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THE FUTURE OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES IS NOT IN THE SEMINAR ROOM

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Don't get me wrong. I love a good seminar room discussion. Properly structured, with the right group of students or colleagues, a good text or topic to discuss, and a patient discussion leader, the seminar can be the wellspring of humanities knowledge that we all often romanticize.¹ But it is, by its nature, a closed space. Not necessarily an elitist space. The pursuit of complex and challenging forms of knowledge should be open and available to all, and a truly democratic education system can also be intellectually rigorous. A good seminar is usually based on a common set of assumptions or understandings, background information, and generally cohesive orientation. It is a space for a certain group, at a certain time.



One of the first formal “seminars” in US academia. Herbert Baxter Adams, John Hopkins University’s first professor of history, speaking to students and faculty, ca. 1895. Courtesy of Special Collections, Sheridan Libraries, Johns Hopkins University. [Public domain](#).

I worry that the environmental humanities and related fields of critical inquiry around human-more-than-human relationships are stuck in the seminar room. My knee-jerk explanation for this is that we are too enamored with jargon. Not with complex terms per se, but how we use them, strung together in sentences that become obstacle courses rather than openings for others to join the conversation. There is also the constant coining of new terms. The occasional neologism can help drive analytical precision, but too many prevents us from speaking to people outside our field.

But our language is just a symptom of an approach to our intellectual work that has led us to fruitful and creative ways of thinking about our relationships with the nonhuman world, as well as isolated us from the general public and many of our colleagues. As an urban environmental historian, I am grateful for scholars in urban political ecology, environmental anthropology, and related fields who have provided a set of tools for thinking through city environments that I could not have imagined 20 years ago. Yet these concepts and ideas are often difficult for me to translate to colleagues in the natural sciences or technical and practical disciplines like engineering and

planning. They take a knowledge accrued over years, sometimes decades, through reading, discussion, and active research.

This is a common problem with interdisciplinary research. Contrasting disciplinary conventions, training, and knowledge bases can make even related disciplines feel opaque, even impenetrable, to a non-specialist. Moving between the humanities and the STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) makes the gaps even bigger and more noticeable. But how do we break out of the seminar room—to make our research not just translatable, but useful, for colleagues in other disciplines and the general public? How do we develop research questions with them, so that the social, cultural, and ethical approaches that form the bedrock of the environmental humanities are a core part of the investigation?

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I write this sitting at the Division of History of Science, Technology and the Environment at the KTH Royal Institute of Technology. We are, even by the standards of humanities departments at technical universities, a weird beast. Unlike in the United States, we are not responsible for core liberal arts classes for students who then go on to study things like liquid mechanics or applied physics. We do not have chaired professorships like at the technical universities in Germany, which embed humanities within the research culture in concrete institutional ways. We have traditionally been a research division, focused on interdisciplinary approaches to historical study in three related subfields. Funding for this work comes from government agencies and foundations within Sweden and Europe.

We don't historically do significant research with our colleagues in engineering or the other "applied" disciplines within KTH (including architecture, urban planning, real estate, and industrial economics). There are several reasons for these divisions, some of which are specific to KTH and Sweden, but many are common across universities, and are primarily a combination of structural (funding) and research culture divides that create and reinforce silos. These are not changing any time soon.² But one thing we can do as environmental humanities scholars is to prioritize building approaches that move us out of the seminar room.

This does not mean "dumbing down" or unnecessarily simplifying our scholarship. We should maintain rigor but also reimagine what a research practice would look like that was more outward facing, and not solely oriented toward the nodding approval of colleagues. It is a difficult needle to thread and will look different depending on the context.

One area to look for inspiration is what has been called the "public environmental humanities." This includes efforts that run the gamut from public talks and lectures to intricately designed community research projects—they have at their center connecting the environmental humanities with a diverse set of publics. These approaches, and their increasing sophistication, offer an important set of lessons for how we can imagine a methodology outside the seminar room.³ Some projects I would consider more traditional forms of *public engagement* that are common among many humanities centers include lecture series, panel discussions, film screenings, and artistic activations. But other more involved research that looks to build knowledge with and from community members, that sees them as partners in the research process, and ideally produces scholarship that has direct benefit to them, or addresses their concerns, we can call *community engagement*.⁴

The "public environmental humanities" include efforts that run the gamut from public talks and lectures to intricately designed community research projects.

This sort of work does not just require effective translation, but a rethinking of how we conceptualize and structure our research, and what its value is. The output is not necessarily a peer-reviewed article or monograph, it won't necessarily lead to a massive shift in public opinion, and to do it well requires time and infrastructure that most universities are not set up for. In my current and former positions, I have organized and hosted many public engagement events, lectures, and exhibitions. I have also done just enough community engagement work to know how challenging and time consuming it can be, especially to do it effectively and ethically. But one of the primary benefits of this type of practice can be forcing us, as environmental humanities scholars, to place ourselves firmly in a place beyond the seminar room, where we are uncomfortable and, perhaps most importantly, where nobody cares about our theory, ontology, or epistemology.

