

Green-Watch's Interview with Dr. Jill Didur



Over the course of the Winter 2023 semester, Sustainability Ambassadors team, Green-Watch, set off to discover and interview Concordians who are actively contributing to sustainability at the university and beyond. Our goals with this interview series are to learn about the people behind the initiatives, to spark conversation around sustainability, and to inspire others to take action however they can.

We had the absolute pleasure of meeting with Dr. Jill Didur for our first interview: an English professor, Associate Dean, and interdisciplinary researcher in environmental humanities, postcolonialism, critical Anthropocene studies, among other things! We hope you enjoy learning about Dr. Didur's creations, research, and path in sustainability!

How would you define 'environmental humanities'?

I think the field of environmental humanities is undergoing a transformation right now. Early work in literary studies would have been referred to as 'ecocriticism', and included research on poetry or novels in which nature or concerns about environmental issues are foregrounded thematically, or the representation of nature mediated certain ideas about culture and society. Meanwhile, in other disciplines like history, the environment has been studied in terms of how particular events and culture have transformed landscape and climate over time, and how we understand our relationship to it in the present. There's related research in other areas such as art history, communication studies, as well as new methodologies such as research creation, where scholars like myself combine scholarly and creative approaches to explore new ways of thinking about our relationship to and interaction with the environment. These different kinds of approaches to studying the environment in the humanities are now coming together in new ways.

The work I find the most dynamic right now is what's being referred to as transdisciplinary environmental humanities, or even the posthumanities, a term that suggests a more interdisciplinary approach, drawing on multiple approaches and methodologies to the study of the humanities. By retaining the reference to the humanities in the term 'posthumanities', I would argue there's an emphasis on investigating the way culture and humans — if we think about the definition of the proposed epoch of the Anthropocene — have shaped nature in a relational manner over time.

You have published several papers and contributed to many academic articles regarding postcolonialism in South Asia. How does this topic relate to environmental humanities?

My own approach to the environmental humanities has really been shaped by my training in postcolonial studies and as a scholar of English literature. Postcolonial studies focuses on literature written in English from regions of the world that had developed their own literary traditions in English as a result of Britain's colonialism, such as the Caribbean, South Asian and Africa. When I was training as a graduate student, I was most interested in those other "minor literatures" in English studies, meaning marginalized works that reflected and challenged the experience of colonialism. What many people are saying about the history of the environment right now, and even how we might think about the origins of the epoch of the Anthropocene, can be linked back to the kinds of ideas and actions that drove colonialism such as the extraction of natural resources, the history of slavery and indenture, and the displacement of Indigenous communities from land where they were living with their own philosophies about the environment.

A lot of work right now in postcolonial or decolonial studies focuses on conceptions of land and the environment, and notions of what it means to be human, that acknowledge our entanglement with the environment rather than conceive humans and nature in a binary relationship. Postcolonial and decolonial studies don't begin from a position of assuming colonialism is over. "Post-colonial" can be a historical term (with a hyphen) that refers to when official independence was declared, but postcolonial (as a concept) is a way of referring to regions of the world where the effects of colonialism continue, including Canada where settler culture remains embedded in colonial attitudes. There are other anti-colonial ways of thinking about our relationship to the environment and land that can be found in the cultures and cultural productions of Indigenous communities in Canada as well as different parts of the world. As a postcolonial studies scholar, I was aware of this aspect of thinking about land

and the environment very early on in my training as a graduate student, but only shifted my own research agenda towards that area of research a little over a decade ago.

It was through Jamaica Kincaid's reflections on colonialism, land, and gardening that I really began to do more extensive research in this area. I read her travel account *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya* about a plant hunting trip she took to Nepal. She is a very avid gardener, but she also always approaches this interest with an eye as to how this experience, and also her own desire to be a gardener of a certain type, has been influenced by the effects of colonialism in her life. I found it fascinating to see her reflect on that from her own positionality. That's how I first started researching and publishing in the area of environmental humanities. It's also what got me thinking about my own relationship to gardening, garden culture, and botanical gardens. You can find that early essay under the title "[Strange Joy: Plant-hunting and Responsibility in Jamaica Kincaid's \(Post\)colonial Travel Writing](#)". As you know, in Montreal, we have a very well-recognized botanical garden. With Kincaid's strategies in mind, I thought, *how do I decolonize my own relationship to gardening?*

Is that how the research creation project, *Alpine Garden Misguide*, started?

