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# The Environmental Humanities and Public Writing

An Interview with Rob Nixon

STEPHANIE LEMENAGER

Rob Nixon is the Rachel Carson and Elizabeth Ritzmann Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. He is author of four books, most recently *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, which was selected by *Choice* as an outstanding book of 2011. *Slow Violence* has received numerous prizes: an American Book Award, the 2012 Sprout prize from the International Studies Association for the best book in environmental studies, the 2012 Interdisciplinary Humanities Award for the best book to straddle disciplines in the humanities, and the 2013 biennial ASLE Award for the best book in environmental literary studies. He is a frequent contributor to the *New York Times*. His writing has also appeared in the *New Yorker*, *Atlantic Monthly*, the *Guardian*, the *Nation*, *London Review of Books*, the *Village Voice*, *Slate*, *Truthout*, *Huffington Post*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Critical Inquiry*, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, *Public Culture*, *Cultural Studies*, *New Formations*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, and elsewhere. He has published over a hundred essays and book chapters in the fields of environmental studies, postcolonial studies, and nonfiction and has delivered lectures on six continents. He has been a recipient of a Guggenheim, an NEH, a Fulbright, and a MacArthur Foundation International Peace and Security Fellowship.

**Stephanie LeMenager:** I spent a good deal of time this fall talking and listening to other academics talk about the environmental humanities,

suddenly a field in which universities want to invest, and with which scholars want to identify. Yet a good deal of what I hear is doubt; in other words, do we believe that this is a plausible field, a useful rubric? And I was curious to see what you say to that.

**Rob Nixon:** I'm a fan of the environmental humanities. My measure is really what is it achieving, what kind of work is it enabling, rather than trying to finesse from an intellectual stance whether it's the correct term or the incorrect term or whether it's superannuated. I do feel that even compared to five or six years ago, there's an enormous amount of very innovative interdisciplinary and international work coming out of the field that's enabled by that banner.

In the abstract there are all sorts of critiques you might make of the term, but look at what's happening at the Carson Center in Munich, in Stockholm, at Australian National University, at Wisconsin, Oregon, UC Santa Barbara, and UCLA, among others. There is a real energy, and there's openness to different kinds of international contexts that wasn't there before.

I also think that because university structures change at a Paleolithic pace, we can't rebrand ourselves every five minutes. We could call the field the anti-natural post-environmental post-humanities. And I'm sure the students would come rushing, and the administrators would be delighted, and the funders would open their wallets!

But really the rise of the environmental humanities isn't taking place in a rarefied context. And I do believe, whatever we think about the term's possible blind spots, that it's enabling a lot of fantastic work, fantastic initiatives. If you look at scholars like Libby Robin, Jane Carruthers, Sverker Sorlin—a whole bunch of people, in the American context as well, that they are really making an impact. They're interacting effectively with scientists. They're interacting with artists, with design people. Connections between the environmental humanities and the interpretive social sciences are also becoming way more interesting.

Part of my enthusiasm is colored by my own experience here at Wisconsin, if I contrast it to, say, my experience at Columbia, which was a much more brittle, partitioned university—at least when I worked there. I'm talking about the 1990s when you had creative writing walled off in one sector of campus. Then you had literary studies in its own sealed universe. You had environmental studies way over there, with

scientists pretty much setting the agenda. At that time scholars who didn't fit those divides, or weren't comfortable with them, had a very hard time getting institutional support for iconoclastic work. At Wisconsin, there is an enormous amount of interdisciplinary energy and interdisciplinary freedom. The Center for Culture, History, and Environment has done fantastically well in that regard.

What I am witnessing more and more—in incoming graduate students and even some undergraduates—is students whose passions are interdisciplinary before they are disciplinary, and they have to negotiate the structures. Environmental humanities gives them a more ambitious space in which to work than to say, for instance, you're history. You're literature. You're geography. And that's it.

So, I'm thrilled by the work that environmental humanities initiatives are enabling, in the classroom as well as in scholarship. Whether it's the best term I don't know. But it exists, and because it exists and has achieved some kind of power that I think is effective, I would be loath to see that power squandered.

**Stephanie:** It's exciting how project driven the environmental humanities tends to be. That's a new thing for me. As a rather pragmatic type, I love the idea of creating an object that acts in the world, perhaps in a bigger world than the one I was prepared to act in as a graduate student trained in English in the '90s.

