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Intersectionality and the Environmental Humanities: Notes on Elisions and Encounters

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Miriam Tola
University of Lausanne, Switzerland

Abstract

This article explores how intersectional approaches can contribute to the rapidly expanding field of the environmental humanities and, in turn, how intersectionality can benefit from insights from environmental humanities scholarship. The essay interrogates the construction and orientation of the environmental humanities through the specific perspective of intersectionality that allows to consider the co-constitution of gender, race, class, sexuality and species. Through the qualitative analysis of key texts, the article shows that field-shaping narratives in environmental humanities invite to move beyond human exceptionalism but tend to sidestep the analysis of interconnected relations of race, gender and class that structure the hegemonic model of the human. Addressing this elision, the article turns to research that creatively deploys capacious intersectional perspectives to grasp the connections between gender, race, species and environmental violence. It argues that while intersectionality remains underexplored in the prevalent narratives of

Corresponding Author:
Miriam Tola
University of Lausanne, Switzerland
miriam.tola@unil.ch

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environmental humanities, a growing body of work enacts intersectional environmental humanities. This work productively mobilizes expansive notions of intersectionality to advance the analysis of the connections between intra-human inequalities and human/nonhuman hierarchies and, in turn, brings more-than-human constellations into intersectionality scholarship.

Keywords: intersectionality, environmental humanities, environmental justice, racial ecologies.

1. Introduction

The goal of this article is to bring into conversation intersectionality scholarship and the environmental humanities. It explores how intersectional approaches can contribute to this burgeoning interdisciplinary field and, in turn, how intersectionality can benefit from insights from environmental humanities scholarship. In the last decade, the environmental humanities and social sciences have become increasingly visible through institutional programs, international journals, book series, conferences and creative multimodal projects. The field has grown substantially in Australia, Nord America and Northern Europe and a range of initiatives have emerged in the Southern hemisphere[1]. Research in this expanding area of inquiry investigates cultural narratives, political discourses, meaning-making practices, embodied experiences and structures of feeling related to environmental matters.

[1] Initiatives in the Global South include Environmental Humanities South, a research unit at the University of Cape Town, launched in 2014; the journal *Tekoporá. Revista Latinoamericana de Humanidades Ambientales*, based at Universidad de la República (Uruguay) since 2019; the online platform Humanidades Ambientales (https://www.humanidadesambientales.com) linking researchers across Latin America and beyond.

Writings on "vibrant matter", "trans-corporeality" and "multispecies kinship" (Bennett 2010; Alaimo 2010; Haraway 2008, 2016), have called into question the hierarchical divide between subject and object, society and nature, human and nonhuman. These concepts have illuminated the entanglement between human bodies and a more-than-human world percolating with agencies. They have questioned the hegemonic model of human as bounded figure entitled to control living and nonliving nature. Yet, the racial, gender and class politics that structure dominant conceptions of the human remain still underexplored within debates on multispecies relations.

Intersectionality is an ubiquitous concept in gender studies and allied fields. It has emerged from the rich genealogies of Black feminism and women and queer of color theorizing to address mutually constituting structures of domination. Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) formulation of intersectionality has highlighted the invisibility of Black women in the US legal system that treats discrimination based on racism as distinct from discrimination based on gender. Over the years, this term has traveled across disciplines and geopolitical spaces, circulating beyond the university, in street activism and popular discourse through social media.

The uses and misuses of intersectionality have been widely debated (Puar 2012; Collins and Bilge 2016; Cooper 2016; Davis 2020). In this paper I am inspired by Jennifer Nash's (2019) bold reworking of intersectionality. Considering the complexities of this analytic, Nash reframes it as an anti-subordination project that has a specific genealogy but cultivates a radical openness to a variety of expressions. What she advocates is a notion of intersectionality that is mobile and deterritorialized enough to speak to "women of color" broadly (Nash 2019, 104) rather that proposing Black women as prototypical embodiment of the intersection of race and gender[2]. This broad conception of intersectionality allows to explore intimacies between Black and transnational feminisms, two feminist strands that,

[2] On these questions see Nash 2017, 94-110.

particularly in the United States, have been constructed as having distinct and at times diverging political trajectories. As a porous, unsettled and unsettling category, intersectionality allows to interrogate the uneven effects of co-constituting power formations including race, gender, sexuality and class. It interrogates racial formations, racial privilege and whiteness, including white feminism's silences and exclusions, while at the same time posing the difficult challenge of forging political solidarities across differences.

