

# An Ecotopian Toolkit for Anthropocene Challenges

Thursday, 13 April 2017—Saturday, 15 April 2017

A conference organized by the Penn Program in Environmental Humanities



Tool making is a signature trait of the human species. What tools can we make, and might we require, in the age of the human, the anthropocene: a name for the present geological epoch when humans are the most potent force shaping earth's systems? Global warming and other anthropocene challenges, including the ongoing sixth mass extinction event, often lead to apocalyptic visions, or apathy. Prompted in part by the 500th anniversary of *Utopia*, a playful work whose concerns continue to translate across time and space, we explore a longer history of the anthropocene to help represent—and respond to—our contemporary moment. Might a utopian turn help us navigate warmer, rising waters and build new forms of refuge? What tools can STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math) educators in universities, museums, and non-profits design and develop via the history of utopia and its hope for better futures?

Proposals, whether for speculative or realized tools, developed by individual or teams working across the arts and sciences might:

- explore past, present and future intersections between environmental ways of knowing and the utopian imaginary
- address present paradigms that attempt to integrate the two cultures: labs, workshops, studios, etc.
- consider how products of integrated knowledge are disseminated from the lab, workshop, studio
- propose tools that might be adapted by citizen scientists and citizen humanists
- suggest how anthropocene tools can reach and engage new audiences in partnership with galleries, libraries, archives, museums, etc.

Proposals should be of no more than 300 words and include a brief c.v. (no more than 2 pages) for each presenter. All materials will be evaluated by an interdisciplinary group of faculty, students, and staff from the University of Pennsylvania. Submissions are due by October 10; applicants will be notified by November 1, 2016. Submissions to [ecotoolkit2017@gmail.com](mailto:ecotoolkit2017@gmail.com)

This conference and related events are co-sponsored by the Penn Humanities Forum, the Libraries of the University of Pennsylvania, the Institute for Contemporary Art, and in cooperation with Bartram's Garden.



### *Why Build an Ecotopian Toolkit?*

At the outset of European imperial expansion across the globe, Thomas More dashed off an enduring work of speculative fiction, composed in two short parts. *Utopia*'s first part stages conversations between intellectuals about the profound changes they were witnessing: the enclosure of commons, regimes of mineral extraction, shifting flows of capital, uneven resource access, and the criminalization of poverty among them. More's second book voyages out to the island utopia: a republican community said to have developed educational tools for a better life.

*Utopia*'s two parts inform the conference's organization: both its scholarly conversations and its future-looking tools for citizens. Over three days of meetings, we will consider how integrated knowledge production can address environmental challenges *and* what tools scholars and other professional in informal STEAM education might create—not only to maintain but to expand the potential for species-being in the Anthropocene, the age of the human. Scholarly presentations will intersect with live performance; longer invited presentations are punctuated by shorter interventions. Our gathering hybridizes a scholarly conference with an inventors' lab, a design workshop, and an experimental performance space. Together, we will create a *Toolkit for the Anthropocene*.

We may be roughly five hundred years—or, far longer—into the profound planetary transformations named by the Anthropocene. The origins of the age of the human are disputed, but it is not our primary concern to date its onset. Instead, it is our contention that considering a longer history of the Anthropocene can help us better to represent and so to respond to our own contemporary moment. How to model and manage our common resources—energy, water, and air—remain questions arguably more urgent for us than for More and his friends.

Amidst this dystopian scenario, this conference aims to recall the role of utopian narratives in the environmental imaginary and in environmental thought, including the environmental sciences. Looking toward the future, we ask how utopian scenarios might prompt the kinds of integrated knowledge production Anthropocene entanglements require. Might a utopian turn help us navigate warmer, rising waters? Can it help build refuge? We are interested in shedding light on the past and futures of utopian thought not as an escape from the urgency and violence of the Anthropocene, but as a productive response. Utopian explorations, in historian of science Donna Haraway's formulation, open the possibility “for weaving something other than a shroud for the day after the apocalypse that so prophetically ends salvation history.” Literary critic Fredric Jameson has framed the frailties of speculative and science fiction as important sites for the elaboration of future-oriented thought. Despite the “passing of mass utopia in east and west” after the fall of the Berlin Wall, diagnosed by intellectual historian Susan Buck-Morss, the last ten years have seen an effervescence of projects across the arts and sciences laced with utopian longing. If, as David Pepper has argued, utopian desires lie behind every form of environmental action, including environmental knowledge production, they are rarely constructed consciously and creatively. How might we do so?

Can the utopian imaginary help us design tools, both conceptual and material, to make worlds that are simultaneously less carbon-intensive, more equitable, more mutually entangled, and available for visions of other possible futures? Can the utopian

imaginary help to conceptualize environmental problems so that their solutions are participatory? Collaborative? Multi-lingual? Open-ended? Hopeful?

*Keynote addresses*

Rebecca Solnit, “Art, Disaster Utopia” and James Hansen, “Can Scientists Be Activists?”

*Featured lectures*

Stephanie LeMenager • Bethany Nowviskie • Jedediah Purdy • Laura Raicovich • Kyle Powys White

*A Period of Animate Existence*

This gathering also features a concert premier of *A Period of Animate Existence*, a symphonic theatre hybrid and series of meditations on planetary cycles and life cycles, set in a time of dire ecological predictions and rapid technological change. This epic project is a collaboration of director Dan Rothenberg, designer Mimi Lien, and composer Troy Herion, 2016-17 PPEH artists in residence.



For more information, check in periodically at the virtual toolkit, <http://www.ppehlab.org/toolkit/>