
Editors' Column

Source: *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (January 2014)

Published by: [University of Nebraska Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5250/resilience.1.1.00>

Accessed: 15/09/2014 17:14

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



University of Nebraska Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to
Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Editors' Column

Welcome to the inaugural issue of *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities*. We conceived and designed this journal to address two ecologies that are in crisis and that we think of as inextricably intertwined. Neither of these crises is new to you. Those of us working in institutions of higher education in an era of global capital are only too aware of how the state has chipped away—conceptually and materially—at the infrastructure of this public good. Those of us working in the humanities in particular know all too well that our fields have taken an even harder hit. In a world dominated by a calculus of financial risk and debt, the enterprise of the humanities has come to seem too risky for the state to underwrite. With no apparent financial value, no ability to immediately reproduce capital, and no mechanism for the extraction of surplus revenue, the humanities seem archaic and close to extinction. Of course we also live in a world framed by the ongoing crises of global climate change and the profound social and economic inequalities that accelerate and are accelerated by it.

For too many of us in the wealthier regions of the world, these are comfortable crises, if such an affective state of reconciliation to fear can be said to exist. We have learned to live with scarcity and anxiety; pursuing our daily lives under their shadow; and finding small ways to resist, question, and challenge—in a world that is harder to navigate even as it is more interconnected than ever before. In a world that seems to be dominated by scarcity, our ability to adapt and move forward depends on *not* seeing the big picture, on not recognizing the scale or the interconnectedness of the problems that we face. Resilience as an idea and as a practice in an age of scarcity ought to be tenuous and dangerous, especially because in a world of debt and risk we must choose how to invest our time.

We began this journal as a way to address the interconnectedness of the crises at hand, to create a common space in which the humanities broadly defined could speak to its own investments in the multiple damaged ecologies that structure our world. Why, we asked ourselves, in a world in which information flows more freely than ever before, are we pushed to ever greater specialization? Why must we write *to* our fields rather than *from* our fields? Writing *from* the disciplinary knowledge that we've honed means addressing readers who share our intellectual commitments without always sharing our particular professional vocabulary. It means choosing to abandon what in fact may be a suicidal professional safety for the explicitly chosen risks of interdisciplinarity and public intellectualism. The shortcomings of interdisciplinary practice have been less important than its potentials when it comes to addressing the crises of an ever-receding contemporary culture. Pratfalls can be grand opportunities, as Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton knew—a willingness to enter into the comedic mode in which precarity subtends pleasure might be a best practice for any interdisciplinary venture. What would it look like to practice as thinkers, scholars, writers, artists, and citizens the art and labor of building a commons in which we can and must be generous, even boisterous, rather than frugal and parsimonious, with our desire to talk about the ecologies of our planet, our institutional lives, and our local worlds?

We call our journal *Resilience* in part because we wish to claim the environmental humanities as a field of abundance and profusion rather than scarcity and crippling precarity. We wish to *occupy* resilience for the purpose of thinking and acting together, and we propose this journal as a bridge toward a scholarly language commons, by which we do not intend a common language, where such is conceived in the reactionary sense of English only or the reactionary-progressive sense of consensual compromise. Within our practice of resilience we include resistance through efforts of collaboration, consensus building only with tolerance for defiant remainders, and a workable, if messy, democracy of scholarly voices in the public forum. As a recent essayistic foray into the possible futures of the Occupy movement proposes, imagine a world where groundwater might be conceived as a common resource to be protected and regulated by the communities who use it. How would that change the conversation, say, about fracking?¹ When you increase the stakeholders to make a common world, that world becomes more

than fair and balanced, pro and con, and arguments about its health and worth grow sophisticated, if, again, messier. As one of our contributors suggests, it is time to get down in the dirt. Division of opinion, a commonplace of living in common, defies privatization and post-democratic, no-option government. The humanities classroom, where the demands of the collective project are often impossible demands in the sense of denying quantification and closure and therefore immune to co-optation, offers a powerful spur to resourceful imagining and future scenario striking. Far from being impotents, we in the humanities are makers. It has always been so.