Intersectionality scholarship in gender studies and feminist theory, including Nash's work, has often prioritized race, gender and class as dimensions of power operating in the domain of the social, often leaving unchallenged assumptions about nature as the passive backdrop of power struggles that are limited to humans. From an environmental humanities perspective, debates on intersectionality have long "tended to stick to a problematic anthropocentrism, not taking power differentials along the lines of human/earth others axis into account" (Lykke 2009, 42).

Complicating this tendency, the US-based scholars Claire Jean Kim and Carla Freccero (2013) discuss the usefulness of intersectionality to connect the hierarchical ordering of species difference to other forms of domination. In a dialogue introducing *American Quarterly's* special issue focusing on the nexus between race, sex and species, they address "intersectionality" together with the concepts of "coarticulation" and "co-constitution" and understand them as "provisional guides" that allow to grapple with tensions and contradictions even as they cannot fully resolve them. These concepts allow:

> to see the trees and the forest at the same time. By spotlighting the particularity of each axis of power while also illuminating the structural relationships among axes, they deepen our understanding of the complexity, multidimensionality, messiness and intractability of domination (Kim and Freccero 2013, 465).

From this angle, race, gender, sexuality, class, and species "are not analogous formations" (Kim and Freccero 2013, 468) but have localized instantiations and are not always operative together[3]. Using the concepts of intersectionality, coarticulation, co-constitution points to the impossibility of each to explain all categories of power at all times and everywhere. Even as these frames help to recognize how supremacies are intertwined, they might not be able to account for shifting modes of togetherness and becoming. In short, employing these frameworks requires specificity and a spirit of open inquiry to acknowledge their potentials and shortcomings in the analysis of a situated experiences of power, resistance and the creation of modes of living otherwise.

As a white feminist scholar of environmental humanities trained in the United States and working in Europe, a geopolitical context where racial formations, racialization processes and racial privilege continue to be largely unaccounted for within and beyond the university, I find intersectionality a generative framework for interrogating persisting cleavages of race, gender and class within the human while at the same time critically addressing distinctions between humans and nonhumans. Following Nash's refreshing account of intersectionality as well as Kim and Freccero's nuanced conceptualization of the potentials and limits of the concept, this article explores how expansive intersectional approaches and the environmental humanities can interrogate each other, fostering dialogues to grapple with the acceleration of socio-ecological precarity and its differential distribution across populations. Bringing these fields in conversation throws into relief how the co-constituting forms of violence that provoke environmental harm are the same ones that reproduce historical inequalities. If, as environmental humanists argue, tackling the planetary impasse requires transforming human/nonhuman relations to undo ongoing processes that reduce nature to resources, and if, as scholars of

[3] For another intersectional intervention in the field of Critical Animal Studies see also the edited volume *The Intersectionality of Critical Animal, Disability, and Environmental Studies* (2017).

intersectionality contend, inequalities among human beings are mutually forming and compounded in lived experience, it seems that these approaches have something to offer to each other.

This essay offers a preliminary assessment of the elisions as well as encounters between intersectionality and the environmental humanities. In doing so, it acknowledges the feminist perspectives within the field that have argued for combining the analysis of oppression and inequality with the exploration of more-than-human relations. Scholars including Catriona Sandilands (2017), Greta Gaard (2014) Jennifer Hamilton and Astrida Neimanis (2018), have touched on intersectionality as valuable conceptual tool for producing insights on multispecies relations in a warming planet. This article extends this work by paying special attention to racial formations, racializing processes and racial privileges that merit further consideration in order to make the environmental humanities into a commons for thinking and acting together in a damaged planet (LeMenager and Footie 2014). Interrogating the construction and orientation of the field through the specific perspective of intersectionality, the article centers Black feminist, women and queer of color perspectives for understanding dominant formations of the human in relation to the the material world. To be clear, intersectionality is not the only analytic capable of doing so. Other concepts can perform valuable work in this sense[4] but my point here is to emphasize the intersectional environmental humanities as an approach that increases attention to how social differences are embedded in socio-ecological relations.

[4] An excellent resource in this sense is the thematic issue on Global Black Ecologies of the journal *Environment & Society* edited by Justin Hosbey, Hilda Lloréns and J.T. Roane (2022). The authors offer "Black ecology" as a framework for challenging "the enduring evasion of the insights of Black histories, Black intellectual thought, Black social and political movements, and Black studies within the theoretical and conceptual edificies of the disciplinary formations associated with 'environmental humanities,' 'environmental social sciences,' 'environmental science,' and related fields" (2). Black ecologies indexes, on the one hand, forms of extractivism and disposability targeting racialized bodies and land, and, on the other hand, the alternative ecological practices and visions of Afro-diasporic and other racialized communities.

