

A Constitution for the Anthropocene Body Politic Environment, Culture, and the Humanities in the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract The following article is a slightly revised version of Serenella Iovino's Keynote Address at the 2021 European Conference for the Humanities, jointly organised in Lisbon (5-7 May) by the UNESCO Social and Human Sciences Programme, the International Council for Philosophy and Human Sciences (CIPSH), and the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT). The theme of the Conference Section inaugurated by this lecture was "The Humanities in the Twenty-First Century". By acknowledging the official approval of the BRIDGES Project on education for sustainability as a partner of the UNESCO Management of Social Transformation Program, Iovino evaluated the role of the Environmental Humanities in the agenda of the so-called 'New Humanities', paying special attention to their relevance during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this framework, Venice emerged both as a symbol and as a very concrete object of care, proving to be "a thinking machine" for contemporary natural-cultural dynamics, as Salvatore Settis has defined it. The lecture ended with the invitation to turn the current crisis into a constitutive moment for the 'Anthropocene body politic', namely, the earthly collective of agents and of processes, both human and nonhuman, natural and technological.

Keywords Body politic. Environmental Humanities. UNESCO. Venice. New Humanities.



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To speak about the Humanities in the twenty-first century means above all to question what ‘human’ and ‘humanity’ mean. Being human, in the twenty-first century, signifies more and more to experience a condition of vulnerability, exposure and co-presence, a condition of different opportunities. Illnesses that intersect with social habits, cultural visions, and geopolitical balances; new media that interfere with our cognitive and ethical realms, the need to relate to an environment and a climate that we threaten and that threaten us in turn; the uneven repercussions of these dynamics: all this is a challenge to our cultural and political imagination. As an Environmental Humanities scholar, who has been involved in UNESCO activities since the decade of the Education for Sustainable Development (2005-14), I find it inspiring that the BRIDGES Project, which is explicitly dedicated to education to sustainability, is now an official coalition partner of MOST, the UNESCO Management of Social Transformation Programme.¹ In my view, the inclusion in the UNESCO policy map of the Environmental Humanities is a remarkable step for both parties: for the UNESCO community, which acquires an important ‘epistemological reservoir’; and, certainly, for the Environmental Humanities community, which acquires a partner that will give institutional relevance and a more concrete impact to the work that humanities scholars have been pursuing in tandem with environmental scientists throughout years of research and activism in ‘cognitive democracy’.

The Environmental Humanities is a typically twenty-first-century humanities field. Indeed, it came about after the concept “Anthropocene”, around the year 2000, entered the scientific debate.² And the reason why the Environmental Humanities started taking shape is

1 BRIDGES is a UNESCO initiative meant to promote a human-centred and humanities-driven education for sustainability. It works in partnership with UNESCO’s MOST (Management of Social Transformations). The goal of the BRIDGES-MOST coalition is “to better integrate humanities, social science, and local and traditional knowledge perspectives into research, education and action for global sustainability through development and coordination of resilient responses to environmental and social changes at local and territorial scales” (see <https://ihopenet.org/bridges/>). The BRIDGES initiative is also a partner of the Humanities for the Environment Observatories (<https://hfe-observatories.org>). An introduction about the BRIDGES Project at the 2021 *European Conference for the Humanities*, held by Steven Hartman, is available on YouTube at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UesQX_wUpTU

2 The first official proposal to call “Anthropocene” the last phase of the Quaternary is by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer (2000). As of July 2021, the hypothesis is still being evaluated by the International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS) and the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS). However, on 29 August 2016 the ICS Anthropocene Working Group (AWG) presented a formal recommendation oriented towards recognition at the International Geological Congress. In May 2019, the AWG voted in favour of submitting a formal proposal to the ICS by 2021, situating the Golden Spike around the mid-twentieth century (beginning of the atomic era). Data available on: <http://quaternary.stratigraphy.org/working-groups/anthropocene/>.

that certain questions prompted by the idea of humans as a ‘geological force’ could not be answered by geologists, climatologists, or environmental scientists alone: questions about responsibility and historical roots, about anxiety and loss, social behaviours justice, even ontology – and questions about how to “think the unthinkable”, as Rosi Braidotti (2013, 160) wrote anticipating Amitav Ghosh (2016).

