

Book Review

McDowell, John Holmes, Katherine Borland, Rebecca Dirksen, and Sue Tuohy, eds. *Performing Environmentalisms: Expressive Culture and Ecological Change*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2021. viii, 282pp., introduction, afterword, index, photographs, and illustrations. ISBN 978-0-252-08609-0 (paper).

This edited volume exhibits a broad range of disciplinary and analytical perspectives. Contributors include folklorists, ecomusicologists (hailing from historical musicology and ethnomusicology), anthropologists, and cultural geographers. They bring their disciplinary and analytical perspectives to bear on wide-ranging areas, subjects, and phenomena. All the essays include extensive reference lists that, in themselves, make *Performing Environmentalisms* a noteworthy resource for scholars working in the environmental humanities. The volume is intended as a “contribution to conversations on global climate change, threats to biocultural diversity, and the rampant environmental degradation we witness today” (1). Through their ethnographically grounded case studies, the contributors engage intimately with local responses to the life-altering forces that are reshaping our planet.

The essays are divided into three sections: “Perspectives on Diverse Environmentalisms,” “Performing the Sacred,” and “Environmental Attachments.” Owing to the book’s central focus on local ecological understandings and their articulations in local expressive cultures, some concepts and concerns cross all three sections.

The first essay in part 1 is John Holmes McDowell’s case study centered in the Andes region of South America. McDowell fleshes out a notion employed throughout the volume of “ecoperformativity.” Ecoperformativity, he asserts, “highlights the ways that people make use of traditional expressive resources to capture and convey knowledge about the natural environment and to exert influence on processes that threaten their community’s connection to land and locale” (22). Drawing on speech act theory, he develops a model for charting the strategic use of traditional expressive resources (such as song, storytelling, music, dance, and ritual) in the contexts of ecological conflict and trauma. It is McDowell’s hope that this model is abstract enough to have applicability for related studies rooted in other geo/cultural settings. Mary Hufford draws on her deep engagement with local understandings of, and entanglements within, the mixed mesophytic forests of southern West Virginia. Drawing data from local speech genres, Hufford employs narrative ecology as a framework for demonstrating the interdependence of human stewards of the forest with the forest, including more-than-human subjectivities. In his chapter “The Critique of Being: Educating for Diverse Environmentalisms and

Sustainable Lives in the Anthropocene,” Rory Turner advocates for developing pedagogies that include opportunities for students to immerse themselves in alternative or nonmodernist ways of knowing. He advances the idea that performance of alternative expressive cultures may encourage students to engage with modes of thinking beyond those that have long dominated (and currently threaten) our world. The final chapter in part 1, and the longest essay in the volume, was penned by Aaron S. Allen, one of the leading voices in ecomusicological study. The basic question of how and why we study expressive culture in the context of social and environmental crises is central to his essay. Fully recognizing that the diverse work of ecomusicologists is “by no means a primary activator of how we as a civilization can learn about and confront ecological change and environmental crises, but they are part of the mix” (111). Shifting the point of view from the long-dominant anthropocentrism to a more holistic ecocentricism is essential to this mission.

Part 2 begins with Chie Sakakibara’s “Singing for Whales” in which she looks at how the memories and histories of whaling among the Iñupiat in Artic Alaska and Azorian islanders allow the two seemingly disparate communities to produce social and cultural events that commemorate whaling as foundational to their shared heritage. Rebecca Dirksen and Lois Wilcken cowrote chapter 5; they report on Haitian activists’ responses to the environmental crisis. Jeff Todd Titon, a pioneer in the study of musical cultures as ecosystems, focuses on the performance of sacred language among farmers in the Blue Ridge Mountains at the northeastern edge of Appalachia. Here, Titon advances an ecological approach to the performance of expressive culture. He finds that when ecosystems fail, as the one under his study did, memories of past ways of living are kept alive through the sung, chanted, or spoken performed word.

Jennifer C. Post’s chapter, “Ecology, Mobility, and Music in Western Mongolia,” focuses on several Kazakh herders whose stories illustrate the harsh impacts of environmental change on their everyday lives, including their music and sound practices. The experiences of these herders resonate with those of many of the people about whom the contributors to *Performing Environmentalisms* write. Long-standing lifeways and musical/artistic practices are under threat due to environmental pressures, yet the ecological knowledge they have passed on for generations in narrative forms, including song, “actually contains all of the essential contemporary principles of sustainability and environmental protection” (Baranovitch 2016: 188, cited on p. 212). Chapter 9, written by poet, educator, and scholar Assefa Tefera Dibaba, focuses on the expressive culture of the most populous single ethno-nation in Northeast Africa, the Oromo. Dibaba urges scholars to go beyond their documentation of and theorizing about expressive cultures; instead, scholars must use their work, and the data they gather, to engage in current struggles for environmental and social justice. The final chapter in part 3 is by Mark Pedelty, another leading voice in ecomusicological scholarship. “The Sound of Freedom: Military Jet Noise in a Contested Sound Commons” stands somewhat apart from other essays in the volume because its subject is not a localized culture passed down within a limited geographic region. Instead, Pedelty listens for how US military culture uses excruciatingly loud jets (the Boeing E18-G “Growler”) as tools for recruitment and

indoctrination. Employing the moniker “the sound of freedom” the military aims to “legitimate the presence of loud jets” in local soundscapes (237). More specifically, Pedelty reports on the conflict between supporters of the activities at the US Naval Air Station Whidbey Island in Western Washington (where Growlers are based) and local groups opposed to the jets’ noise, such as the Citizens for Ebey’s Reserve. Drawing on concepts in semiotic ecology, Pedelty views Western Washington as a “highly contested soundscape, a place where the one listener’s ‘sound of freedom’ is another’s life-threatening noise” (237).

In his “Afterword: Recognizing the Contributions and Power in Performing Diverse Environmentalisms,” anthropologist Eduardo S. Brondizio states, “*Performing Environmentalisms* makes a powerful case for the role of performance and expressive culture in mobilizing and motivating change, to offer hope” (258). Indeed, there are numerous expressions of hope found throughout the volume, yet there are few examples of verifiable positive change stemming from the activities reported on by the book’s authors. In the midst of our human-caused planetary crises, we must, as Dibaba advises, continue to collect, document, and analyze personal accounts of the environment (and assaults on it). Importantly, we must use our findings to influence policy. Several chapters make strong cases for the vital importance of documenting traditional environmental knowledge, particularly as relations between humans and their physical environments change.

Performing Environmentalisms represents a milestone as scholars working under the umbrella of environmental humanities seek a footing in the struggle to save the planet as we have known it. Writing this review during what was the hottest meteorological summer (in the Northern Hemisphere) on record (NOAA 2023), and in what was likely the coolest summer of the rest of our lives, I hope the book inspires real action.

References

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NANCY GUY

doi:10.1017/ytm.2023.8

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