But there are the questions of, for example, if we're doing more project-driven work, or exploring more collaborative models, is there a way in which scholarly rigor dissipates? What does it mean to be a public humanist, for instance? Are there reasonable expectations for the publics we can summon, given what we actually do?

**Rob:** I've always been an advocate for working up your expertise in a variety of registers. For me, the question of rigor is not paramount. I don't think rigor needs to be compromised. If you look at Rachel Carson or some of the people whom I mention in my book, for example Edward Said, they were very alive to the contexts that they were working in, and they were very alive to audience expectations. To me, particularly because I worked closely with Said, that was a profound lesson. And I know that the media context is clearly different in the twenty-first century than when he was operating. But I try to instill those lessons in

my students as well. If you have a body of knowledge, experiment with it in different formats. If you're writing for *Critical Inquiry*, you'll have a particular voice, a particular frame, a particular register. That needs to change if you're writing for the *New York Times* or the *Huffington Post*.

On the subject of rigor, there's sometimes a kind of rigor mortis that can set into a student or a scholar's prose as they decide *this* is my professional voice. *This* is associated with gravitas, with career advancement, et cetera. But I feel the most interesting scholars tend not to confine themselves to a single voice. I very much enjoy being around colleagues who work laterally, like those on Wisconsin's creative writing faculty and at the Center for Culture, History, and Environment. Finding new guises, new platforms for established knowledge—and in the process changing the audience for that knowledge—is endlessly fascinating.

**Stephanie:** That leads me to another question, which I have debated with a number of people—including Jenny Price, another of our board members. How do we, or should we, attempt to work the teaching of writing into graduate curricula for the humanities? Because at least in my experience, there really aren't courses about entering into these different registers, or even about how to write well as an academic within a traditional mode, in a graduate curriculum. Is that something you can speak to?

**Rob:** Yes, I can speak to that because I have basically four hats here at Wisconsin. I teach creative nonfiction in the MFA program and in the undergraduate writing program. In literary studies, I teach postcolonial and environmental literatures. Through Culture, History, and Environment I'm involved in interdisciplinary courses in environmental studies. And I'm affiliated with African Studies as well. So those are my four main hats.

What I find is that, for instance, at the undergraduate level I'll teach a creative nonfiction course, and science majors will come in saying they have done their metrics and produced their research papers, but there are perspectives that that approach has precluded. Maybe they want to write an opinion piece for radio. Or maybe they want to do a blog or a travel piece or a public science essay. So we work with questions of dramatization, character, suspense, dialogue, those kinds of issues. The

content they bring to the writing is often fascinating—I learn a great deal from such students—but they do need to pursue an imaginative skill set that they haven't been able to acquire in their native disciplines.

Similarly, at the graduate level we have a very small MFA program that just admits six in fiction one year, six in poetry the next year. All the students are fully funded: that was part of our push for diversity and for not getting students into debt. But we also offer a creative writing minor in the English PhD, for which students have to take a minimum of three workshops. I work with a lot of those students in combination with the MFA students. So a typical nonfiction workshop at the graduate level attracts full-time MFA students, English PhDs doing the creative writing minor, and a sprinkling of graduate students from across the humanities, the social sciences, and the sciences. Many of this last category are searching for a way, say, to write a more impassioned, dramatic, personally inflected introduction to their dissertations, something that can help establish them, in the minds of potential employers, as young scholars' arresting voices.

The exchanges in such workshops are highly productive, because the MFA students are specialist writers and the creative writing minor students, among the PhDs, have some memory of loving writing and are excited to be in a context where writing is valued. At the same time the academics in the group are often energized about ideas. And that can carry over to the MFA students, who then realize that perhaps they should try a manifesto, or experiment with some other idea-dense, idea-driven genre.

So that's the immediate context out of which I'm working. I should add that when I start off with dissertators, I ask them to find two books whose style they really admire. They should disagree with the arguments or politics of at least one of those books, but be seduced by the style nonetheless. So the student is not just noticing the argument but is alive to voice, rhythm, cadences. Then I ask them to undertake an exercise in mimicry of those two writers' styles, just to try to internalize what it is that makes the writing move. I also encourage dissertators to have a shelf, a small shelf beside their desk, of writers whose voices make them feel alive. That's one tactic that I use.

