their daily lives despite the overwhelming influences of consumerism and materialism. Linking agrarian values to ecological resilience, Yulianto frames the community's ancestral teachings as local environmental wisdom fostering ecological resilience. The environmental-activist ethics practiced by the Sedulur Sikep community are anchored in an ecological awareness, for instance, of the importance of the sustainable cultivation of rice, attuned to the nuances of the Central Javan landscape.

Remaining within the Indonesian ecological context, my contribution to the issue, "Towards an Intermedial Vegetal Ethics: Sumatra's Charismatic Titan Arum and the Spectacularization of Plant Being," employs an ecomedia and environmental communications approach to understanding the mediation of plant life. Over the last decade, time-lapse videos of Sumatra's titan arum have garnered considerable interest on popular video-sharing platforms. Blooming intermittently, the endangered plant species is known for having the tallest inflorescence and one of the largest tubers of any known plant. Also called *corpse flower*, titan arum is identifiable through the noxious odor it emits when flowering. Through the case

of titan arum, my article interrogates the ethics of botanical time-lapse. My analysis begins by situating the mediation of titan arum on YouTube and other social media within the history of time-lapse. From the late-nineteenth century to the present, time-lapse has been constructed as a relatively benign means to decode the mysteries of plants while fostering empathy for their otherwise unseen lives. As a techno-utopianist intervention, however, time-lapse animates plants' imperceptible movements, disclosing their dynamic behaviors. Time-lapse constructs what I call *creaturely plants* by compressing their temporalities and fixating on their reproductive anatomies rather than their biocultural embeddedness. Proposing an *intermedial vegetal ethics*, my article draws upon the critical plant studies framework, including concepts of hetero-temporality, intermediation and trans-corporeal subjectivity. An intermedial ethics of time-lapse, as forwarded in the article, attends to whole plants; resists the aestheticization of the vegetal body; narrativizes the heterogeneous temporalities of vegetal being; foregrounds in-situ conservation issues; and emphasizes the biocultural integrity of plants particularly the traditional material relationships between flora, Indigenous people and local communities.

Further grounded in Indonesian cultures and ecologies, my co-authored article with Else Liliani, "Embracing Comparative Ecocriticism Through Affect: Representations of Tropical Forest Ecologies in Indonesian and Nicaraguan Poetry," develops a comparative ecocritical approach to contemporary poetry concerning tree ecologies and forest conservation issues in Indonesia and Nicaragua. The poetry of Indonesian authors Taufik Ismail and Micky Hidayat evokes the richness as well as the vulnerability of tropical forest systems in Indonesia through diction expressing varieties of environmental affect. As defined in the article, *environmental affect* encompasses the negative emotions associated with ecological loss—anger, grief, melancholy and depression, for example—yet also reasserts our inescapable corporeal interdependencies with other-than-human life, particularly trees, herbs and the plant world in general. In a comparable manner, poet Pablo Antonio Cuandra narrativizes Nicaraguan forest bioculturalities where the collective trees of the tropical biome voice a compelling biopolitics of resistance. Also writing on Nicaraguan trees and forests, Esthela Calderón develops an ethnobotanical poetics predicated on environmental and, more specifically, arboreal affect. Her creative work foregrounds the human interdependencies with trees that become destabilized when ecologies are under threat. The poetry of Ismail, Hidayat, Cuandra and Calderón communicates a shared concern for the bioculturality of forests. Their poetry reveals how the decline of trees, forests and ecosystems through deforestation, pollution,

vandalism and practices of disregard register on an affective basis among people of different cultural backgrounds.

Shifting from Indonesia to Bangladesh, Ashfara Haque's article, "Picturing Environmental Advocacy: Understanding the Role of Photography in a Campaign to Save Rivers in Bangladesh," offers an example of an approach to ecomedia and environmental communications studies in South Asian contexts. Located in the Ganges-Brahmaputra Delta, Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, is surrounded by five major rivers which offer vital means of transportation and communication to millions of local people. Rapid urbanization and uncontrolled population growth, however, have caused the city to expand without efficient urban planning. Rivers have become polluted by chemical contamination and eroded by river shore encroachment and land grabbing. To protect Dhaka's imperiled rivers, several initiatives have been undertaken, notably an advocacy campaign by a major news media outlet. In 2009, the national daily newspaper of Bangladesh, *The Daily Star*, initiated an advocacy campaign shining a spotlight on the decline of Dhaka's rivers. As part of the campaign, the newspaper published a significant number of photographs depicting the deteriorating conditions of the rivers. Haque selected twenty-five photographs to analyze as representative of the campaign. Combining Rod Giblett's theory of photography for environmental sustainability with the technique of content analysis, her contribution to this issue of *RILE* weighs the effectiveness of the photography employed in "Save Our Rivers, Save Sonar Bangla," the campaign run by *The Daily Star*.

