

Talking About Trees: The Paradox of the Environmental Humanities

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“If you search the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s 2007 synthesis report,” Amitav Ghosh writes, “you will not find the words ‘history’ or ‘historical’”. Outside and even within the university, the vital role of Humanities perspectives in addressing the climate crisis remains under-acknowledged and under-explored. The types of expertise developed in our disciplines are crucial for understanding the historical conditions in which the crisis has arisen, attending to the specific contexts in which its effects are felt, communicating this awareness across cultural divides, and imagining alternatives. At the same time, this role presents something of a paradox for Humanities research, by instrumentalising a field whose counter-cultural power lies precisely in resisting logics of utility and acceleration. In a sense, the urgency of the climate crisis has simply inverted Brecht’s famous line about the necessity of engaged literature: what kinds of times are these, when it is almost a crime *not* to talk about trees?

I propose to consider this paradox in greater detail, outlining some of the key arguments for Humanities contributions to climate justice while contending that to reduce their value to this use would be to overlook their most lasting strengths. I will consider, for instance, the case of linguistic diversity and minority languages, which are now being promoted as a medium of ecological understanding, but which the Humanities might otherwise be well placed to value as ends in themselves. While the discourse around Environmental Humanities is proliferating at speed, I will attend to the widespread image of the Humanities as ‘slow’, as somehow lagging behind the times. It is this perceived weakness, I will argue, that is in fact our superpower, working to resist techno-utopian responses to the crisis while providing a rare alternative to cultures of consumption and acceleration through ‘slow’ activities like reading.