A brief genealogy of the term “resilience” is necessary in order to make clear the complexity and willfulness of our conceptual claims. “Resilience” as a term came into the parlance of US national security around the oil shocks of the 1970s, aligning itself with efforts to protect critical infrastructure from sabotage and exploitation.² It is a term designed to build uncertainty and the state of emergency into a notion of ecosystem (and, by extension, socioeconomic) health. Its focus on precarity and the limits of our ability to predict and insure against the future oddly protects it from all emergency, insofar as resilience theory, when it has been applied from ecology to society, promises that unforeseeable systemic disruptions are natural and survivable, if not by everyone then by some ones—some who will perhaps even thrive, opportunistically, on the tail end of the others’ disaster.³ At its most malign, resilience has worked as a catchphrase of the IMF and other new imperialist agents, a phrase paternalistically imposed upon indigenous and edge populations who are imagined as capable of bootstrapping their way back to health after the wealthier portions of the globe have wrecked their cultures or mined their lands. As several of our contributors note, indigenous peoples would be the first to caution us not to romanticize resilience.

C. S. Holling, the systems ecologist who brought resilience into the scientific community in the early 1970s, dismissed equilibrium as the core of the ecosystem concept in favor of destabilization—in the process tossing out the Club of Rome’s *Limits to Growth* and other arguments for sustainable development.⁴ Resilience always opposed itself to sustainability (one reason we like it). Along with our contributors Bish-nupriya Ghosh and Dick Hebdige and all of you who recognize that the term “resilience” derives from the Latin verb “resiler,” meaning “to draw

back, distance oneself from an undertaking” or “recoil in repugnance,” we appreciate that the populist notion of resilience as “bounce-back” includes disgust at the way things are, a necessary self-distancing from the normative.⁵

In other words, resilience hacks its own brand.

We follow other progressives, many who grew up around the peak oil movement, in our interest to take resilience and other strong language back from the neoliberals and bad guys who typically claim all the charismatic words (e.g., values) for themselves while we academics too often limit ourselves to parsing such words or concocting neologisms so unsonorous that our arguments go unread save for our own circles of language purifiers. With resilience as our flag, we’ve chosen to squat on another’s claim—because we like what it can mean, and what we might make of it. This is Occupy Resilience speaking. Not in one voice, but in many. We invite you to consider for yourself what it means to resile as scholars, as aspiring interdisciplinarians and public humanists, as environmentalists, ecologists, and humans enmeshed in a deep world of vulnerable, other life.

Such utopian hopefulness and cheek has shaped the design of the journal. We believe that the journal should be a commons in which anyone interested in the humanities and the environment can participate in an evolving conversation about how and why we must narrate our relationship to others with similar commitments. The environmental humanities—our favored term for the interlinked ecologies of the humanities and the environment—is an aspirational, interdisciplinary field. It represents a not-quite-achieved present within academic circles and in the broader realm of the public humanities, where scholarly research opens up to public arts projects, educational apps, curatorial ventures, public television, and Internet communities. More hopefully, the environmental humanities signals a possible future, one where the humanities organizes around problems rather than within disciplinary silos, one where scholars experiment with broader audiences and dedicate ourselves to communicative competency at a variety of scales.

Ours is still a fragile enterprise in terms of field and practice. If we calculate its chances of survival by its current rate of occurrence on the Internet, archive of the historic contemporary, the environmental humanities sags below more established critical rubrics such as ecocriticism and environmental studies. And if we calculate its success against

our goal of producing work written in plain, clear prose from a wide range of disciplines that seek to address not only their own corner of the world but the worlds contiguous to them, we cannot yet estimate its longevity. Ours is essentially a utopian project, and yet a pragmatic utopianism—oxymorons allowed!—that pursues its fulfillment through what we've already described as the comedic assumption of precarity as an origin of abundance. We envision that the environmental humanities will put a range of humanities scholarship at the service of the crises of ethics and values and the inadequacies of narrative and imaging that haunt the efforts of social scientists, natural scientists, and policy makers who address ecological problems such as desertification, food security, ocean acidification, and energy.

