



ECOCENE

CAPPADOCIA JOURNAL OF ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES



Volume 1/ Issue 1/June 2020

Environmental Humanists Respond to the World Scientists' Warning to Humanity



The Sense of Place at the End of the World

Stephanie Foote

West Virginia University, USA
stephanie.foote@mail.wvu.edu
ORCID: 0000-0001-7124-1459

Foote, Stephanie. 2020. "The Sense of Place at the End of the World." *Ecocene: Cappadocia Journal of Environmental Humanities* 1, no. 1 (June): 52-58.
<https://doi.org/10.46863/ecocene.2020.6>.

Research Article/ Received: 07.05.2020 /Accepted: 08.06.2020

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.



The Sense of Place at the End of the World

by Stephanie Foote



Abstract

This article discusses the 2017 document “World Scientists’ Warning to Humanity: A Second Notice” in relationship to the daily life of Appalachia, one of the United States’ most resource rich and yet economically poorest regions.

Keywords: Energy Humanities, Appalachia, ordinary life



About the Author

Stephanie Foote is the Jackson and Nichols Chair of English at West Virginia University. She is the author of numerous books and articles and is the co-founder and co-editor of Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities. She is currently co-editing The Cambridge Companion to Environmental Humanities with Jeffrey J Cohen, and is also completing The Art of Waste, a project about waste and literature. Her work has been supported by fellowships from the NEH, the Mellon Foundation, the National Humanities Center, and the Carnegie Foundation.

The Sense of Place at the End of the World

Stephanie Foote

The 2017 “World Scientists’ Warning to Humanity: A Second Notice” closes with thirteen “diverse and effective steps humanity can take to transition to sustainability,” ranging from restoring native plant communities to advancing education and reproductive rights, especially for women, to strengthening infrastructures for food production and distribution (Ripple et al., 1026). The short manifesto, endorsed by more than 15,000 signatories, is a response to the global failure to address climate change, the immiserating effects of which were clearly anticipated in the first 1992 warning. Implementing the 2017 recommendations is now even more urgent and would require an unprecedented level of economic and political cooperation across existing governmental and cultural structures, as well as an unprecedented level of cooperation between government agencies and corporate interests.

Most of the paper’s recommendations target large-scale changes in economic and political life, yet the authors also assert that individual subjects must “change [their] individual behaviors” (1026), an argument linked to their contention—or perhaps their hope—that citizen activism can change the direction of government and corporate will. Whether on-the-ground activist organizing or a sudden and unlikely corporate awakening catalyze the necessary systemic economic changes required to confront climate change, it is clear that any change in global business as usual will be felt and experienced most directly and deeply at the level of the local. It will, that is, inevitably bring to the forefront the broken promises and ravenous extractive logic of a biopolitical capitalism that has secured an abstract human flourishing through relentless extractive economies. Those economies have scarred the political process of every country on the globe, contaminated the quality of food, water, air, and soil, and left less tangible but no less destructive traces on the flourishing of local cultures and places.

The cultural and material effects of extractive economies that fuel global capitalism are experienced unequally. Their harms fall most seriously, as all scholars of environmental humanities know, on people of color, on women, on citizens of emerging economies, and on the refugees, which extractive economic orders must create in order to thrive. I write this essay in the United States, which is by any measure among the most gluttonous countries on the planet, consuming endless amounts of raw material and energy and producing an unrivalled level of *per capita* pollution. The US's relatively high standard of living is precisely what provides me the luxury of critiquing it, the luxury of being interpellated by the "World Scientists' Warning to Humanity" report as one of the *we* who not only should, but can afford to change my habits of consumption, who not only should, but is able to devote time, money, and energy to considering planetary and local matters all at once.

But I also write this essay in West Virginia. West Virginia's population is around 1.7 million people. To put that into perspective, it's close to the population of Manhattan, and about half the population of Brooklyn, NY. West Virginia is, according to the most recent measurements, one of the five most impoverished states in the US, and among the most environmentally and economically decimated by the decline of coal mining and the rise of fracking. While it historically produced the raw material that fueled the hyper-development of the United States in the twentieth century, it has not shared the US's steady rise in quality of life as measured by increased education, income, and longevity. It is also a stunningly beautiful state; its inhabitants care about its wild spaces, its cultural heritage, and its tradition of unions and collective organizing. I love living here.