Turning from Bangladeshi to Indian environments, Debajyoti Biswas' contribution, "Anthropocene Conflict and Reconciliation: Literary Responses from India's Northeast," highlights the anthropogenic impacts that increased after the rise of industrialization during the period of European colonization globally. The introduction of colonial modernity and subsequent changes in cultural practices have also contributed to the intensification of Anthropocene issues in numerous ways. These impacts and effects, however, evade clear categorization and strict boundaries. Quite to the contrary, the cultural transformations of the Anthropocene occupy grey areas where religion, tradition and modernity intermingle in peculiar ways. Biswas analyzes the representation of these complex issues in literary texts from India's Northeast region. Four short stories encapsulate the interlinked cultural and environmental tendencies that prevail in Northeast societies. Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi's "The Forest Guard," Arupa Patangia Kalita's "The Conflict," Vanneihtluanga's "Innocence Wears Another Look" and Monalisa Chakgkija's "The Hunter's Story" deal with intertwined cultural

and ecological issues impacting Northeast India. Rather than merely identifying the ecological concerns narrativized by the authors, however, Biswas demonstrates how cultural practices transform over time in response to Anthropocene pressures, in turn aggravating the global environmental crisis as manifested regionally.

Dharmendra Baruah's "Figurative Ecologies in Northeast India: Reading Easterine Kire's Novel *When the River Sleeps*" also focuses on the bioculturally rich Northeast region of India. As Baruah argues, English writings from Northeast India have produced a space of their own in the literary landscape of contemporary India. Of note is Easterine Kire, a fiction writer and poet from the Northeast state of Nagaland. Her writings emerge from her nuanced understandings of the lived experiences of Nagaland people and, intriguingly, resonate markedly with the folklore and oral narratives of Nagaland. Baruah's article explores the construction of ecologies in her novel *When the River Sleeps* published in 2014, especially in terms of environmental metaphorization and ecological ethics. Baruah scrutinizes the ways in which the fictional narrative employs what he calls *ethnic eco-spatial symbolism*. This term underscores the connections between ecological and ethical issues while also calling attention to possible strategies for imagining and living with/in Northeast Indian environments.

This issue of *RILE* also features an impressive micro-collection of twenty-one ecopoems by thirteen poets writing about the landscapes, ecocultures and non-human beings of Amazonia, Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Indonesia, the Andes, the American West and elsewhere. The selection of ecopoetry opens with a distinctively Western Australian emphasis, beginning with Perth-area poet Rita Tognini's "Almond Tree in Late Winter," followed by Andrew Burke's "Tourist Beach" concerning Rottnest Island located off the coast of Fremantle, Western Australia, and intensifying with Glen Phillips' poetic meditations on Western Australian seasons. Although not explicitly addressing Australian ecologies, Luke Fischer's "Orphic Elegy" expands the Orphic myth to encompass the Sixth Mass Extinction impacting the world, including Australia. My own multi-part narrative "Gorge" is situated in the New England Tablelands region of northern New South Wales. From Australia, we turn to Southeast Asia with Henrikus Joko Yulianto's poems on Indonesian nature-cultures, particularly the urban landscapes of Java and the ecological ramifications of karst mining.

From the Indonesian archipelago, we consider the global contexts of Covid-19 and climate injustice with "Germ Theory Haiku During the Pandemic" and "Ecclesiastes Sonnet in a Time of Climate Change" by Craig Santos Perez. "To a Silent Lichen" by Zélia M. Bora joins a small but distinguished subset of global environmental poetry sensitive to the mysterious

worlds of lichens—hybridic organisms that upend the possibility of strict taxonomic divisions between life forms. Stuart Cooke's enthralling "Landless, Iberá" and "Site" call attention to the ecologies of the Andes while Juan Carlos Galeano's immersive bilingual "Botos" and "Pumayuyus," translated by James Kimbrell and Rebecca Morgan, poeticize the traditional ecological narratives of the Amazon. Mary Newell, then, brings the languages of science and poetry into dialogue in "Flying Jewel Fade-out," a poem addressing a hummingbird species and its imperiled ecological networks. From South America to North America, Paul Lindholdt's "Brown Recluse" and "Directive" attend to the ecologies of the Pacific Northwest of the United States while Joel Weishaus' "Being Earth" concludes the poetry section of this issue of *RILE* with an embodied mediation on Gaian interconnectivity.

On behalf Zélia M. Bora and the *RILE* Editorial Board, I thank all the researchers, essayists and poets for their generous contributions to the journal. Read as a whole, their work affirms the vital importance of the arts, humanities and social sciences in confronting the urgencies of the Anthropocene in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond.

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End Notes

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