The expectation of most academic writing is that it's written in the passive voice. And as soon as you say "we," all hell breaks loose. From an emotional and activist perspective you're going to get nowhere with-

out a “we” or an “I” or something personal up front. I think that’s a big issue in terms of how comfortable we allow people to be with taking those risks. Yes, maybe this “we” is overgeneralized or is making some assumptions that need to be examined, but I prefer that kind of personally present risk taking to thirty thousand passive sentences in a row.

**Stephanie:** I think that much of academic style, as I’m beginning to see it, was actually crafted to avoid argument, oddly enough, or to create an illusion of safety and retreat, which shouldn’t really be where we want to go. You had mentioned the shelf that you wanted these students to create for themselves of animating writers. For those who don’t have the pleasure of being in your creative nonfiction course or the benefit of being at a university where there’s a creative writing minor for grad students—which I think is wonderful—can you suggest two or three texts that you think ought to be on that shelf?

**Rob:** Well, I can give a historical perspective in terms of my own development, and then there’s what I’m enjoying currently. Let me divide then into two shelves. There are people like John Berger, who from an early age was profoundly influential on me. A book like Edward Said’s *After the Last Sky* was huge and remains my favorite book of his. Also the writings of Derek Jarman, particularly *Modern Nature*. Imaginatively it opened up my sense of what environmental writing could be. But I also really loved his voice.

If we turn to the present, we’re seeing an incredible outpouring of smart, inventive nonfiction. Elizabeth Kolbert’s *The Sixth Extinction* is an ambitious, expansive, yet wonderfully accessible account of a highly complex subject. It’s gratifying to see it selling so well. I’m eagerly anticipating Naomi Klein’s forthcoming book on climate change and climate justice. I’ve really enjoyed the advance excerpts that I have seen. Rebecca Solnit, particularly the Solnit of *Savage Dreams*, was profoundly inspiring for me. And I continue to be delighted by the occasional pieces that she does in places like *CounterPunch* and the *London Review of Books*—I really appreciate those. Subhankar Banerjee, at [climatestorytellers.org](http://climatestorytellers.org), is an increasingly indispensable voice, someone with the right mix of courage, creativity and the capacity to make quick, urgent interventions.

There are a couple of antipodean writers whom I have been enjoying

greatly. Iain McCalman has a fine new book called *The Reef: A Passionate History*. It's a trade book on the Great Barrier Reef: the history, the ecology, the precariousness of that marvel. *The Reef* is a fabulous read. McCalman has the ability to dramatize both scientific and historical stories and to channel them through compelling characters.

Kennedy Warne, a New Zealander, is an editor of *New Zealand National Geographic* and is a marine feature writer for the US *National Geographic* as well. He recently wrote a book called *Let Them Eat Shrimp* on the impact of large-scale shrimp farming on coastal areas—especially vulnerable mangrove forests—around the world, from Thailand and the Sundarbans to Ecuador, Mexico, and Louisiana. He's a terrific writer. So while he's talking about the coastal poor and the coastal rich, and the distribution of resources in the intertidal food chain, he'll be simultaneously talking about hermit crabs as ecosystem engineers, and raccoons and river otters. He has a wonderful way of integrating some of the questions that we in environmental studies often address more theoretically—like how agency is distributed in the landscape and the economic and cultural ramifications of that. Those are a few people whose work I've learned from recently.

Also, in the twenty-first century we're witnessing a huge outpouring of first-rate environmental writing from the United Kingdom. George Monbiot is indispensable. Richard Mabey continues to be a force. Way back in the 1970s, he was already talking about edge lands. In 1973 he had this book called *The Unofficial Countryside*, about those interstitial spaces where life is happening—vital but often disparaged spaces that are written off as non-environmental or not worth observing. I'm a great admirer of Mabey's *Nature Cure* as well as environmental non-fiction by his compatriots like Kathleen Jamie, Roger Deakin, Robert Macfarlane, and Esther Woolfson.

There's a superb writer in Chicago called Michael McColly, who is writing a book about the urban wilds of postindustrial Chicago. He's walking the shoreline of Lake Michigan from his home in Rogers Park all the way through to Gary and on to the Indiana Dunes. He has introduced me to some of the sections he is walking. He has a wonderful way of not only writing about walking as a physiological way of engaging with the landscape, but also writing about the environmental and industrial heritage of that area. He goes right through the gargantuan BP refinery on the Illinois-Indiana border, which is a big part of the tar



sands story. So I'm really looking forward to that book. I've seen sections of it, and I think it's urgent and original.