West Virginia is also the only one of the 50 states in the US to be wholly in Appalachia. Appalachia is much in the news lately in the United States; it has become the bellwether region for all of the country's most intractable economic and social problems. From JD Vance's 2016 *Hillbilly Elegy* to Elizabeth Catte's sharp rejoinder to Vance in her *What You are Getting Wrong About Appalachia* (2018), understanding the ravaged landscape and cultures of Appalachia seems to be critical for understanding what has gone wrong in the twilight of the decaying American empire. But Appalachia, as scholars like Emily Satterwhite have argued, has always been both the warning sign of decline as well as the site of extraordinary tenderness for a more authentic rural culture, or a more free way of life, or a more intense relationship to the natural world.¹ It is a region that is on the one hand insistently material as well as insistently abstract and nostalgic; it is sign and warning of decline, example of destructive social and economic policies, and home to the effects of some of the most persistent economic and environmental damage in the nation. How is it, critics ask, that the poorest region in

the US, abandoned by the coal industry and left in a state of economic stagnation, has forgotten its history of labor unions? Of collective organizing? Why did it vote overwhelmingly for Trump, who believes that everything is a resource to be appropriated and used—money, people, nature, animals. Who took advantage of a global pandemic to loosen environmental regulations across the board? Why, critics ask, would Appalachia vote against its own interests?

Answering these questions, according to political pundits, would reveal not just the secret of Appalachia, but the way that the population of one region would choose to identify with a larger we that does not have its best interests at heart. It would reveal how the process of living daily, ordinary life deliberately overlooks or ignores larger structural problems that the “World Scientists Report” reminds us are about to blow apart the world as we know it.

Let me offer a few statistics. At the time of this essay’s composition, Appalachia has been ravaged not simply by environmental devastation caused by the surge in fracking and the remains of the coal industry, it has been ravaged by what are known as “diseases of despair”—drug and alcohol poisoning and alcoholic liver disease and cirrhosis (Joint Economic Committee 2019).² In particular, the opioid crisis in which an unprecedented flood of prescription pain relief pills were prescribed, often leading to heroin use as patients struggled to find cheaper ways to stave off “dope sickness” has caused untold misery in Appalachia. A recent report from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (2020) reports that “West Virginia has the highest age-adjusted rate of drug overdose deaths involving opioids. In 2017, there were 833 drug overdose deaths involving opioids in West Virginia—a rate of 49.6 deaths per 100,000 persons. This is the double the rate in 2010 and threefold higher than the national rate of 14.6 deaths per 100,000 persons.” *The Washington Post* and the *Charleston Gazette-Mail’s* reporting on the opioid crisis revealed that the region has been the site of profound exploitation by drug companies, which released over 76 billion prescription opioids nation-wide between 2006–2012, many of which went to Appalachia, which became not only one of the nation’s heaviest using regions, but the site of an extraordinary number of pill mills and distribution points for the Northeast (Higham, Horwitz, and Rich 2019; Eyre 2019).³

As one journalist puts it, “How and why Appalachia became the epicenter of the epidemic is partly due to the real need for painkillers among workers hurt in coal mines and in other types of physically demanding jobs” (Achenbach et al. 2019).⁴ Yet as virtually every serious study of the problem recounts, the diseases of despair were enabled by a virtually unregulated system of drug companies who took advantage of the problems of Appalachia to overprescribe opioids, making massive profits along the way. Though some drug companies, as well as various pharmacists and physicians have been

punished, the root causes of addiction in Appalachia have gone unaddressed and unhealed.