The stakes are real: with the acceleration of climate change and overlapping ecological crises, more frequent extreme weather events, environmental disasters and industrial hazards expose populations made vulnerable by various social differences to increased risks and burdens. As struggles for socio-environmental justice intensify, adopting porous intersectional perspectives in the environmental humanities might contribute not just to advancing scholarship but also the practices and imaginaries of collectives that, in varied geopolitical contexts, refuse to adapt to the uneven effects of ecological unraveling.

The article begins by offering a brief overview of the environmental humanities. It explores the extent to which intersectionality and closely related concepts have or have not been circulating in the "origin stories" and the "imagined futures" of the field (Hamilton and Neimanis 2018). Specifically, it looks at the inaugural issues of established journals and at handbooks, companions and introductory volumes. These publications work as "gatekeepers" shaping communities of interest and references (Müller 2021). The journal's inaugural issues are relevant for establishing "origin stories", tracing the emergence of the field and its genealogies. The handbooks, companions and introductory volumes are the product of practices of selection that shape the field's state-of-the-art and identify new research directions. The scope of my analysis here is limited mainly to established anglophone publications that have a central role in shaping the field. More research will be needed to assess the contributions emerging from marginalized sites of knowledge production and challenging the priorities of a relatively new research area with respect to the imbrications of gender, race and the politics of nature.

While limited and specific in its geographic and epistemic scope, the qualitative analysis of key texts in this article shows that "origin stories" in the environmental humanities invite to move beyond human exceptionalism and yet tend to sidestep the analysis of interconnected relations of race, gender and class that structure

the normative model of the human. In order to address this gap, the article examines attempts to creatively adapt intersectional perspectives to grasp the connections between gender, race, species and environmental violence. In other words, I am interested not just in assessing what has been missing, but also in highlighting scholarship that has been countering elisions and generously enacting intersectional environmental humanities. These include Rob Nixon's gesture towards "intersectional environmentalism" in the analysis of environmental writings from transnational perspective, Malcom Ferdinand's rethinking of ecology from France's overseas territories, Julie Sze and David Pellow's use of intersectionality in environmental justice studies in the US context, and Tiffany Lethabo King's troubling of "applied intersectional frames" in the feminist theorization of the Black shoals. These interventions interrogate uneven ecologies by placing the experiences and perspectives of racialized bodies and the more-than-human places that they inhabit squarely at the center of the analysis. In doing so, they productively complicate both the environmental humanities and intersectionality scholarship.

2. Critical re-readings of origin stories

Over the past two decades the environmental humanities and social sciences has emerged at the crossroads of a range of disciplinary and interdisciplinary fields. The term "ecological humanities" was proposed in Australia in the late 1990s by a group of scholars including the ethnographer Deborah Bird Rose, the historian Libby Robin and the feminist philosopher Van Plumwood. In 2012 Rose and other researchers based in Australia launched the journal *Environmental Humanities*. The opening article defines the field as "engaging with fundamental questions of meaning, value, responsibility and purpose" through the relation with environmental issues (Rose *et al*. 2012, 1). This allows to question "reductionist accounts of self-contained, rational, decision making subjects" and reposition the human "in lively

ecologies of meaning and value" (Rose *et al*. 2012, 1). Importantly, the authors acknowledge a tension animating the field between the unsettling of dominant narratives and the fashioning of alternative modes of more-than-human sociality: "the environmental humanities is necessarily, therefore, an effort to inhabit a difficult space of simultaneous critique and action" (Ivi, 3).

Writing two years later, Stephanie LeMenager and Stephanie Foote (2014), make similar point in the inaugural essay of the journal *Resilience*, evoking the focus on "ethics, values, narrative, image" as central to the field's approach to pressing ecological problems. These short inaugural essays sketch the contours of the field and its commitment to undoing the dichotomies between society and nature through social change. The introduction to handbooks and companions including *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities* (Heise, Christensen and Niemann 2017), *The Environmental Humanities. A Critical Introduction* (Emmett and Nye 2017) and *Environmental Humanities: Voices from the Anthropocene* (Opperman and Iovino 2017) perform a similar function. They highlight multiple genealogies and stories of origins, often insisting on the need of integrated and interdisciplinary approaches to environmental problems including climate change, biodiversity loss, energy production and consumption. A key argument is that the overlapping environmental crises, with uneven and localized manifestations and effects, are not just techno-scientific problems but political and cultural problems related to socio-economic relations, historical power asymmetries, divergent values and imaginaries.

