

[Filbrun on McDowell and Borland and Dirksen and Tuohy, 'Performing Environmentalisms: Expressive Culture and Ecological Change'](#)

Review published on Thursday, September 29, 2022

John Holmes McDowell, Katherine Borland, Rebecca Dirksen, Sue Tuohy, eds. *Performing Environmentalisms: Expressive Culture and Ecological Change*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2021. 294 pp. \$110.00 (cloth), [ISBN 978-0-252-04403-8](#); \$30.00 (paper), [ISBN 978-0-252-08609-0](#).



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Printable Version: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=58144>

Performing Environmentalisms—an edited volume from the University of Illinois Press—looks to the “strategic use of traditional artistic and expressive resources in moments of social turmoil caused by the ravages of environmental degradation and ecological collapse” (p. 1). The essays underscore the importance of the diverse approaches to environmentalism used by world cultures. These practices and performances intentionally challenge Western-focused environmentalism and offer poignant portrayals of alternate forms of resilience and relationships to nature. *Performing Environmentalisms* shows that the expressive culture of people around the globe—from the indigenous communities of the Andes to the Iñupiat people—yields valuable insights. From the “stories told and songs sung, objects crafted, ceremonies and rituals conducted,” these practices function as a way to understand and resist climate change (p. 3). Organized into three sections—“Perspectives on Diverse Environmentalisms,” “Performing the Sacred,” and “Environmental Attachments”—the work offers wide-ranging themes and a diverse cast of case studies.

The first part, “Perspectives on Diverse Environmentalisms,” includes John Holmes McDowell’s “Eco-performativity,” Mary Hufford’s “The Witness Trees’ Revolt,” Rory Turner’s “The Critique of Being,” and Aaron S. Allen’s “Diverse Ecomusicologies.” McDowell examines the Andes region of South America. Using a robust definition of “eco-performativity,” which he defines as “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 the land and locale,” McDowell highlights the power of speech to unite and empower (p. 22). In her exploration of West Virginia’s forests, Hufford contends that how we discuss forests reflects and shapes the interdependence of human and nonhuman in the forests. Turner takes a more pedagogical approach to his contribution, focusing on how education (a performative act itself) has erected a conceptual barrier between human and natural, which has contributed to environmental degradation. He urges students to experience fieldwork that challenges Western assumptions about the environment. The final essay in part 1, Allen’s “Diverse Ecomusicologies,” poses an important question: “How do we who study expressive culture make a difference when confronted with environmental crises and ecological change?” (p. 89). Allen argues that an environmental liberal arts

approach (one that blends environment with music and cultural studies) can imbue a recognition of the importance of ecological systems in students and offer a chance for scholars and students to practice “the art of listening well to human and nonhuman subjects” (p. 11).

“Performing the Sacred,” the second part, looks to the expressive traditions and spiritualities that approach environments as sacred and thus refrain from large-scale extractive practices. Chie Sakakibara, in “Singing for Whales,” offers an exploration of Iñupiat and Azorean production of “musical landscapes,” which connects whaling communities to one another and to the animals they hunt. Rebecca Dirksen and Lois Wilcken’s “The Drum and the Seed” explores Vodou beliefs and practices, which serve to provide Haitians with deeper understandings of environments and human and nonhuman interactions. They argue that, in Haiti and in Haitian communities in New York City, cultural performances of the sacred help Haitians “understand and reassess their relationship with the environment and ... provide present and future generations with models for action based on traditional values” (p. 137). In the final essay, “An Ecological Approach to Folklife Studies, Expressive Culture, and Environment,” Jeff Todd Titon argues that sacred language constitutes a mode of resistance and a reflection of historical change, while at the same time connecting people to the physical environment. Through examination of farmers in the Blue Ridge Mountains, Titon reveals the connectivity of people to ecosystems through their understanding of “husbandry” as a means of relating to the spiritual and environmental realms.

The third and final part, “Environmental Attachments,” contains three essays, Jennifer C. Post’s “Ecology, Mobility, and Music in Western Mongolia,” Assefa Tefera Dibaba’s “Ecopoetics of Place,” and Mark Pedelty’s “The Sound of Freedom,” which offer “sobering accounts of the difficulties of maintaining biocultural diversity in an increasingly urbanized, globalized world” (p. 13). Post explores the loss of place experienced by Kazakh pastoralists as a warming climate forces them from their rural homes into bustling urban centers. In his essay, Dibaba examines the challenges faced by those in Ethiopia seeking to reclaim and restore the city of Finfinne (known now as Addis Adaba). Dibaba studies the entangled songs that mourn dispossession of Oromia and the contemporary protests against annexation of Oromo lands. In the final essay, Pedelty explores the disruptive noise pollution created by navy jets over the Salish Sea. Its effects to the soundscape draw varying responses. Some praise the sound as the roaring “sound of freedom” while residents (nonhuman and human) suffer the detrimental health effects caused by the pollutive outburst.

The expressive environmentalism contained within *Performing Environmentalisms* offers an important correction to the “singular” Western-focused approach of many environmentalists. Instead, what the authors of *Performing Environmentalisms* offer is a mosaic of studies into the diverse forms of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), placemaking, and ecocriticism. These case studies provide an ample exploration of methodologies, practices, and spiritualities that offer hope in light of climatic precarity. In the book’s afterword, Eduardo S. Brondizio succinctly describes the volume’s contributions, “*Performing Environmentalisms* ... shows the power of performances and expressive culture to move people to action: resisting, negotiating, and finding solutions to environmental problems” (p. 261).

Citation: Christian Filbrun. Review of McDowell, John Holmes; Borland, Katherine; Dirksen, Rebecca; Tuohy, Sue, eds., *Performing Environmentalisms: Expressive Culture and Ecological Change*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. September, 2022. **URL:**

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