In real ways, the opioid epidemic is part of a broader extractive economy that uses the landscape, culture, and residents of Appalachia as raw material from which to extort profits. Yet in West Virginia some people still hold out hope for the return of a coal mining industry that provided, for a brief sliver of time, a middle-class life for its workers, but whose operations have been largely automated. Mountain top removal and fracking (which have caused massive disasters ranging from lethal mudslides to the poisoning of wells) have replaced the miner who works in deep mines. Impoverished and seemingly left behind, Appalachia is still where energy comes from, but more people work in Walmart, the state of West Virginia's largest employer, than are employed in the coal industry. Despite the promises of Donald Trump, who has assured Appalachians that coal is coming back, the energy industry in Appalachia is enriching only corporations while polluting the air, water, and land of the citizens who believe that leasing their mineral rights to fracking corporations will make them financially comfortable.

The arguments made in the “World Scientists’ Warning to Humanity: A Second Notice” are on the one hand unobjectionable in their aims, and on the other, not easy to reconcile with life as it is lived in Appalachia. The example of Appalachia demonstrates that the coherence of even a rich world country is produced not by the homogeneity of its population but by the global reach of its corporations. Appalachia is most definitely not a rich world country, but it is nestled within one, and has been serially exploited by it to provide energy, fuel, and in some sense, an abstracted and ugly political other. There is something, that is, in the sweeping nature of the common humanity poignantly invoked by the “World Scientists’ Warning” that erases how much the people in Appalachia have already given to the citizens of the rich world of which it is nominally a part. And there is something in the uneasy tension between the common humanity the article relies on and the exploitation that was done in the name of bringing Appalachia into the nation’s prosperity through new forms of extraction that have fueled the extraordinary right-wing politics of the area.

I offer the statistics about drug use and environmental exploitation in my region of the United States not to flatten the region into a haunting mirror image of the rich world’s prosperity. Appalachian energies are not simply in its natural resources and its fossil fuels; its histories and cultures are vibrant and lively and ongoing. They are not just about survival but about resilience. But if we look at the granular data about Appalachia’s most serious problems as opposed to the large-scale data supplied by the “World Scientists’ Warning,” we can get a better sense of what it means to live in a

hard present that perhaps feels easier than the very hard future that is right around the corner. Arlie Hochschild's recent book *Strangers in Their Own Land* (2016) asked a similar question about voters who seemed to be bargaining away an environmental and planetary future—one to which they are personally committed—to guarantee marginal livelihoods that have polluted their bodies and communities. The map of the world, she discovered, was a felt map of local customs and values, a felt map of clean places and communities that citizens believed they were fighting to protect even as they could see those places dissolving. There was always another future just around the corner. That paradox, among many others, showed her, and us, how and why the data the world's scientists produce might seem unreal to the people who are overwhelmed by other kinds of *data*—lost jobs, lives, livelihoods, practices, and a sense that they have not been valued as “planetary citizens” but devalued as statistical problems.

Environmental humanists have paid close attention to the way that universalizing narratives about the subject have reified the division between the human and the nonhuman world, erasing the agency of the nonhuman and reducing it to mere resource to be managed, contained, or exploited. And environmental humanists have also paid close attention to the way that racial suffering and justice claims must underwrite how we understand the interrelationship between material and metaphor, between a nature that is always overwritten by culture, by a culture that is always underwritten by a drive to exploit the nature it claims to value.

Environmental humanists, especially those working in the field of energy humanities, have also tried to understand the long histories of how we have lived with fossil fuels, how they have shaped our art, our cultures, our histories, our anxieties, and even our hope for a radical future. Stephanie LeMenager (2014) notes that “the world itself writes oil, you and I write it” (11). In Appalachia, coal has written and unwritten the world, and coal is, like oil, a geoarchive of the planet and the region's history. It has driven a fantasized history of the future, one that only came to pass for some people, and it helped to drive the planet to the brink of catastrophe. It is critical that when academics read documents like “The World Scientists' Report” that we remember where we are when we read it, that we understand how abstract and unreal its urgent and important data might seem to some people, that we think and understand the real and imaginary losses that *already* structure the lives of people who bear the weight of extractive industries.

Those losses, and that grief, are also *data* about how different people are living at the ends of many kinds of worlds, some of which are disappearing faster than the planet seems to be failing. Expertise in loss and grief is not the same as expertise in large-scale modeling, of course. But if we want to bring everyone into the future, it has to be a

future in which there is room to map and remember the different worlds we might be mourning and celebrating when we wake up and follow the advice of the worlds' scientists.