Indeed this is in part why we have chosen to organize the journal's first issue as we did. This inaugural volume presents a riot of mini-manifestos from our board members, all dynamic scholars, artists, or activists—or some combination of the three. Written from the particulars of their fields, their lived experiences, and the rhythm of the day on which they composed them, the manifestos offer an entryway into an ongoing conversation between disciplines and methods, practices and theories. They are, like all manifestos, quirky and succinct, dominated by a single voice that surveys the present and its futures to reveal a way of thinking and seeing that might not have been available to us before. Bruno Latour, in a recent essay, writes of his own attempt to write a manifesto: “[A] manifesto might not be so useless at this point, making explicit (that is, *manifest*) a subtle but radical transformation in the definition of what it means to progress, that is, to *process* forward and meet new prospects. Not as a war cry for an avant-garde to move even further and faster ahead, but rather as a warning, a call to attention, so as to *stop* going further *in the same way* as before toward the future.”⁶

Latour describes the very immanence, the heady not-quite-achieved present, we seek in this first iteration of *Resilience*. He also describes how we envision its possible futures: as a common space in which the ways we have learned not to see are revealed to us as possibilities for as of yet unknown modes of thinking. It is, we hope, a surprising undertaking, and one that will produce conversations that reveal what and how the humanities can speak to the larger crisis of the environment. Ethics, values, narrative, image: We humanists and posthumanists—for let us not forget the radical inadequacy, if not impossibility, of the hu-

man outside of multispecies relations—have these cards to play, a honed cultural knowledge that has long assisted the regeneration of culture, in its old-fashioned sense of the cultivation of matter into life. It's a speculative venture, the environmental humanities, so we might as well think big. Such thinking big is also, or ought to be, everyday practice: what we champion is the ordinary work of humanist scholarship when done by teachers and writers who remain confident in our roles as semi-elite or non-elite creatives, depending upon whether we work within a national system in which tenure is present, whether we have access to publication venues in our first language and physical classrooms and offices and insurance, and whether we are adjuncts or lecturers or assistant professors or graduate students or endowed chairs.

At our best we are public defenders of a common world constituted of durable goods, including our stories and ideas, and we are builders—sometimes fabricators of wrenches to hegemonic systems, lovers of language and its sociality, and producers of a commons which cannot be present without the repeated efforts of ourselves, our students, and others to commit to and imagine living on this planet together.

At this juncture there is nothing more crucial, in our minds, than deploying and if necessary retooling our disciplinary skills for the sake of ecology. As Bill McKibben once wryly remarked, the idea that ecology depends upon economy, and that it is the economy, not the global climate, that is too big to fail—that's about reached the limits of belief, despite the persistent everyday denial of climate change that social scientists such as Kari Norgaard find even in the most politically active communities of environmentally conscientious nations such as Norway.⁷ The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association's 2012 report states matter-of-factly that this past year saw across-the-board indicators of disruptive global climate change, especially in the Arctic and in the world's oceans. In the US, drought strangles Texas farmers and ranchers, forcing even that cussedly libertarian state to begin considering methods of adaptation to the new—in fact, ever changing and not precisely predictable—climate regime. Floods ravaged Alberta this summer, displacing more than one hundred thousand people in one of the worst natural disasters that the province has seen—even as bitumen extraction continues in the oil sands, adding methane to the atmosphere and polluting one of North America's most crucial northward-flowing rivers to the Arctic Sea.

Every one of these disasters, which are not disasters insofar as the word “disaster” etymologically descends to the random misbehavior of a planet, rather than human misbehavior upon a planet, requires stories—films, videography, blogs, comics, novels, histories, journalistic accounts, memoirs. Storytelling, a word that resurfaces repeatedly or appears as performance in our contributor’s manifestos, interviews, and book reviews, provides adaptable points of view, ways of seeing the world that can be picked up, pieced apart, borrowed and bricolage-ed into modes of resistance and response. The environmental historian and writer Jenny Price, who left a traditional academic career in order to pursue the public humanities as a career, before the “public humanities” became a catchphrase for scholars, has experimented with multiple platforms for her research, including the performance art collective the LA Urban Rangers and now an app, based on a Rangers’ project opening access to the protected but public beaches of Malibu, California, which has garnered international attention. Matt Coolidge, another of our three interview subjects, describes storytelling as fundamental to the mission of the Center for Land Use Interpretation, a research collective, exhibit space, and Internet archive that he established in the early 1990s and that continues to be immensely influential for artists, cultural geographers, and geeks, despite a shoestring budget and commitment not to advertise or compete for your mindshare.