This is a point worth mentioning. The crisis of the humanities in the “neoliberal university ruled by quantified economics and the profit motive” (Braidotti 2016, 11) is a fact. The humanities are at risk, and the UNESCO World Humanities Report will soon tell us how grave this risk is. Of course, after one-and-a-half year of COVID-19, this risk becomes more and more concrete, and for a paradox: the funds earmarked for research have never been so conspicuous in both President Biden’s Stimulus Plan and the Next Generation EU Recovery Plan. But ‘research’ means here exclusively scientific and technological research. This, once again, potentially reduces the humanities to a merely ornamental role. Yet, also during the pandemic, the humanities have been very much alive. Like never before humanities scholars have experienced the thrill of being ubiquitous, restless, and public. COVID-19 has proven not simply what the humanities can be, but also what they cannot *fail* to be: the humanities cannot *not* be digital, public, biomedical, intercultural, and environmental (I am quoting these partitions from the Network of the European Humanities 21, also supported by UNESCO).³ During these months, we have seen a need for stories and creative coalitions, but we have also been called to reflect on the sustainability of old and new practices. And we have discovered that many of them, including our ‘virtual’ technological experiences, impact on ecosystems and reverberate differently on society. This gives the Environmental Humanities a *certain* relevance.⁴

But let me frame my standpoint for you: I am a European Humanities scholar teaching in an American public University – a ‘Research’ University. Here, too, the humanities face their crisis – and yet I found here the possibility of an academic appointment that combined my two research fields: Italian Studies and Environmental Humanities.

From this standpoint, I will try to answer these questions:

1. Why are the Environmental Humanities so relevant now?

³ See <https://neh21.net>.

⁴ Even though this issue has become increasingly popular during the pandemic outbreak, the Environmental Humanities have been exploring this issue for a long time. See, among others, Parikka 2015 and 2018, and Iovino 2019. Also very useful is the article “Why Your Internet Habits are not as Clean as You Think” in the online BBC *Smart Guide to Climate Change*, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200305-why-your-internet-habits-are-not-as-clean-as-you-think>.

2. How do these two – Italian Studies and Environmental Humanities – go together?
3. How does this involve UNESCO?

Internationally, the Environmental Humanities are an increasingly consolidated discourse. The leading example is the web of Observatories of the Humanities for the Environment global network. With hubs in North and Latin America, Europe, the Arctic, Africa, East Asia, the Pacific, and Australia, all these observatories are specifically dedicated to framing local matters from a global perspective. From the Arizona desert to the North Pole and the Pacific, issues of indigenous ecologies, coral reef biodiversity, ‘native science’, island aesthetics, post-nuclear landscapes: all these foci form a huge cultural and scientific conversation finalised to protection, conservation, and development of eco-political strategies.⁵ This is valid for all Environmental Humanities projects: for example, my university, UNC Chapel Hill, is part of the consortium “Coasts, Climates, the Humanities, and the Environment” funded by a conspicuous Mellon-grant. Here scholars, scientists and local communities build together “Coastal Climate Archives”, which will help study the history and impact of storms and tidal waters.⁶ The examples in the US are too numerous to be quoted, but the Environmental Humanities are also thriving in Europe: in research centres (the Rachel Carson Center in Munich, the Environmental Humanities Lab at the KTH in Stockholm, the Long Room Hub at Trinity in Ireland), master’s programmes and variously articulated initiatives in Turkey, at Cappadocia University, with an international journal, *Ecocene*, in Holland at Amsterdam’s Vrije Universiteit, where they specialise in environmental history, at Aarhus University in Denmark, where the focus is on multispecies anthropology, in Norway at the Oslo School of Environmental Humanities, which experiments with new forms of teaching in the Anthropocene, again, in Rome at Roma Tre, with a focus on ecology and architecture, in Germany at University of Augsburg with an emphasis on cultural ecology, in the UK, where Bath Spa provides a prominent example of trans-disciplinary ecocritical studies, in Switzerland... Theories and practices are flourishing in all these places.