Feminist scholars have surveyed these stories of origin to highlight the contributions of feminism to the environmental humanities. Jennifer Hamilton and Astrida Neimanis (2018) observe three main trends in various texts tracing the roots of the field: the first trend comprises accounts that position feminist insights and political commitments as central to the field's development; the second comprises

stories that do not mention feminism; the third consists of origin stories that reference feminist scholars but downplay their connection and political commitment to feminism. For example, Rose and colleagues (2012) cite the vital contributions of Donna Haraway and Van Plumwood but do not take up how their work illuminates the overlap between the "self-contained, rational, decision making" subject and Man (white, straight and able-bodied) as hegemonic model of the human. Similarly, Ursula Heise's (2017) introduction to the *Routledge Companion* includes Sherry Ortner's classic article "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" as one of the shared reference points in the environmental humanities and social sciences but it does not consider Ortner's argument about the connection between gender hierarchies and the nature/culture dualism.

Hamilton and Neimanis are not just claiming space for feminism in the environmental humanities. Rather, they contends that feminist efforts to unmake the universal human, to illuminate modes of domination and exploitation specific in time and space, are central to the environmental humanities' goal to resituate the human within the environment and to "attend to our entanglements with both living and non-living beings" (Rose *et al*. 2012, 4). By foregrounding feminism in the environmental humanities, this work enacts a practice of paying attention to the stories and bodies that risk being left out of the emerging canon of this academic field. Importantly, Hamilton and Neimanis identify with a feminism that understands gender as inseparable from other power structures:

> We stress the contiguity (overlap, mutual imbrication) of oppressions and reject the idea of analogy between them (e.g. sexism is 'like' racism) because we wish to underscore how these structures of power provide each other scaffold and alibi: they are the condition of possibility of one another (Hamilton and Neimanis 2018, 512).

This statement suggests that the authors are informed by intersectional approaches. The authors quickly mention intersectionality as valuable conceptual tool for grappling with intra-human inequalities and multispecies justice and touch on the predominant whiteness of the environmental humanities. These questions, however, remain underdeveloped and demands further analysis to clarify why and how intersectional lenses are helpful for undoing mutually constituting supremacies.

Intersectionality also figures in a 2020 blog post by the Sweden-based scholars Cecilia Åsberg and Lauren LaFauci that asks: "Can all the environmental humanities assumed to be feminist?". This short text is intended as a provocation reflecting on the role of feminism in the field and recalling the importance of social-justice-oriented contributions. It suggests that the key concerns animating the environmental humanities, including the critique of the dichotomies of nature and culture *and* the commitment to social change, align with feminist scholarship and activism, specifically with orientations that reject the neoliberal emphasis on the self-optimising and entrepreneurial individual (Rottenberg 2018). The authors note that some origin stories that link the field's emergence to disciplinary approaches such as environmental history and ecocriticism, risk minimizing "the defiantly feminist – and thus, anti-colonial, queer, and anti-racist – underpinning the environmental humanities" (Åsberg and LaFauci 2020).

The text's starting point is Leah Thomas' viral Instagram post that, in the wake of the Black Live Matter movement, advocated for an "intersectional environmentalism" demanding justice for the most vulnerable communities and the planet[5]. Åsberg and LaFauci plaud this initiative and its wide reach through social media but note that "intersectional environmentalism" describes a long tradition of environmental justice and ecofeminist work. They observe,

[5] A North-American environmentalism and eco-communicator, Leah Thomas is the author of the trade press book *The Intersectional Environmentalist: How to Dismantle Systems of Oppression to Protect People + Planet* (2022).

> It strikes us that 'intersectional environmentalism' is environmental humanities (…). That the field can be encapsulated so well using a term from US Black feminism supports our provocation in this blog post: that all environmental humanities is in fact *feminist* environmental humanities (Åsberg and LaFauci 2020).

It is worth noting that, while this intervention draws attention to the vital contribution of feminism, it evokes "intersectional environmentalism" as central to the environmental humanities but then replaces it with "feminist" and places intersectionality in the background. This slippage in terminology reflects the goal of reclaiming "feminist– and thus, anti-colonial, queer, and anti-racist" as integral in the field's formation but it risks neutralizing the specific value of research that addresses how racial formations, racializing processes and racial privileges are entangled with gender, class and the politics of nature. The feminist interventions in environmental humanities examined here mention intersectionality without fully exploring its role in the fields' origin and futures. Reflecting on the backgrounding of intersectionality, incidental or otherwise, this article invites environmental humanities practitioners to stay with the trouble raised by this framework and explores productive paths for reimagining it.

