



Rebecca Tillett, 'Introduction: Environmental Action Studies as New Area Studies,' *New Area Studies* 4:3 (2024).

Introduction: Environmental American Studies as New Area Studies

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'[For New Area Studies] there remains a strong and evident need to understand peoples, cultures and places *comprehensively* and *comparatively* in an era of rapid change'

Susan Hodgett and Patrick James¹

We live in an era of rapid change of all kinds. It is change that is both political and climactic; and both result in profound and unsettling social reverberations. We are witnessing this change at both a local and a global level: in the elections of right wing populists such as Donald Trump, Viktor Orban, and Georgia Meloni; and in the visibility and/or growing influence of highly vocal right wing commentators, and of populist groups such as Marine Le Pen's National Rally in France, the Brothers of Italy, the Alternative for Germany, Greece's Golden Dawn, Poland's Law and Justice, Belgium's Flemish Interest, and in the UK under Nigel Farage's leadership first UKIP and then Reform. Indeed 'populism' was declared the Word of the Year in 2017 by the *Cambridge Dictionary*.² This political turmoil is matched only by climate turmoil, as year on year we witness unprecedented 'extreme weather events' driven by global warming: greenhouse gas emissions are rising due

¹ 'Overview' to *Necessary Travel: New Area Studies and Canada in Comparative Perspective*, London: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2018, p4.

² <https://www.cam.ac.uk/news/populism-revealed-as-2017-word-of-the-year-by-cambridge-university-press>



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to the burning of fossil fuels coupled with ongoing intense deforestation; polar ice caps are melting and raising sea levels to threaten coastal and island communities; rising temperatures are causing both drought and wild-fires; unexpectedly heavy precipitation is causing flooding whose effects are exacerbated by both drought and deforestation; and, as a direct result of all of this, there are increasing global food shortages. In fact, the reports from the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) have become increasingly urgent, culminating in 2023 in the declaration by the co-chair Hans-Otto Pörtner that we have only 'a brief and rapidly closing window to secure a liveable future'.³ This growing crisis was the focus of the Green BAAS 2023 BAAS conference panel 'Our House is Still On Fire!', which directly addressed the profound social reverberations we are currently living through, and brought together diverse cultural threads in order to produce a more comprehensive, comparative, and holistic understanding of the climate emergency and human responses to it. The insightful new work presented at this panel by a range of early career American Studies scholars is showcased here, in this special issue of *New Area Studies*.

More specifically, this special issue showcases scholarship that is emerging from a rapidly growing sub-field within American Studies: Environmental American Studies. This exciting and original scholarship draws together the approaches of the fast-developing field of the Environmental Humanities with those of the long-established field of American/Area Studies, to develop established interdisciplinary methods that interrogate the multi-dimensional nature of the climate emergency. Indeed, in their introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*, Stephanie Foote and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen note that scholarship in the field draws on an eclectic mix of methods, critical theories, and topics to create 'riotous theoretical inquiries' that 'challeng[e] the disciplinary conventions that have shaped and limited how we understand and can talk... about' human relationships with our environment.⁴ For Robert S Emmett and David E Nye, the Environmental Humanities are a now 'global

³ See <https://www.ipcc.ch/2022/02/28/pr-wgii-ar6/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CThe%20scientific%20evidence%20is%20unequivocal,%E2%80%9D%20said%20Hans%20Otto%20P%C3%B6rtner>.

