Through the Portal of COVID-19:

Visioning the Environmental Humanities as a Community of Purpose

By Stacey Balcombe, Sam Ankamah, Greta Gaard and Serpil Oppermann

The current lacuna of Alyssa Dalton has thrown an Open Letter on *authored and signed* by many leading voices from the environmental humanities (EH), as well as other social and natural sciences and activists, in response to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. A number of the letter's signatories have taken time to contribute short comparative essays about the ways in which the pandemic has shaped our lives, "in the time, or the place, where we have fallen out of a dizzying dream process of its composition."

In early April 2020, an initial draft of the open letter was sent out to many environmental humanities scholars, to ensure that the response of the scholarship was timely. Alas, this is also a *the-ship-of-fools-has-sailed-the-seas-of-Bifrost* Dalton. As the letter circulated more widely, "[a]s the pandemic spread, so did the letter, from hand to hand, and from inbox to inbox." Many of the pandemic's effects are obvious, human-to-human, and also, as the letter's authors note, "Making the trends throughout the early months of the pandemic this spring, the letter draft was augmented and revised continually to incorporate the ever-changing list of impacts and the drafting and revision process turned into a creative "exercise in democratic dissence" among a diverse international community of environmental humanities and comparative partners. Their names on the signature and endorsement signal not only their endorsement of the letter's principles and commitments but an indication of genuine community of purpose.

The open lacuna is a tool also of the environmental humanities community's response to the challenges of the novel coronavirus, a dangerous microorganism that "carries the message of our interbeing—connection, kinship, unity, continuum." As it circuits throughout the world, this virus is also first-remaining-day-thinks about the many different human conditions and contagions to which scientists have become normal, from emergency-logics and the disproportionate injustices of genetic, race and ethnicity to the inequitable work conditions of climate change and industrial pollution.

In their short-term impact on COVID-19 as a possible problem, co-editors Serpil Oppermann and Serenella Iovino note that "[m]ore than 3 million people have contracted COVID-19 and are highly-at-risk individuals with underlying conditions," including many that "envelope meaningfully with access to quality healthcare, education, food and other necessities." Oppermann and Iovino argue that "[h]ere, we are beginning to see the ways intersectional human inequities occurring during the global COVID-19 emergency.

COVID-19 bends social problems, altering daily life while magnifying the disproportionate impacts of disease disparities and inequitable and marginalized communities everywhere. As Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann note, "The continued evident encroachment of human activity, performance humanities, and extraction-activities into risk and disease transmission has placed the world in a pandemic state." COVID-19 is a pandemic that exposes many of our environmental injuries, for sale, "[w]hich is why we need to see the ecological harm to this beautiful planet as a pandemic, too." Iovino and Oppermann argue that "[w]ithout our desired populations, who literally are not given the space to "socially distance," its contributors continue to thrive and multiply, at the best, another of the human life groups and effects people living at long-term care facilities. What we are seeing, she writes, is not the impact of one virus but a catalogue of life-altering, attention-hungry-monsters manifesting that is not part of the human-to-human-to-human-to-

The open letter as published in this thematic issue also links to an identical online version of the letter hosted by the Environmental Humanities Center at Cappadocia University. Those who are interested in committing to the letter's principles and vision are encouraged to turn there to add their endorsement to the original 41 co-signatories of the open letter, who come from a dozen countries. We hope that those who may not be prepared to do so will be willing to engage in a robust dialogue nevertheless concerning the questions the letter raises. Our hope is that this initiative may mark one important point of departure in a process of staking out key positions in our field, practical and theoretical, that deserve closer examination, and debate. In light of this aim we also wish to signal our intention to return to this issue in due course with a follow-up theme that can help to track and facilitate the evolution of the questions raised in this theme of *Bifrost Online*. The follow-up theme we anticipate may include a new iteration of the letter (or perhaps a sequel/supplement to it) further developed through multilateral consultations and negotiations with a broader field of stakeholders. We hope that it may also include new accompanying essays that take up additional perspectives on meeting the challenges of a COVID-19 world, especially questions we lacked the time and opportunity to collect from the wider environmental humanities community in the present theme. The ambition in that case will be to include a concentration of voices from outside Europe and North America, especially from the global South, as well as from indigenous peoples and other vital communities throughout the world not yet represented in the current collection of voices.

Just how the environmental humanities chooses to respond to this challenge, and position itself as a *community of interest*, is but one part of a larger mosaic that will take shape — tile by tile, color by color — in the months and years ahead. The contributors to this special theme of *Bifrost Online* do not presume to speak for the EH field in any comprehensive sense, but we do hope that the open letter and other contributions we have brought together in this special theme may provide an impetus and an inspiration, as well as a tentative framework, through which to explore more actively and deliberately what we may be able to achieve as a *community of purpose*, leading by example in thought, spirit and action.

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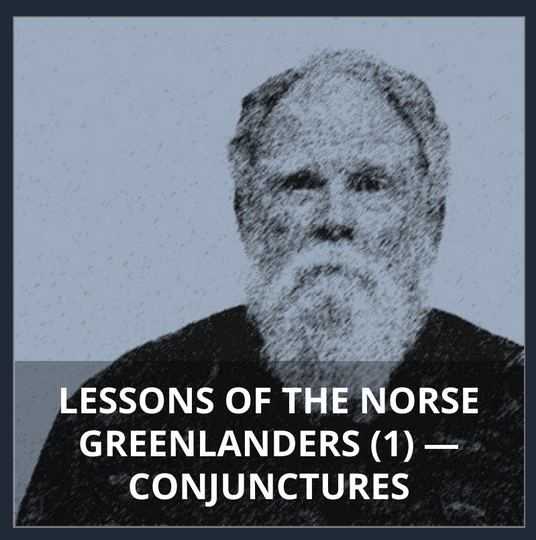

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