Notes

¹ See J.D. Vance's (2016) *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and a Culture in Crisis*; Elizabeth Catte's (2018) *What You are Getting Wrong About Appalachia*; and Emily Satterwhite's (2011) *Dear Appalachia: Readers, Identity, and Popular Culture Since 1878*. For more on the history of Appalachia, see Steven Stoll's (2017) *Ramp Hollow: The Ordeal of Appalachia*.

² "Diseases of despair" is a common phrase that has been mobilized by public policy experts. More on current trends in deaths of despair can be found in "Long-Term Trends in Deaths of Despair" (September 5, 2019), the Joint Economic Report of the United States Congress.

³ For more on the epidemic, see *The Washington Post's* special report (Higham, Horwitz, and Rich 2019) on opioids, which gives a granular account of exactly how many pills were distributed, county by county. Including maps, data sets, and investigative reporting, the Post's work stands as the best account of the crisis.

⁴ The opioid crisis in Appalachia has been addressed in Eric Eyre's (2020) *Death in Mudlick: A Coal Country Fight Against the Drug Companies that Delivered the Opioid Crisis*. Eyre is the Pulitzer Prize winning reporter who uncovered the scale of the crisis in West Virginia.

References

- Achenbach, Joel, Joyce Koh, Dalton Bennett, and Melina Mara. 2019. "Flooded with Opioids, Appalachia is Still Trying to Recover." *Washington Post*, July 24, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/flooded-with-opioids-appalachia-is-still-trying-to-recover/2019/07/24/26607328-ad4a-11e9-a0c9-6d2d7818f3da_story.html. Last accessed February 26, 2020.
- Catte, Elizabeth. 2018. *What You are Getting Wrong About Appalachia*. Cleveland, Ohio: Belt Publishing.
- Eyre, Eric. 2019. "Court Orders Release of Previously Secret Reports on Opioid Sales." *Charleston Gazette-Mail*, November 6, 2019. https://www.wvgazette.com/news/health/court-orders-release-of-previously-secret-reports-on-opioid-sales/article_d5298955-a654-5580-a649-0382124065fa.html. Accessed June 8, 2020.
- Eyre, Eric. 2020. *Death in Mudlick: A Coal Country Fight Against the Drug Companies that Delivered the Opioid Crisis*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Higham, Scott, Sari Horwitz, and Steven Rich. 2019. "76 Billion Opioid Pills: Newly Released Federal Data Unmasks the Epidemic." *Washington Post*, July 16, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/76-billion-opioid-pills-newly-released-federal-data-unmasks-the-epidemic/2019/07/16/5f29fd62-a73e-11e9-86dd-d7f0e60391e9_story.html.
- Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 2016. *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. New York: The New Press.

- Joint Economic Committee (JEC) of the United States Congress. 2019. *Long-Term Trends in Deaths of Despair*. SCP Report No. 4–19. Washington, DC: Dirksen Senate Office.
https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/republicans/2019/9/long-term-trends-in-deaths-of-despair#_ednl
- LeMenager, Stephanie. 2014. *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA). 2020. *West Virginia: Opioid-Involved Deaths and Related Harms*. Accessed June 8, 2020. <https://www.drugabuse.gov/opioid-summaries-by-state/west-virginia-opioid-summary>.
- Ripple, William J., Christopher Wolf, Thomas M. Newsome, Mauro Galetti, Mohammed Alamgir, Eileen Crist, Mahmoud I. Mahmoud, and William F. Laurance. 2017. “World Scientists’ Warning to Humanity: A Second Notice.” *BioScience* 67, no. 12 (December): 1026–28. <https://doi.org/10.1093/biosci/bix125>.
- Satterwhite, Emily. 2011. *Dear Appalachia: Readers, Identity, and Popular Culture Since 1878*. Lexington, Kentucky: U of Kentucky Press.
- Stoll, Steven. 2017. *Ramp Hollow: The Ordeal of Appalachia*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Vance, J.D. 2016. *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and a Culture in Crisis*. New York: Harper Publishing.