The Environmental Humanities are animated by the ambition of intervening in the understanding as well as in the ethical reframing of inhabiting the world. The Environmental Humanities ask: what natural forces shape cultural processes? And vice versa: how is reality the outcome of concurrent forces, both material and discursive, which intersect in the body of every living being, every territory, eve-

⁵ See <https://hfe-observatories.org>.

⁶ See <https://college.unc.edu/2019/08/mellon-cchec/>.

ry object? What is the ecology of wars and migrations, of gender and of disability, what is an ecology of mind and what an ecology of matter? The Environmental Humanities are animated by the idea that our species as well as our planet are not 'lonely' but are always already in a deep interchange. This implies that every form of politics must take into account this mutual belonging, this multiplicity, as well as the gaps of injustice among different species, or among members of the same species: ours. The Environmental Humanities teach us how important the 'local' is and how difficult it is to 'locate' environmental phenomena - in space as well as in time.⁷

But the Environmental Humanities also fully embrace Rosi Braidotti's invitation to explore intellectual avenues in which *critique goes together with creativity* (Braidotti 2013, 11 and *passim*), turning the humanities into a field of knowledge production and the cradle for new forms of resistance.

And here let me turn my focus closer to my research on Italy - and to UNESCO. One of the things that the Environmental Humanities have taught me is that you don't need to embrace the whole world to know the world. Though unique in themselves, places can be used as concepts, categories, cognitive tools, they can become lenses that make us see the life of other places. Italy for me is one of these place-concepts. Through Italy's lens you can understand the links of pollution and politics, industrial development and biodiversity at risk, social injustice and environmental disasters, the way climate change and illegal activities impact territories and people, the bio- and necro-politics of migrations, the environmental dimension of gender, species, ethnicity. And the creativity that emerges from all this. A major element in this discourse is landscape. Italy's landscapes speak of the contradictions of this country - and of its creativity. There are landscapes with factories or waste dumps in the middle of protected areas, landscapes of social fragmentation, landscapes of struggles and crises. Cultural and natural landscapes are often islands within this ambivalent fabric.⁸

In July 2021, fifty-eight of these were UNESCO landscapes, thus situating Italy at the top of UNESCO's World Heritage list. The files that are available on the UNESCO website emphasise all the reasons why a site has deserved inclusion in the list.⁹ For every place, there are descriptions, compliance with the criteria, maps, and relevant documents. And this is of course the outcome of important team research. But I believe that these landscapes must be also ex-

⁷ I am referring here to Rob Nixon's famous concept of "slow violence" (Nixon 2011).

⁸ For an exploration of these topics, see Iovino, Cesaretti, Past 2018 and Armiero, Iovino 2020.

⁹ See <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/>.

amined with the eyes of environmental historians, of social justice theorists and activists, of philosophers and literary critics, of multispecies anthropologists and ecosemioticians, all working hand in hand with environmental scientists, geologists, climatologists. Seen through their eyes and conversations, new meanings emerge from these landscapes – meanings that can also be of inspiration for political action, both in terms of cautionary tales and of a wider awareness of the issues at stake. And, last but not least, the educational impact that this can have must not be underestimated. These landscapes, in other words, can become theories for thinking and agendas for action – also in relation to the Humanities and what they can be.

Let me quote one example: Venice. Salvatore Settis, one of the world’s leading experts on landscapes as commons, has defined Venice “a thinking machine” (Settis 2016), the epitome and the laboratory of processes that take place wherever the bond between landscape, citizenship, and democracy is tested.

We do not need to explain why Venice is on the UNESCO World Heritage list. We also know, however, that its place on the list is precarious for many reasons: over-tourism, depopulation and real-estate speculation, water mobility congestion (and the big cruise ships problem), the ‘shortsightedness’ of the local administration and its corruption. The case of the MOSE anti-high tide dams is an eloquent instance. I am summarising and quoting from the report *Venezia, il Dossier UNESCO e una città allo sbando* (Venice, the UNESCO Dossier and a city in disarray) presented to UNESCO in 2019 (Fabbri, Migliorini, Tattara 2019).