It is with this question in mind that I want to re-consider "origin stories" and "imagined futures" of the field in recent canon forming texts and pay attention to what has been happening in a decade of environmental humanities. In their 2012 inaugural text Rose and colleagues indicate that "rethinking the ontological exceptionality of the human" (Rose *et al*. 2012, 3) with respect to the more-than-human world is at the core of the environmental humanities. While I agree with this perspective, I would argue that such rethinking needs to attend simultaneously to the racial and sexual politics that have historically structured the field of the human within Euro-American modernity and produced the exclusion of bodies constructed as closer to nature. These include women associated to the sphere of biological

reproduction and heterosexual domesticity, indigenous peoples deprived of relations to land, black and brown bodies objectified as property and dehumanized (Val Plumwood 1993; Hartman 1997; Lugones 2007). Paying attention to the "entanglement of agential beings" that make up "multispecies communities" (*Rose et al., Ibidem*) also entails naming and confronting these exclusions and how they have mutually reinforced each other.

Yet, prevalent overviews of the environmental humanities offer visions of multispecies worlds but tend to evade discussions of the co-constitution of race, gender and class. Sometimes this happens even as these texts evoke intersectionality. An example of this paradoxical elision is Serpil Oppermann and Serenella Iovino's otherwise valuable introduction to the volume *Environmental Humanities. Voices from the Anthropocene*. The authors present the environmental humanities as interdisciplinary project exposing and remediating the "anthropocentric and dualistic worldviews" (Opperman and Iovino 2017, 4) that have created the conditions for the planetary ecological crisis. They also acknowledge the contribution of the ecofeminist analyses of Karen Warren and Val Plumwood, in calling into question the damaging anthropocentric mindset. But while their introduction refers to "intersectional academic responses to the injured habitats and beings" (3) and "intersectional analyses" (8) in environmental humanities, it neither considers questions of race and racism nor the dynamics of co-constitution between race, gender, class, and environmental violence. This generic use of the term "intersectional" for the environmental humanities promotes the field's effort to address the corporeal, social and cultural dimensions of environmental problems but it risks obscuring its limits in confronting the ongoing effects of gendered, racial and class stratifications within the species. The vague reference to "intersectional" research here, is even more noticeable given that the volume includes an essay by

Greta Gaard that argues for integrating feminist perspectives, and specifically intersectional feminism and indigenous feminism in the programs and research agendas of the environmental humanities (Gaard 2017).

Now, if one looks at surveys of the environmental humanities, what emerges is a rather contradictory landscape, one in which some origin stories and imagined futures remain stubbornly attached to a predominantly white masculine canon of environmental thought while others take up, the challenges of intersectionality, articulation, co-constitution even as they do not name these concepts explicitly.

Let's take a comparative look at the *Introduction to the Environmental Humanities* by J. Andrew Hubbell and John Ryan and *The Cambridge Companion to Environmental Humanities* edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Stephanie Foote, both published in 2022 in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and anti-racist protests that spread across the world following the killing of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in the United States. These wide-ranging volumes are meant as comprehensive and accessible entry points to the field. Both aim to historicize the environmental humanities but the origin stories and the imaginary futures that they offer present interesting divergences. Hubbell and Ryan organize their survey around key disciplines and argue for a solid grounding in the field's disciplinary roots. Cohen and Foote's edited collection is organized around keywords and interdisciplinary debates.

The opening chapter of the Hubbell and Ryan's book traces an origin story that parallels the canonical narrative of the environmental movement in the Global North and centers the North American nature writing of Henry David Thoreau, Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson as the roots of the field. Although the authors mention the contribution of indigenous perspectives to the environmental humanities, they seem unaware of research that has probed the canon of environmental writing pointing to its silences and exclusions. As important research has shown, environmental narratives and environmentalism in the United States, Europe and beyond

have been largely shaped by white, masculine voices (Finney 2014; Ferdinand 2019). These narratives, albeit diverse, have largely obscured indigenous modes of inhabiting as well as the ecological experience of black people and indigenous people (Gilio-Whitaker 2019). What is largely left unspoken and obscured in Hubbell and Ryan's text is the whiteness and maleness of mainstream Euro-American environmentalism. Still more, this work reiterates the refusal of a view of the world that "divides nature from humankind, weaving social, cultural, and ecological concerns together into a tapestry" (Hubbell and Ryan 2022, 4). However, the authors' introductory chapter pay little attention to the racial, gendered and class inequalities that have contributed to create the current planetary predicament and shape differential experiences and positionalities with respect to the ecological crisis.