**Stephanie:** As a native Chicagoan, I'm excited about that one, actually about all of them—what a wonderful list. So I think that the last time I saw you was at ASLE, and it was interesting to me to feel that postcolonial studies had finally really arrived at ASLE, at least in my relatively short time being a part of that organization. I'm curious about what you perceive as the futures of postcolonial studies within the environmental humanities rubric. Are the fields mutually enabling?

**Rob:** I do think they're mutually enabling, and there's a bunch of brilliant scholars—Pablo Mukherjee, Susie O'Brien, Byron Caminero-Santangelo, Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Jennifer Wenzel, and many more—who are working the edges of these disciplines or fortifying the bridgework between them. Anne McClintock, many years ago, talked about her reservations about the term “postcolonial.” I think it's probably a pity, going back a few decades that the “post” trend ever took off. [*Laughs.*] But again, ultimately I'm less interested in terminological refinement than in what work gets done. If I look back to the 1990s at Columbia, under the banner of postcolonial studies there was this outpouring of amazing work from fantastic graduate students, and a real professorial network that spanned disciplines, geographies, and centuries. That was all so generative, quite remarkable. I'm not particularly invested in the term “postcolonial.” What I'm invested in is, in both postcolonial studies and environmental justice studies, the bridgework they enable. Environmental justice studies has provided a postcolonial entry point into environmental studies. Scholars like yourself and Joni Adamson have been very important in internationalizing of American studies, which has been vital for the bridgework I am talking about. What matters are the imaginative and political energies generated by new and established fields.

For some, postcolonial studies may seem like a superannuated term. But as I mentioned in *Slow Violence*, I am suspicious of some of the things that supplant the term, like world literature. There was an excellent, quite thoughtful editorial in *N+1* recently, a long meditation on world literature, saying that world literature needs to have some inflection of power in the term and the frame. And whatever anyone thinks,

postcolonial studies is consistently interested in power. I continue to be compelled by the subject of power gradients: who is speaking, who is acting, and who is structurally dismissed from the conversation under different rubrics. So I do think that both environmental justice and postcolonial studies draw our attention to the fact that the spokespeople often come from a very delimited demographic.

**Stephanie:** In an earlier comment, you made a bit of a gesture towards this field of the post-humanities, or posthumanist scholarship, which is an interesting thing to come out of the same moment as the environmental humanities—the one field in some ways geared toward the ears of administrators and funding agencies, and the other pointing in a very different direction. Are the post-humanities where we really are, but we simply can't use that language in every situation or discourse? Or is this a very different movement that you think has a distinct trajectory?

**Rob:** I think there are overlaps, but not that many. I think “post-humanities” might be one of the most unfortunate terms of all. In fact, I'd rank it number one. Because you have some know-nothing Republican Tea Party senator from Missouri or wherever saying, “Why bother with the humanities? We're post-humanities.” Just imagine—

**Stephanie:** Yeah, even the English professors are saying it. [*Laughter.*]

**Rob:** Or it's the governor of Florida asking, “Do we really need another anthropology major?” So the post-humanities requires a lot of interpretive unpacking for a general audience, and that's my concern. I understand the value of engaging with the interface between the technological and the human, and the nonhuman, or more-than-human, whatever you want to call it. But the term itself, I think, isn't very transparent to nonspecialist audiences. That's a concern I have.

I have the same concern, although it's not an institutional structure, with the term “precarity.” What does *precarity* do that precariousness or vulnerability doesn't do? Because I have, like we all do, many smart, nonspecialist friends, who want to know what's going on. Post-humanities is a tricky sell. What it does offer, in terms of content as opposed to labeling, is a certain type of connection to the sciences. And that can be empowering, enabling, and creative. We see that also in something like the medical humanities, which is more self-explanatory.

**Stephanie:** Well there are so many proliferating humanities. It seems we are both in a world of abundance and a world that has potentially already ended in the humanities right now. I've been interested in and excited about, in part because of my own former location in California, the intersection between the digital humanities and the environmental humanities, and the ways in which this is actually being instantiated in labs, like the one at KTH in Stockholm. And yet I'm a little bit mystified still about how exactly this lab work takes place. I'm curious to hear what you think about the new model of a lab or "collaboratory" for humanists.