However, many other things emerge from this landscape and this reality, if we approach them with the toolkit of the Environmental Humanities. With the Environmental Humanities, we can read Venice as a text in a larger context. This context embraces of course Venice’s lagoon (as the UNESCO site’s denomination also does). But this context also includes Venice’s monstrous alter-ego, the Porto Marghera Petrochemical Plant, and all the issues related to it: issues of environmental justice and sustainability, ethics and biopolitics, history, and political ecology in a conversation with climate emergency, biodiversity, labour, epidemiology. The Environmental Humanities make us see, for example, that potential solutions turn out to be themselves problems (I am referring to the MOSE’s impact on the Lagoon’s bed and biodiversity).¹⁰ The Environmental Humanities can invite us to consider the resonances between literature and reality, for example in the uncanny materialisation of the ‘Death in Venice’ trope, which becomes a narrative told by the city, the bodies of residents and workers, the

10 On this issue see Del Bello 2018 and Massariolo 2020, among many others.

ecosystem.¹¹ Literature even lets us see the larger plot of this narrative. I am thinking of Amitav Ghosh's last novel, *Gun Island*, in which Venice, New York, and the Sundarbans in Bangladesh are interlaced to expose the concrete faces of global warming, including migrations, sea level rise and the invasion of alien species (from tropical spiders to shipworms – a threatening reality in Venice!) (Ghosh 2019).¹² With the Environmental Humanities, we can read this landscape as a narrative, whose stories emerge from the interplay between human and nonhuman agents, the creativity of matter and the creativity of people. And we can better hear the voice of the people, their stories, understanding them in a more comprehensive way. The Environmental Humanities impact our moral imagination of the earth as a whole and as a collectivity of individuals, stimulating strategies for action. They provide us with a convivial epistemology of the commons that transforms the humanities into activism for democracy and the planet. What UNESCO can get from this is a theoretical and educational background to its policies, useful to reconfigure notions such as identity, tradition, and heritage in a more inclusive and generative way. This discourse is valid for every landscape: seen through this lens, in fact, every landscape becomes a “thinking machine”.

The Environmental Humanities are already a rising presence in Venice: the Biennale never fails to host and celebrate environmentally-sensitive artworks (but let me also recall the irresistible incursions of Banksy!).¹³ And, very important, the newly established University Ca' Foscari MA's degree in Environmental Humanities led by Shaul Bassi (former director of the Venetian branch of the Center for the Humanities and Social Change).¹⁴ And a significant outcome of these efforts is *Lagoonscapes: The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities*, which is the first international journal in Italy completely dedicated to these topics.

Ca' Foscari University has a UNESCO Chair on Water Heritage and Sustainable Development: here the Environmental Humanities discourse can – and will – be fruitfully grafted.¹⁵

Among the stories inscribed in the landscape of Venice, there are stories that can teach us something about our specific situation to-

11 See Iovino 2016 for an interpretation of Venice's 'material narrative'.

12 On the shipworm invasion of the Lagoon see Tagliapietra et al. 2021.

13 Environmental issues have been regularly represented at the Biennale for several decades. See Celant 1977 for one of the first occurrences of this artistic emergence.

14 The official webpage of the MA's Programme is available here: https://www.studyatcafoscari.com/programmes/graduate/master-in-environmental-humanities/?_sp=0e7eb173-c62c-4007-b6bc-8cd7b9dccd34.1626909498549.

15 On Ca' Foscari UNESCO Chair on Water Heritage and Sustainable Development, see: https://www.unive.it/pag/14024/?tx_news_pi1%5Bnews%5D=8413&cHash=9651e0e4da3ce886c534d3e35a8279bc.

day: the church of Santa Maria della Salute, or St. Mary of Health, for example, was erected out of devotion for the end of a pandemic, the plague of 1631.¹⁶ The lesson we learn is simple: pandemics are cyclic cataclysms, they come and they go, which also means that they are not the only problems we are called to face.