⁴ Stephanie Foote and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'Introduction' to *Cambridge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021, p1.

intellectual movement that reconceives the relationship between scientific and technical disciplines and the humanities,' a development that is 'essential to understanding and resolving [the] dilemmas that have been created by industrial society.'⁵ And Ursula Heise notes that the Environmental Humanities 'constitute a fundamental challenge to the understanding of environmental crises as basically techno-scientific, with history and culture added on as secondary complications.'⁶ Rather, the Environmental Humanities 'envision ecological crises fundamentally as questions of socioeconomic inequality, cultural difference, and divergent histories, values, and ethical frameworks' and this is an approach from which 'scientific understanding and technological problem-solving...*stand to gain* by situating themselves in this historical and sociocultural landscape.'⁷ This change in emphasis injects much need 'value' back into the Humanities after decades of governmental and institutional under- or de-valuing, and throws a light upon the kinds of contributions that the Environmental Humanities can make not only to our understandings of cultural responses to and relationships with the natural world, but also to the operations of social and environmental justice and injustice, and its interrelationships with race, gender, and poverty. And this change in emphasis also demonstrates the value of Environmental American Studies to New Area Studies more widely.

New Area Studies' foundational aspiration to respond directly to 'growing complex global challenges' via a 'deep understanding of places and peoples'⁸ is thus reflected in Environmental American Studies' central concern with how the rapid geological and ecological changes of the ongoing climate emergency result in equally rapid socio-political changes. As 'New' Area Studies self-reflexively strives to recognise and address the problematic and often critiqued imperial histories of 'Traditional' Area Studies while extending the field's remit to consider the complex interconnections between various formerly discrete 'areas', so Environmental American Studies seeks to understand how the imperial operation of 'America in the World' contextualises

⁵ Robert S Emmett and David E Nye, 'Introduction' to *The Environmental Humanities: A Critical Introduction*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017, p4.

⁶ Ursula Heise, 'Introduction' to the *Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*, London: Routledge, 2017, p2.

⁷ Heise, *ibid*.

⁸ Heise, *ibid*. p4, emphasis added.

America's role both in contemporary global political instability and the growing political power of global multinational corporations, and in the – often related – climate emergency and its global reverberations. Environmental American Studies scholars remain acutely aware of America's status as 'the world's leading producer of both oil and natural gas' whose greenhouse gas emissions are 'the primary driver of [international] climate change,' and how the US has lagged behind the majority of countries in its response to the climate change, only enacting its first-ever climate legislation – the Inflation Reduction Act – in 2022.⁹ With Donald Trump elected for a second term in 2024 with an even more 'extreme anti-environment' agenda – including 'scrap[ping] government considerations of the damage caused by carbon emissions', 'squash[ing] pollution rules for cars, trucks, and power plants', and 'withdrawing the US again from the Paris climate agreement'¹⁰ – it is safe to say that the climate emergency and America's role within it is increasingly central to our understandings of American politics, culture and international influence.

And, of course, Environmental American Studies in the UK is peopled by British scholars who have an abiding interest in the ecological impact of conducting American Studies scholarship in the UK, and how that might be mitigated. We are increasingly aware of the need to recognise the often problematic relationship between our research and our professional practices that requires us to take responsibility for the complicity of the British Americanist community in contributing to climate change. Moreover, we are increasingly aware of the need to promote a critical engagement with climate accountability within the interlocked and interconnected disciplines of American/Environmental American Studies and New Area Studies. In short, Environmental American Studies is striving to explore new ways of thinking about our political structures, our cultural relationships with our

⁹ See <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-united-states-can-take-climate-change-seriously-while-leading-the-world-in-oil-and-gas-production/>; and <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/08/09/what-the-data-says-about-americans-views-of-climate-change/#:~:text=The%20U.S.%20is%20the%20second,13.5%25%20of%20the%20global%20total.>

¹⁰ See Oliver Milman and Dharna Noor, "'In a Word, horrific': Trump's extreme anti-environment blueprint', *The Guardian*, 6 February, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/feb/06/trump-climate-change-fossil-fuels-second-term>.



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environments, our very *ways of being*, in order to suggest practical and sustainable solutions to the global climate emergency.