In contrast, the *Cambridge Companion* includes two chapters focusing on "the nature of gender" and "race, health, and environment" and several other essays centering racialized perspectives in the analysis of rights and extractivism, and indigenous experiences of temporality and multispecies kinship. Cohen and Foote's introduction conveys a sensibility attuned not just to the ways in which feminism, queer and post-colonial approaches have contributed to the environmental humanities but also to the tense political climate around "matters of structural economic, gendered and racial inequality" (Cohen and Foote 2022, 7) in a world in which "natural resources are disappearing, and in which some human actors are themselves seen as resources to be exploited and discarded" (Ivi, 6). Examining COVID-19 in relation to ecological changes that create opportunities for zoonosis and the its unevenly racialized effects, they write, "Changing climate is ecologically always already racialized" (Ivi, 8).

The juxtaposition between the two texts shows contrasting priorities for the environmental humanities. It reveals divergences between origin stories that emphasize disciplinary attachments and others that foreground interdisciplinary propensities, and between visions of the future that, on the one hand, center the

overcoming of the divide between humans and the environment and, on the other hand, address the relations between infra-human and human/nonhuman hierarchies. Cohen and Foote do not take up the question of intersectionality directly but hold open space for exploring the togetherness of structures of oppression, their articulation and co-constitution. This concern has been at the core of intersectional scholarship in Black feminism, transnational feminism and queer of color critique. These approaches have sought to interrogate racial, gendered and sexual distinctions to show that what counts as human is a highly contested terrain. Bringing insights from these fields to bear with human/more-than human hierarchies has the potential to create generative openings for both the environmental humanities and intersectional research.

Because these questions remains problematically underexplored in prevalent narratives of the field, it is important not just pointing to what has been obscured but also centering the scholarship that has been addressing the relations between society and nature in terms that mobilize intersectional perspectives. Thus, the next section discusses research that been creatively reimagining intersectionality as part of the project of questioning and transforming what it means to be human.

3. Intersectional environmental humanities?

This section examines work in the environmental humanities and social sciences that adopts or references intersectionality in a more or less explicit fashion. In doing so, I respond to Hamilton and Neimanis' invitation to "gathering up and sifting through what's already there, with care" (2018, 511). This means to acknowledge and honor contributions that exist as promising pathways for the field's present and future. To this end, I have selected a range of examples from ecocriticism, environmental justice studies and Black studies. Although by no mean exhaustive, they demonstrate how to productively mobilize intersectionality to

advance the environmental humanities and, in turn, how to bring more-than-human ecological constellations within debates on intersectionality.

Writing before Leah Thomas, the scholar of postcolonial ecocriticism Rob Nixon (2011) uses the term "intersectional environmentalism" in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), the book that engages the literature of writers-activists from the global South to examine how environmental damage occurs gradually and out of sight becoming unmoored from its structural causes. Nixon considers the ecological activism and nonfiction writing of Wangari Maathai's, the Kenyan writer-activist best known as one of the founders of the Green Belt Movement (GBM) and the recipient of the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize. Starting in 1977, this movement led by rural women used three planting for countering the destruction of local forests. This simple yet highly figurative act was a response to the slow process of soil erosion resulting from the mismanaging of resources by the Kenyan authoritarian regime that favored the privatization of communal land and threatened the livelihood of local communities. The movement's focus was the redress of cumulative harm produced by resource exploitation on soil quality and the life prospects of rural women who "inhabited the betrayals of successive narratives of development that had brutally excluded them" (Nixon 2011, 140). As the *porte-parole* of GBM and the nonfiction writer who popularized the connection between deforestation, soil depletion and women's subsistence economies, Maathai was never a single-issue environmentalist. As Nixon (2011) observes, she sought to integrate environmental struggles with struggles for "women's rights, for the release of political prisoners, and for greater political transparency" (138-141). Maathai's writings, although not unproblematic in their recasting of collective practice as an autobiography, combined the challenge to the patriarchal authoritarian state with memories of anti-colonial resistance, local Kikuyu knowledges and practices of land use, scientific expertise as a biologist and attention to transnational dynamics. Maathai has spent time in the United States and had been inspired by the civil

rights movement, developing a vocabulary that blended social justice and environmental justice. This allowed her to craft transnational alliances and resist the attempts of the Kenyan government to discredit her as a white woman masquerading as black. Nixon (2011) does not provide an in-depth discussion of intersectionality but his use of "intersectional environmentalism" to describe the GBM and Maathai's as iconic figure of the movement highlights the need of capacious categories for taking into account the complexities of socioenvironmental problems as well as the possibilities of coalition building and "transnational meldings" (*Ibidem*, 36). This use of intersectionality brings the political struggles of racialized and gendered subjects front and center the analysis of the ecologies of meaning and value in the environmental humanities.