**Rob:** It is certainly one creative model. And if it brings people in from design, graphic everything, digital everything, there's a lot of positive foment that's going to happen there. It's not a model that I have worked in intimately. I am also leery of aspects of the digital turn: sometimes the mere production of something digital gets an unearned, assumed cachet, just because it exists, as if it thereby had the viral power of some Hollywood star's wardrobe malfunction. How many people are really connecting to this digital product? Sometimes it has just fifty hits.

So I still think that while, by the minute, digital everything becomes more central, we should recognize that there are dominant, residual, and emergent technologies. You might write for the *Guardian* or the *New York Times* or talk on NPR and be reaching a far wider audience. A dominant-residual-emergent awareness should be integral to any environmental humanities lab.

**Stephanie:** I wanted to ask you one more question, a little bit more personal. I guess it's really a two-part question. First, I'm sure our readers would love to know what you're working on now if they haven't figured it out already. And the second part then would be something I ask everybody that I talk to, and it's always interesting to hear what the answer is. And that is this: is there a project that you've conceived that seems overwhelmingly large, but that you might pursue anyway, or that you'd like to put forward as a kind of imaginary for us to contemplate?

**Rob:** Let me take the second half of that question first. I think I just wrote that book in a sense that the book seemed unimaginably large. I can't tell you how much rewriting I did and how many chapters I threw away in order to get *Slow Violence* down to a manageable size. Part of

that had to do with the different geneses of the writing of that book. What had happened was that after I'd written a trade book, a sort of political memoir right at the beginning of the twenty-first century, I was planning to write a second trade book, a follow-up.

Post-9/11 and the invasion of Iraq I wanted to do something on depleted uranium warfare. That was the story I wanted to tell. I went with my agent to all the trade publishers and talked up the issue. I was following the science very closely. And they all said, "Well, where's the hope?" [*Laughs.*]

Well, actually, the hope, from my perspective, is just in the act of witnessing, in trying to bring a harsh story into the light. But I can't promise a hopeful arc. In fact, it's pretty dire.

Then I started interviewing veterans, and the idea was to look at exposed veterans who had returned, health damaged, to the United States. I proposed to go over to Iraq and follow the Geiger counter there. I soon found I was completely overwhelmed. I was overwhelmed by the subject and the fact that I found it so hard to find positive turns in the story. It made me realize that it wasn't a story that I could tell. I had maybe four crates of notes and documents and interviews on depleted uranium. In the end it all became compressed into half a chapter of *Slow Violence*.

So depleted uranium warfare was a project that I think emotionally was too vexing and too vast for me. I really admire intellectual courage and investigative courage as much as I admire somebody who takes care with her style. There's a trace in *Slow Violence* of that massive book that somebody should write, but it's not going to be me. But those investigations into depleted uranium did get me thinking conceptually and politically about invisibility, spectacle, and slow violence, and so they were generative in a way.

**Stephanie:** That's fascinating. I didn't know that. Might there be yet another iteration of that emotionally vast book that comes to you?

**Rob:** I did a few pieces and some interviews on it. There was a woman, Alexandra Miller, whose work I was following, who was looking at the science and showing the impact on bystander cells of exposure to depleted uranium. And she got defunded. That to me was also very demoralizing. So what was the first half of your question again?

**Stephanie:** I think those of our readership who don't know what you're working on now would probably love to hear a bit about the current project.

**Rob:** I'm doing what I hope is a shortish book on the Anthropocene, trying to pull together what's being said theoretically and what's emerging in the public realm—in special issues of *Nature*, *Smithsonian*, the *Economist*, and on the internet. The public realm here includes what's being done with the Anthropocene curatorially, how creative people are using objects to try to release stories about the Anthropocene that have the capacity to inform and surprise.

The Anthropocene is so compendious and elusive in some ways, but it also can offer, imaginatively, a profound epochal jolt that of course has very different reverberations among diverse political interests and communities. In this context I want to stay true to my longstanding fascination with who is included and who is excluded from this frame. Obviously Anthropocene thinking brings species issues to the fore. I am interested in the oscillation between Anthropocene hubris, Anthropocene humility, Anthropocene exclusiveness, and other more inclusive gestures. So that's broadly where my thinking and writing are going.

Finally, I really want this to be a book that can be used in the classroom. In other words, I want it to be a book that undergraduate and graduate classes can use as a staging ground for debate. I think one of the most useful things about the idea of the Anthropocene pedagogically is that can generate so many rich, urgent exchanges, enlivening the classroom and encouraging students to extend their interdisciplinary reach.