COVID-19 has disrupted millions of lives. It has created an historical watershed. And it has been literally an apocalypse: a revelation. Very banally, it has revealed that humans are exposed – and that a microscopic agent can tell us that the emperor is in fact naked. All this requires immediate action, of course. Yet, this urgency involves a risk: the risk of turning the Coronavirus into an *absolute*. In other words, focusing exclusively on the virus, people (and governments) might end up neglecting that many of the issues at stake are environmental. This is a risk that we cannot afford: COVID, in fact, is not *the* ultimate catastrophe but *one* chapter in a bigger narrative: it is an epiphenomenon of a larger picture.¹⁷

The Environmental Humanities allow us to see the connections between the chapter and the bigger narrative.¹⁸ They allow us to see the elements that shape the pandemic's ecology: an ecology of causes and effects ramified in space and time made of evolutionary pathways and crossings, endangered habitats and biodiversity, decades of neoliberal economy and centuries of colonialism, the maps of globalization and pollution, the ecology of contagion and cure, which is an ecology embedded in social, gender- and racial justice, and again the interlacement between power and the life of indigenous communities and their lands (as the case of Bolsonaro's Brazil tragically shows). Pandemics are also powerfully connected to climate change. Many tropical viruses are already thriving and spreading due to warmer climates. Scientists also believe that rising temperatures might free pathogens that have been trapped in the permafrost for millennia.

All this means that we cannot face the Coronavirus crisis while keeping the global ecological crises out of the picture. And we need a culture for this. We need the humanities to read this planetary narrative and to interpret its signs: signs are important, because they can indicate directions that must be taken. And here let me quote a great Italian poet, Andrea Zanzotto: reflecting on the wounds that surround us – the wounds that affect our landscapes and our body politic, and Venice in particular – Zanzotto (2013) states that we must be able to *turn the evil into a sign*: in his words, we need to move fur-

¹⁶ See Ben-Ami 2021.

¹⁷ On this, see Iovino 2020a and 2020b.

¹⁸ For an Environmental Humanities response to COVID-19, see the articles in *The New Normal? An Environmental Humanities Response*. *Bifrost Online*. Available at: <https://bifrostonline.org/>

ther, “toward a never-seen where even evil could be stopped, emptied of its power, and rehabilitated as a sign, a trace, a form” (Zanzotto 2013, 104-5).¹⁹

Turning the evil into a sign means transforming it into something we can read, and understand, and overcome. This is what the humanities are all about: the transformation of wounds into signs, of crises and emergencies into turning points and opportunities.²⁰

This presupposes a precise assumption: there is no way back. The past has known many crises. But these crises have acquired a meaning only when, instead of restoring the old order, they were conducive to a new one. In other words, we do not need a restoration here – less than ever one modelled on the grand Restorations Europe has known.

Rather, we need a constitution. A constitution is the system of principles according to which a body politic is formed and ruled. It is the action of establishing an order – in this case a new order. Let me put the focus on this concept: body politic. If humans are a geological force, then the body politic of our time stretches beyond the human social body: it includes cities as well as forests, bodily cells as well as vegetation and fauna, animals in industrial farms and melting glaciers; it includes climate and the oceans, it includes our media and technological devices, it includes our waste. This body politic raises issues of political freedoms and individual wellbeing, issues of energy democracy and global pollution, issues of non-anthropocentric values. In the Anthropocene, ‘body politic’ is a collective of agents and of processes, human and nonhuman, themselves resulting from collective dynamics and cycles. In the Anthropocene, this body politic is the earth. And it is all the invisible, non-hegemonic beings that are left in the shadow by the emergencies dictated by neoliberal politics.

The Environmental Humanities are able to shape the culture necessary for this constitutional moment; they can give us not only the coordinates of the many landscapes that we are called to read, but also the necessary road map for sustainability that human cultures – the Humanities – must develop in the twenty-first century.

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¹⁹ If not otherwise stated, all translations are by the Author.

²⁰ I have extensively commented on this passage by Zanzotto in Iovino 2016, 72-3.

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