The political philosopher Malcolm Ferdinand employs a range of intersectional perspectives and women's of color perspectives to explore the disavowal of race and racism in French and European, ecological thought. His book *Decolonial Ecology. Thinking From the Caribbean World* (2019) argues that Euro-American modernity has been shaped by a double fracture. On the one hand, there has been an environmental divide based on the hierarchical distinction between humans and non-humans that has placed the human out of and above nature. On the other hand, the colonial fracture has distinguished between the colonizers (men and women) and the colonized (men and women), placing the masters above slaves and servants. If mainstream environmentalism has generally focused on protecting nature and ignored colonial histories of enslavement and land appropriation, anti-racist and anti-colonial activists have often left environmental issues in the background. Inviting to move beyond this double fracture, Ferdinand proposes to rethink ecology from the situated perspective of the Caribbean, particularly the French overseas departments whose current poverty and environmental injustices are the product of European colonial history. In Martinique and Guadeloupe, for instance, the French state has authorized between the 1970s and the 1990s the

use of chlordecone, a carcinogenic pesticide, in banana monocultures. Today the islands' populations, particularly female farm workers, but also animals, soil and water continue suffering from a long-lasting, widespread and deleterious chlordecone contamination and have long been demanding reparations.

Ferdinand makes a powerful intervention in European debates about the effacing of race in public discourse and policies. This work mobilizes Afro-feminism and intersectional feminisms to examine the imbrications between gender violence, racial subjugation and colonial power in what he calls "the matricides of the Plantationocene" (Ferdinand 2019). In historical terms, this concept connects the violence on women reduced to property through the slave trade, subjects largely dispossessed of bodily control in regimes of forced reproduction, and the exploitation of the earth as repository of resources. Even more, reflecting on the present time, the concept draws attention to the specific effects of environmental violence on the gendered, racialized and poor bodies that today embody the toxicity of banana plantations in Martinique and Guadalupe. For Ferdinand rethinking ecology from France's overseas territories through intersectional lenses means facing multidimensional situations of inequality while valuing the histories of those who struggle for gender, racial and environmental justice. This research questions racial assumptions and silences within prevalent environmental thought while also opening up the space for discussing whiteness within the environmental humanities in Europe and beyond.

In the US context interdisciplinary scholars including David Pellow, Giovanna Di Chiro and Julie Sze have long been engaged in expanding environmental justice studies initial focus on the unequal distribution of environmental risks and burdens based on race. Early approaches to environmental justice, often drawing on quantitative methods, focused on assessing the role of race or of race and class as contributing factors of toxic exposure. This work tended to overlook gender and

the compounded effects of inequalities. However, this has been changing with research in critical environmental justice (Pellow 2018) that has increasingly adopted intersectional and multi-scalar approaches for analyzing the interrelations between socio-ecological inequalities. While the experience of various devalued groups is distinct and not equivalent, intersectionality connects inequalities that tend to act together to produce and maintain power, privilege, and subordination. At the same time, these approaches complicate debates on intersectionality by considering other-than-human actors as "subject to oppression and frequently agents of social change" (Pellow 2018, 19). Thus, intersectionality extends to grapple with intra-human as well as human-nonhuman inequalities.

For instance, Julie Sze (2018) has examined the role of racialized discourses of motherhood and childbirth in activist organizing strategies addressing toxic exposures in Kettleman City, a small town in California's Central Valley. The site of the largest hazardous waste facility in the United States, exposed to intensive pesticide use in the agriculture industry, the area became the subject of local policy and media attention in 2007 due to the high rate of children born with cleft palates. Community residents, mainly low income Latinx employed as farmworkers, worked with social justice and environmental organizations to connect congenital disorders to pollution and toxic exposures at work and in their everyday life. Through the analysis of media coverage and residents' statements, Sze argues that Kettleman City residents have developed a maternalist discourse that counters the technical approach of regulatory agencies and polluters and problematizes the separation between race, gender, labor and environmental issues. This analysis allows to extend the notion of trans-corporeality by attending to specific racial and gendered embodied experiences of women in Kettleman City. If trans-corporeality indexes the often unpredictable effects of the interchanges across bodies, ecosystems, chemical agents and other actors (Alaimo 2010), Sze proposes a notion of

"racialized trans-corporeality" that considers the politics of gendered, race and disability simultaneously and intersectionally. She writes:

> The activist politics of race, gender, and toxic exposure are constructed through the frame of motherhood and birth defects, which relies, in complicated ways, on normative ideologies of bodily health, even as activists challenge the social and economic structures that deny the bodily health of these women of color and their babies (Sze 2018, 108).