This special issue of *New Area Studies* explores America's environmental role in the world, and so engages directly with a key aim of New Area Studies to 'recogni[se]... the state of the world today and its multiple complex challenges.'¹¹ The contributions cover a wealth of topics and approaches that offer a practical demonstration of the breadth of the field, ranging from the photographic projects of the agencies of the New Deal in the 1930s documenting floods, through representations of African American children and their relationships to the outdoors in W.E.B. Du Bois's children's magazine, to Indigenous philosophies on North American land ethics, and a comparative analysis of Indigeneity and environment that reflects on the resonances between India and North America.

We begin with Ananya Mishra's (Queen Mary, London) elegant comparison of the complex relationships between the different forms of Indigenous Land Ethics, as she places Adivasi concepts drawn from the Indian states of Odisha and Jharkhand in direct conversation with those of a range of tribally diverse North American First Nations writers. Tracing the resonances of diverse 'trans-Indigenous spaces', Mishra deftly balances the local with the global, assessing geographically and culturally divergent political constructions/interpretations of 'Indigeneity' and local Indigenous forms of resistance, while remaining mindful of the ways in which 'Indigenous concerns globally are [nonetheless] aligned in the face of a global climate crisis, as they are disproportionately affected due to historical injustices of empire, settler colonial enterprise and caste orders' (Mishra).

Directly related to this is Abigail Morton-Wilcox's (University of East Anglia) thoughtful consideration of how we might decolonise our understandings of climate emergency. Morton-Wilcox traces the operations of kinship and responsibility in North American Indigenous philosophical traditions as ways of understanding and addressing the climate emergency. Drawing from a range of culturally diverse Indigenous writers from the land masses now known as America and Canada, Morton-

¹¹ *Ibid.* p8.



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Wilcox identifies 'care, consent, respect, and reciprocity' as foundational values through which to address and mitigate ongoing climate emergency, and via which further ecological damage can be avoided. Again, a delicate balance is struck between paying attention to Indigenous philosophies without acting in an appropriative manner, and Morton Wilcox's readings act to warn us of the ways in which global climate emergency discourses – both scientific and popular – continue to celebrate carefully selected Indigenous philosophies while deliberately erasing Indigenous presence, resulting in both decontextualisation and recolonisation.

We then move to two USA-focused essays. In the first, Sam Hawksford White (Leverhulme Centre for Water Cultures, University of Hull) explores an original new approach to using photographic sources for a more expansive understanding of how humans impact their environments. Drawing on the still flood photography of two New Deal projects – the Soil Conservation Experiment Station (Missouri) and the Resettlement Administration (Indiana) – Hawksford White considers how 'record photography' can provide more than a simple documentation of environmental events such as floods, but can also be rich sources for recovering 'specific instances of embodied human action' in the context of climate emergency (Hawksford White). And Hawksford White's readings are deployed to offer examples of how American Studies might deploy visual forms of communication in new and exciting ways for environmentally focused projects.

Finally, Katie Taylor (Liverpool John Moore's University) considers the development of African American environmental thought through the medium of the first magazine produced for African American children – W.E.B. Du Bois's children's magazine *The Brownies' Book* – and the ways in which it depicts African American children's relationships to the 'outdoors' and the natural world. Taylor makes a range of pertinent and highly timely connections between the development of environmental thought and racial justice movements, making important connections between the 1920s and the present in terms of the African American experience: where a yearning for the outdoors coupled with its inherent danger speaks directly to the histories of white supremacy and the concomitant historical and contemporary violences directed against black bodies in the United States. Moreover, Taylor carefully situates her own work within a network of related fields – critical race theory, childhood studies,



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environmental studies – that, in their very intersectional complexities, demonstrate the deep relationships between Environmental American Studies and New Area Studies.

Importantly, all four essays begin with highly personal reflections on each academic's own introduction into the field of Environmental American Studies. In speaking of what has inspired them to explore environmental themes, each writer considers how their own works fits into the wider scholarly fields of both American Studies and New Area Studies, and how each might develop productively and in concert in the future to 'explore the local, the global, and the spaces in between'.¹²

¹² Mission statement, *New Area Studies* journal. See <https://newareastudies.com/about>.