Although storytelling does not have the academic credibility of critique or criticality, two more terms repeatedly invoked by our contributors to this first issue, it performs a complementary kind of action. It performs what Latour calls “compositionalism” rather than critique: “from universalism it takes up the task of building a common world; from relativism, the certainty that this common world has to be built from utterly heterogeneous parts that will never make a whole, but at best a fragile, revisable, and diverse composite material.”⁸ When our interviewee Dick Hebdige comments that “criticality is the necessary crisis through which practice has to pass,” he does so within a context where crisis, not resilience, offers itself as the word of the age. “[C]risis. . . calls us back to what is happening now, i.e., to everything that, one way or another, as human beings—individually and en masse—we’re responsible for. The word ‘crisis’ is etymologically linked to critique.” Hebdige’s own staying power as a major force in cultural studies relies on his remarkably playful and performative inhabitation of critique,

from flamboyant multimedia lectures that sell out concert halls to his assertion, from *Subculture* to his current work in Desert Studies, that critique plays out with dead seriousness in matters of style. We chose to include interviews with Price, Coolidge, and Hebdige in this inaugural issue in part to help us discover the mindsprings of resilience within an academic or activist setting—that is, how to get out of the ivory tower and into the streets, literally or virtually, without losing our analytical acuity and, in the meantime, improving our competency as narrators and makers of culture. How to do scholarship and *life* as complementary ventures, in short.

We seek heterogeneity in *Resilience*. We're a no-monocultures operation. You will discover this in our format, which for the inaugural issue is particularly experimental, an invitation to your creativity and response. First there is the energy and sheer imaginative plenitude of our manifesto segment, which our online format invites you to visit and revisit without the strictures of sequential reading. Next we have three interviews with the exceptionally resilient public humanists named above. Then our book review section, where a chat-style conversation, again designed for clickable, nonsequential reading, frames the innovative work in critical environmental justice of two founding scholars of the environmental humanities. Finally in our media section, the graphic and digital arts offer visual commentary on ecological questions not always best addressed in print, or in words. Each segment of the journal stages a conversation about that tough composite of environmentalism as cultural praxis. All demand that we see that enterprise from multiple perspectives. As we've worked to edit this first issue with Allison Caruth, Julia Christensen, and Janet Fiskio, we've found ourselves challenged by *Resilience* as an incipient object and by our varied contributors to give an account of our own thinking, to trace its sources and its effects. In short, we've been challenged to bring ourselves, and whatever we've got, to the commons, and to remain faithful to the generosity and liveliness of a collaborative conversation that cannot *not* be heterogeneous, unpredictable, revisable, fragile, and difficult. Please join us in the effort to distribute and multiply the riches that reside in this dirt.

Stephanie LeMenager and Stephanie Foote

NOTES

1. Deseriis and Dean, "A Movement without Demands?"
2. Walker and Cooper, "Genealogies of Resilience," 153.
3. Walker and Cooper, "Genealogies of Resilience," 157; MacKinnon and Derickson, "From Resilience to Resourcefulness," 261.
4. Holling, "Resilience and Stability of Ecological Systems," 2.
5. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "resilience," <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/163619?redirectedFrom=resilience>.
6. Latour, "An Attempt at a 'Compositionist Manifesto,'" 473.
7. McKibben, quoted in *Everything's Cool*; Norgaard, *Living in Denial*.
8. Latour, "An Attempt at a 'Compositionist Manifesto,'" 474.

WORKS CITED

- Deseriis, Marco, and Jodi Dean. "A Movement without Demands?" *Possible Futures*, January 3, 2012. <http://www.possible-futures.org/2012/01/03/a-movement-without-demands>.
- Holling, C. S. "Resilience and Stability of Ecological Systems." *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics* 4 (November 1973): 1–23.
- Latour, Bruno. "An Attempt at a 'Compositionist Manifesto.'" *New Literary History* 41, no. 3 (2010): 471–90.
- McKibben, Bill. Quoted in *Everything's Cool*. Dir. Daniel B. Gold and Judith Helfand. Toxic Comedy Films. 2009.
- MacKinnon, Danny, and Kate Driscoll Derickson, "From Resilience to Resourcefulness: A Critique of Resilience Policy and Activism." *Progress in Human Geography* 37, no. 2 (2012): 253–70.
- Norgaard, Kari Marie. *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions, and Everyday Life*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2011.
- Walker, Jeremy, and Melinda Cooper. "Genealogies of Resilience: From Systems Ecology to the Political Economy of Crisis Adaptation." *Security Dialogue* 42, no. 2 (2011): 143–60.