

Humanities on the Brink: Energy, Environment, Emergency

A Nearly Carbon-Neutral (NCN) online symposium sponsored by the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) and hosted by the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB)

July 10-31, 2020

Call for Papers

Is it time to panic yet?

The accelerating drumbeat of awful, depressing, terrifying, no-good, exasperating, numbing, rage- and despair-inducing news from around the globe has many of us repeating the same simple question: *What can I do?* How can one person make a difference, for instance, in the effort to transition to renewable energy systems? Or what influence does a single person have over governments as they deal (or choose not to deal) with sea level rise, climate migration, monster hurricanes and wildfires, and other catastrophes associated with the out-of-control overheating of our planet? What about mass shootings, resurgent white supremacy, the rise of “illiberal democracy,” the weaponization of social media, or any number of the other ills that threaten to metastasize into full-blown planetary emergencies?



A fire consumes the National Museum of Brazil, 2018. In addition to destroying countless artifacts, the fire claimed records of many Indigenous languages that are no longer spoken. Photo by Felipe Milanez.

Scholars in most mainstream humanities circles, understandably preoccupied with the grim “endgame” (http://connect.chronicle.com/rs/931-EKA-218/images/ChronicleReview_Endgame.pdf) of declining enrollments and budget cuts playing out in academic departments at universities all over the map, have had relatively little to say about the climate and extinction crises. On the other hand, scholars in fields such as ecocriticism and the energy and environmental humanities have been grappling for years with questions about the rapidly worsening state of the biosphere and related social problems. The trouble with many academic conversations about these things is that, however interesting they may be to their participants, they are, indeed, academic conversations: discussions carried out among specialists in language that ordinary people find off-putting or simply unintelligible; discussions that too rarely translate to meaningful action; discussions that perpetuate academic “business as usual,” advancing the careers of individual humanists but mostly failing to spark collective change and the growth of the sorts of inter- and extra-disciplinary alliances that hold the greatest promise of actually transforming the petrocultural impasse we currently inhabit. And, of course, much of the dialogue still happens at conferences with enormous carbon footprints. No matter how convivial and edifying the gatherings are, this fact lends a bitter taste of *flygskam* (Swedish: “flight shame”) to the proceedings.

As we continue to examine the meaning of the humanities in a time of emergency, scholars must find ways to bridge academic critique and research with the work that non-academic communities are doing in response to the existential threats of what many have come to call the Anthropocene. Extending this impulse to create bridges rather than silos, this ASLE Off-Year Nearly Carbon Neutral (NCN) symposium asks participants to take up questions of urgency and emergency in the context of the overlapping social and ecological crises that mark the present—to think within and against what we might call the “Emergency Humanities.” We seek panels and presentations that not only study texts through these lenses, but that also reflect on the limits and possibilities of doing humanities scholarship and changing our rapidly warming world. We invite you to submit panels, presentations, and programming ideas to “Humanities on the Brink” and participate this coming July...*Flygskam*-free! Panel and presentation themes may include the following:

- Climate pessimism, optimism, and/or denialism
- Energy humanities on the brink of an age of emergencies
- The “failure” of the humanities
- Salvaging the wreckage of the liberal arts
- Urgency as a mode of foreclosure
- Urgency as a site of possibility
- Energy transition and the question of urgency
- The humanities and/as resistance to authoritarian (ab)uses of emergency discourse

- Alternative or queer temporalities and the question of urgency
- Energy, infrastructure, and narrative
- Settler colonialism and the uneven experiences of “emergency”
- Creating ecological/cultural “arks” to preserve endangered beings, relationships, languages, communities, and heritages
- Community-building efforts inside and outside the humanities
- The humanities and radical forms of dissent: culture jamming, civil disobedience, mass mobilization, monkey-wrenching, and more
- Lessons for the humanities from disaster sociology, emergency management, and other relevant fields
- Rewilding and biocultural restoration and/as the humanities
- “Emergency” and the global South
- Apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic imaginaries; utopian and dystopian visions
- Past “emergency humanities” failures and successes (e.g., Nazi book-burning vs. the distribution of tens of millions of Armed Services Editions in World War II)
- Current approaches to keeping the humanities alive in war zones, under conditions of economic austerity, in prison, and elsewhere outside the proverbial Ivory Tower
- Emergent genres that imagine utopian infrastructural futures (e.g., solarpunk)
- The limits and possibilities of the “new” humanities
- Research-creation and the necessity of challenging conventional academic knowledge production
- Metacritical reflections on other forms of NCN research and interactions

NCN Format

Speakers record their own talks. Talks normally consist of:

- a) a video of them speaking, which could be filmed with a webcam or smartphone;
- b) a screen recording of a presentation, such as a PowerPoint, with the talk as a voiceover;
- c) a hybrid of the two, with speaker and presentation alternately or simultaneously onscreen.

Talks are uploaded to the conference website where they can be viewed at any time during the conference timeframe. Talks are organized into panels (i.e., individual web pages) that generally have three speakers each and a shared Q & A session.

Participants and panelists contribute to online Q & A sessions, which are similar to online forums, by posting and responding to written questions and comments.

Submissions

We welcome two categories of submissions from participants. Those interested in pre-formed panels, workshops, and roundtables should submit a panel overview of 300-500 words, including two keywords and 100-word biographies of each participant, along with contact information. For pre-formed panels, 200-word abstracts will be required for each presentation on top of these requirements. Individual presentations will require a 300-word abstract, 100-word biography, two keywords, and contact information.

We encourage creative uses of the medium of the virtual conference setting, and ask that applicants model their proposal on the form that most closely fits their format, providing a short description of the format in their abstract. For examples of past NCN symposia, see ASLE’s [“A Clockwork Green: Ecomedia in the Anthropocene”](#) and [other successful online conferences](#) recently hosted by the University of California, Santa Barbara. For a helpful, detailed guide to NCN conferences, see [this white paper](#) by Ken Hiltner, Director of UCSB’s Environmental Humanities Initiative.

Questions or suggestions? Please contact Bart Welling at bhwellin@unf.edu. Please submit all proposals as .doc(x) or .pdf attachments to Bart Welling, Jacob Goessling (jacob.goessling@gmail.com), and Jordan B. Kinder (jkinder@ualberta.ca).

Symposium Events

Keynote speakers will be announced as they commit to the symposium. We will be hosting an online watch party featuring the documentary *INVASION*, which deals with the anti-colonial work of the Unist’ot’en Camp of the Wet’suwet’en Nation. We invite your ideas regarding other events and ways to put the NCN format to the best possible use.

Timeline

April 1: Proposals due

May 1: Acceptance decisions made

May 15: Registration opens (\$25, or pay what you can)

June 15: All videos uploaded