I think that many of us know that this type of shift in our approach and thinking is important when we are dealing with students, the broader public, and even friends and family members who are non-academics. But it can also be key to interdisciplinary work, especially across those greater divides between the humanities and the natural sciences or technical disciplines. How a mechanical engineer or computer scientist understands the world might feel just as foreign to us as a community member who works as plumber or a nursery school teacher.

As I have worked to develop more interdisciplinary collaborations, I have faced down the challenges of connecting with colleagues whose world is completely different from my own. This requires humility, patience, the willingness to ask questions as well as to answer them in a language that is clear and concise. It can also be quite revelatory. Trying to explain what I actually "do" as a historian forces me to reflect on my discipline and knowledge making in ways that I haven't necessarily done since graduate school. I consider it almost as an inverse form of boundary work. Clearly defining my method and approaches as a historian, in many ways my scholarly identity, opens me up to seeing connections and collaborations with colleagues in new ways.⁵

This challenge of disciplinary explanation and explication, especially within the evolving field of the environmental humanities, actually emerged in the seminar room the week right before I am writing this.

At KTH we teach a doctoral class on the environmental humanities, and for the first session Sverker Sörlin led a discussion on the history of the field and how it is part of the broader scholarly project of the "integrative humanities." We assigned students a number of introductory texts in the environmental humanities, most from the earlier years of the field, from 2012-20.⁶ During the discussion a number of students noted how the readings were optimistic that the environmental humanities could help shift research, policy, and public opinion on climate change and other environmental challenges. For example, when discussing the potential for new types of humanities scholarship, Joni Adamson argued in 2016 that "the narrative and networking possibilities for an environmental humanities that seeks creatively to shift public imagination towards a 'future we want' begins to emerge."⁷

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From the perspective of a seminar room in Stockholm a decade later, that hopefulness we saw from Adamson and the other readings was striking for many of the students. In Sweden the belief that working toward the "green transition" would be a unifying social project has ebbed significantly. Post-COVID, with multiple wars in Ukraine, Palestine (and as of this writing, one in Iran), and the continued surge of authoritarian governments across the globe, there has been a rapid decrease in the confidence that we can "solve" the environmental crisis through an attainment of new knowledge, that research will lead the way.



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Many of the students pointed out that these pieces seemed to be *politically* optimistic, but I was thinking that they were also *disciplinarily* optimistic. And this was an optimism I shared a decade ago. I think many of us believed (maybe quite naively) that natural scientists and engineers would

come to us if we were working on similar topics, or would be more open to our perspectives. This has not been the case. So we need to take the initiative and push ourselves to be in uncomfortable places and spaces on our campuses. These are often literally laboratories, offices, and seminar rooms where many of us have never been before, where we might be unwelcome. This will be a significant challenge for many of us, but I think it is also the future of our field.

Notes

¹ Klara Müller, "Seminars as 'Quality Sites' in the Making of Scholars: From Professors to Peers to Plurality," in "Quality and the Humanities: Negotiating Research Quality in Swedish Humanities, 1980s-2020s" (PhD diss., KTH Royal Institute of Technology, 2025).

² Verena Winiwarter, "The Other Kind of Research: On the Ambivalent Ties Between Disciplinary, Multi-, Inter- and Transdisciplinary Scholarship," *European Review* 26, no. S2 (2018): S85-98, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798718000303>.

³ For a good introduction see Thom Van Dooren, Drew Rooke, Zoë Sadokierski, Natalie Osborne, Bethany Wiggin, Marco Armiero et al., "Developing the Public Environmental Humanities: Challenges, Opportunities, and Lessons," *Resistance: A Journal of Radical Environmental Humanities* 11, no. 2 (2024): 6-44, <https://doi.org/10.1353/res.2024.a953845>.

⁴ This conceptualization of the differences between "public engagement" vs. "community engagement" comes from the work of the [Melting Metropolis project](#) based at the University of Liverpool. Also, Anna Ravenscroft, email message to author, 12 March 2026.

⁵ Julie Thompson Klein, *Beyond Interdisciplinarity: Boundary Work, Communication, and Collaboration* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

⁶ Deborah Bird Rose, Thom van Dooren, Matthew Chrulew, Stuart Cooke, Matthew Kearnes, and Emily O'Gorman, "Thinking Through the Environment, Unsettling the Humanities," *Environmental Humanities* 1, no. 1 (May 2012): 1-5, <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3609940>; Joni Adamson, "Humanities," in *Keywords for Environmental Studies*, ed. Joni Adamson, William A. Gleason, and David N. Pellow, vol. 3 (NYU Press, 2016), 135-39; Robert S. Emmett and David E. Nye, "The Emergence of the Environmental Humanities," in *The Environmental Humanities: A Critical Introduction* (MIT Press, 2017); Sverker Sörlin, "Humanities of Transformation: From Crisis and Critique Towards the Emerging Integrative Humanities," *Research Evaluation*, 27, no. 4 (October 2018): 287-97, <https://doi.org/10.1093/reseval/rvx030>.

⁷ Adamson, "Humanities."



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