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The Environmental Humanities in a Post-Truth World

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AMANDA DI BATTISTA
AND
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***Editorial: The Environmental Humanities
in a Post-Truth World***



All Pipelines Will Spill wheatpaste (Photo: Lisa Szabo-Jones)

This is an extraordinary time full of vital, transformative movements that could not be foreseen. It's also a nightmarish time. Full engagement requires the ability to perceive both.

—Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark*

It would seem that we live, at least partially, in the age of “alternative facts.” While the earth’s climate spirals out of control, the political climate vacillates between fact and fabrication. Oxford Dictionaries’ word of the year for 2016, “post-truth,” captures the frightening belligerence towards reality that has become such a dominating force in much public discourse—a phenomenon that threatens the sustainability of democracies as well as ecosystems. Like climate systems, sociopolitical effects transport themselves across the globe in complex ways. And lest we think that Canada is immune, let us remember that this is a nation where only 44% of citizens believe that human activity is the primary cause of global warming (“Canadians Divided”) and where scientists were banned for several years from speaking freely to the media, a policy now being imitated by the Trump administration (Palen).

The absurd and frightening momentum of post-truth politics can be said to pose two forms of energy threat. The systematic denial of facts complicates the fraught transition away from oil, prolonging the damaging extraction and burning of fossil fuel energy—a crisis about which the newly emerging field of the energy humanities invites us to think critically. At the same time, the rejection of factuality can also drain the scholarly, artistic, social, and imaginative energies that are so necessary for our collective ecologically oriented labours.

Let us not grow fatigued. One of the key roles of artists, scholars, and activists, each in their own ways, is to uncover truth—to hold reality up to the light so that it cannot be denied. The post-truth political climate clarifies the urgency of this work. As Rob Boschman writes in a recent issue of *The Goose*, “One of the things I point out to students in the Humanities . . . is that the environmental crises we face in the twenty-first century provide openings for them to do good work” (Banting et al. 11). A crisis of fact provides a similar opening. We must challenge denialism, and we must do so publicly. Reaching wider audiences and engaging in truly public reality-based discourse should be a top priority for those whose concerns include ecological sustainability.

Important and creative venues still exist for communicating facts. Despite being silenced professionally, individuals claiming to be rogue park rangers and climate scientists in the United States have taken to Twitter to disseminate information about parks, glaciers, and the warming planet (Davis). Merriam-Webster has been using social media to challenge the intentional misuse of common terms such as fact, weather, climate, military, and feminism by the Trump administration (@MerriamWebster). We must honour those who communicate facts. At the same time, we must acknowledge that facts alone, whether they are presented in 140 characters or in detailed form, will not solve our problems; a shortage of the will to act has long

been a more grievous problem than a shortage of facts. This is where the environmental humanities finds its most significant challenge. The expertise of those who work specifically with forms of cultural discourse and representation can illuminate the complex links between truth, fiction, meaning, and action. We have an obligation to use our expertise to make space for sustained engagement with environmental knowledge, ecological sustainability, climate justice, and the ways in which all of these are inevitably tied up with cultural representation and unequal claims to truth.

The responsibility to shed light on truth also comes with a twin responsibility to keep open the possibilities of hope. As Rebecca Solnit writes in *Hope in the Dark*, “wars will break out, the planet will heat up, species will die out, but how many, how hot, and what survives depends on whether we act. The future is dark, with a darkness as much of the womb as the grave” (42). Facing the dark ecological realities of climate change is no more possible if we are hopeless than if we are in denial.

How, then, can the environmental humanities respond with hope to a post-truth world? What role can poetry, art, ecocriticism, cultural studies, critical theory, and public intellectualism play in the era of Trump, Brexit, and climate denialism? With the aim of reimagining the present as womb rather than grave, we invite submissions of 1,000 word position papers for our August 2017 issue. Position papers can take the form of a brief essay, a creative work, a case study, or a hybrid or multimedia form. Submit by May 31st, 2017, and show us how you wish to illuminate the potent darkness of the future.

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We begin Issue 15.2 with a remarkable collection of reflections on the creation of common causes—the theme of ALECC’s biennial conference in June of 2016—edited by current and past ALECC presidents Jenny Kerber and Astrida Neimanis. Kerber and Neimanis have curated short reflective works from several keynote speakers from the conference with the aim of “understand[ing] the effort to make common causes as a process, rather than a ‘one and done’ act.” The works of Pamela Banting, Tania Aguila-Way, Ron Benner, Mick Smith, Adeline Johns-Putra, and Peter C. van Wyck, although profoundly different, come together in conversation across disciplines, styles, and foci, to imagine and reimagine how we might “cultivate the common ground whereupon these difficult conversations can be engaged.”

We are also delighted to publish here, for the first time, Sylvia Bowerbank’s personal essay “Sitting in the Bush, or Deliberate Idleness.” Bowerbank was one of the first ecocritics in Canada, and her work remains powerful and influential. Cheryl Lousley serves as the editor for “Sitting in the Bush,” and she has also assembled a series of reflections from eight scholars who discuss the ways in which Bowerbank remains an important figure. New and experienced ecocritical scholars alike have much to gain from Bowerbank’s work.

Suzanne Stewart completes the collection of articles in this issue with her creative nonfiction piece “Autumn’s Fragrant Afterthought,” which comes from her larger body of work on the seasons. Focusing on the experience of November in Nova Scotia, her essay examines agrarian

labour as well as the role that the rhythms of the seasons play within the faster pace of contemporary life.

We are proud to feature the poetry of Jan Zwicky, Elizabeth Anne Godwin, Patrick Williston, nathan dueck, Yvonne E. Blomer, and gillian harding-russell. And, as always, we have lined up a robust selection of book reviews.



Graffiti Ruelle Montrealaise (Photo: Lisa Szabo-Jones)

This issue also brings some editorial changes to *The Goose*. Tempest Emery, longtime copyeditor turned reviews editor, will be leaving the journal to focus on other projects. Tempest's outstanding dedication to *The Goose* has helped to shape the polished publication you find before you. Camilla Nelson, who has served as our poetry editor for the past four issues, is also moving on to new projects. During her time with the journal she expanded our poetry section to encompass new forms of work, often in multimedia formats, from poets within and beyond Canada. Thank you, Tempest and Camilla, for your great work.

We are delighted to welcome our new poetry editor, Emily McGiffin. Emily is the author of two poetry collections: *Between Dusk and Night* (Brick Books, 2012) and *Subduction Zone* (Pedlar Press, 2014), which was awarded the 2015 ASLE Creative Environmental Book Award. She is

currently in the final months of a PhD program in York University's Faculty of Environmental Studies where she has been researching the environmental politics of South African oral poetry.

Finally, it is with sadness that we mark the passing of Jon Gordon. A kind and generous colleague and friend, Jon conducted pioneering research in the field of petrocultural studies, was a frequent contributor to *The Goose*, and supported ALECC and the larger ecocritical community in many ways. His book *Unsustainable Oil: Facts, Counterfactuals and Fictions* (University of Alberta Press, 2015) deserves a wide readership. We will miss you, Jon.

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**PAUL HUEBENER** is an assistant professor of English in the Centre for Humanities at Athabasca University. His book *Timing Canada: The Shifting Politics of Time in Canadian Literary Culture* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015) was a finalist for the Gabrielle Roy Prize. He is also a co-editor of *Time, Globalization and Human Experience* (Routledge, 2017).

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