Sze's reworking of trans-corporeality in the empirical example of Kettleman City intervenes in the environmental humanities by showing how race, gender, class and toxic exposure are specifically intertwined in the situated trans-corporeal experiences of the Central Valley. This contribution dovetails with Jennifer Nash's invitation to broaden intersectionality beyond its focus on Black women to considers its implications for "women of color". Sze's offers the Latinx community in Kettleman City, and particularly local women, as embodying multiple oppressions and enacting a politics capable of connecting their status as devalued racialized bodies to the devaluation of the environment. Thus Sze responds to the call by LeiLani Nishime and Kim Hester Williams, editors of the volume *Racial Ecologies,* for "expanding the scope of intersectionality" (Nishime and Hester Williams 2018, 10) through the examination of variously racialized groups that are especially subject to environmental violence and enact various forms of everyday resistance. Rather than privileging a singular vision of racial ecology that center specific subjects, Nishime and Hester Williams invite to attend to the multiple ways in which racialized groups inhabit precarious landscapes and more-than-human environments. This allows to appreciate specificities and continuities in the environmental experiences of differently racialized and gendered people.

In *The Black Shoals* (2019), Tiffany Lethabo King draws on Black feminism and the Black radical tradition to complicate at once intersectionality and the tendency of much environmental humanities' to ignore racial formations, racial processes and privileges. King offers the shoal–a shape-shifting offshore geologic formation that is neither land nor water–to explore the uneasy intimacies between African-American and Indigenous modes of survival and resistance in the face of ongoing forms of white conquest. In reading eighteenth century and contemporary texts, including British colonial maps, Black women's novels and films, King's primary concern is to bring into conversation Black studies and Indigenous studies, to think how they speak to each other. But the shoal, an unstable ecozone in-between ocean and land, also emerges from her engagement with intersectionality and as a challenge to what she calls "applied intersectional frames" (King 2019, 28). As a metaphor and a methodology, the shoal illuminates the co-constitution of modes of existence and experiences of oppression often conceived as separate. It problematizes perspectives that assume a distinction between discrete phenomena "that must be connected in ways that occlude their co-constitutions or oneness" (*Ibidem*). Challenging rigid applications of intersectional frameworks, King uses the shoal as "analytical site where multiple things can be perceived and experienced simultaneously" (*Ibidem*). This ecotonal space allows to think together Black life, associated to ocean of transatlantic crossings, and Indigenous life, usually thought through land relations. It functions as site of co-constitution, at once junction and disjunction, for generating a new relationality beyond the hegemonic model of the human.

Taken together, these projects show how to attend to historical asymmetries within the human rather than advancing post-gender and post-racial visions of multispecies worlds. They operationalize but also transform intersectionality to articulate the deep imbrications between bodies and landscapes, intra-human violence and ecological violence, social and environmental justice.

4. Conclusion

Over the last decade the environmental humanities have engendered important analyses of the co-evolution between societies and a more-than-human world that is usually classified under the generic category of "nature". This burgeoning field has demonstrated that other-than-human entities are actors in power dynamics, participating in the creation of meanings, sensations, imaginaries and values. On-going debates on intersectionality have produced generative multi-methodological interventions to understand gender and race as made through each other, and crosscutting with other vectors of domination. In doing so, they have created space for the difficult project of creating intimacies across differences. My goal in this article has been to highlight the elision of gender, race and class inequalities in key contributions in the environmental humanities. These texts position the field as able "to articulate a 'thicker' notion of the humanity" (Rose *et al*. 2012, 2). They favor the exploration of the human enmeshed in a turbulent world of distributed agencies, but often risk flattening the co-constituting histories of gendered, racialized and classed violence that have shaped relations to the material world. The article argues that while intersectionality remains underexplored in the canon shaping narratives of the environmental humanities, a growing and diverse body of work has been enacting the intersectional environmental humanities. This work productively mobilizes capacious notions of intersectionality for advancing the analysis of the connections between intra-human inequalities and human/nonhuman hierarchies while, in turn, unsettling intersectionality scholarship by bringing the ecological dimension into the debate.

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