When Kincaid goes to Nepal for her plant hunting trip, she's going there because she knows she can collect the seeds of alpine plants that normally grow in cooler regions of the world. There was a period in the first half of the 20th century, when alpine gardening was a very popular colonial pursuit. Ultimately, it was just another form of extraction. Colonial botanists would go to alpine regions such as Nepal, and often rely on expertise from local communities to help them "discover" plants that they had never seen before that would fare well in cooler temperatures, then bring them back to gardens in UK and North America. Alpine gardening in the 20th century was one of the most popular styles of gardening. It was a prestigious activity because these transplanted plants were seen as unique treasures brought from the edges of the empire. It also inspired a sense of ownership of the empire by locals of metropolitan London who did not necessarily travel to these other colonies themselves but could have access to these plants. I wanted to understand what ideological impulse was driving the desire to acquire these plants. Not only were the plants beautiful and unusual, but they also provided the imperial gardener a sense of connection and ownership of the empire.

I approached the head curator of the alpine garden at the Montreal Botanical Garden. I explained what my interest was in creating a locative media project, the *Alpine MisGuide*, which was inspired by my research at archives located at the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, and my readings within postcolonial garden studies. I was also reading anthropologists who'd written about colonial botanical explorers. I thought, *you know I love this garden, but I feel like I need a more critical and thoughtful relationship with it.* And again, I think that is definitely Jamaica Kincaid's strategy: to bring politics into the garden. I was pleasantly surprised that the Montreal Botanical Garden agreed to let me pursue my project!



Another thing I found interesting about alpine gardening is that it adopted a wild aesthetic to “naturalize” the plants — the plants were not displayed in straight rows. There was this act of erasure that went hand and hand with how the plants were presented in gardens. I wanted to use the *Alpine MisGuide* project to denaturalize the wild aesthetic associated with alpine gardening and the app includes different details about how the garden is curated to look like a wild alpine landscape even though it is not.



I started that project with this interest in wild aesthetics – how it sometimes risks erasing the history and politics of the environment – and completed and installed the app in the MBG Alpine Garden in 2015. This interest in wild aesthetics also led to my collaboration with [Les Amis du Champ des Possibles](#) around the locative media app I completed, [Global Urban Wilds](#). The Champ des Possible is an ‘urban wild’ in my own neighborhood and I wanted to engage with it more thoughtfully. The app was installed and launched in October 2021. It’s available for download for iPhones from the iTunes App Store for free and can be used in the Champ de Possibles.

The Alpine Garden Misguide is no longer available; however, Dr. Didur did express interest in updating the platform.

Why do you choose to use research creation?

Within literary studies, I have published books and written articles, but I also wanted to think about how I could mobilize my research in ways that might reach more diverse audiences. I was not just interested in ‘how do I get more attention for my research?’ but also ‘how do I learn more about the history of this particular landscape through exploration and creative engagement?’. Locative media brings together the personal, sensory, and affective impact of being in a physical space with the archive, history, and context of its creation to produce a kind of embodied learning. Research creation and the environmental humanities in general holds the potential to change minds and human behaviors in ways that cannot solely rely on sharing data about climate change – though that is also needed! That’s obviously essential information that we want to work with, but if we want to also consider how we mobilize more people to share diverse concerns about anthropogenic climate change, I think part of the answer lies in how environmental humanities frames the questions we ask about how we got to where we are now.

You mentioned that the work of Jamaica Kincaid pushed you to change your approach towards your academic work. Has she also influenced how you teach classes and your curricula?

Currently I am serving as Associate Dean of Faculty Affairs and Inclusion in FAS, so I am not teaching this term. The last class I taught was a graduate class on Postcolonial Environmental Humanities, where we read interdisciplinary research on alternate approaches to thinking about the Anthropocene. I am especially inspired by the work of Katherine McKittrick, Sylvia Wynter, Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing's work on the Plantation(ocene), work on the Capitalocene, Rob Nixon's concept of 'slow violence', along with a whole variety of other critical and creative approaches that complicate how we understand the proposed epoch of the Anthropocene. There's been an explosion of critical thinking in the environmental humanities, which is very interdisciplinary and connects with these topics in the social sciences and the environmental science in important ways.

I also teach poetry, fiction and creative nonfiction concerned with ongoing practices of extraction, such as Arundhati Roy's *Walking with the Comrades*, Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*, Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, Jamaica Kincaid's *My Garden: Book*, Mulk Raj Anand's *Two Leaves and a Bud*, and I have published on some of this material in dialogue with critical approaches to the Anthropocene. I have also taught courses at the undergraduate level in Caribbean, South Asian, and African literature. Environmental humanities is part of my approach to this material in all these classes and I also encourage my students to think about research creations and "alternative assignments" for the work they have to complete. I look forward to expanding my teaching in these areas once my term as Associate Dean is over.

My research at the moment is anchored in the [Speculative Life Research Cluster](#) at the [Milieux Institute for Arts, Culture and Technology](#). Speculative Life is a meeting place of interdisciplinary scholars thinking about the Anthropocene, environmental humanities, anthropogenic climate change, contemporary responses to it, and the history of colonialism and race that has perhaps led us to the current climate crisis. The conversations and collaborations at Speculative Life encourage these more diverse ways of doing research and academic work in those areas. My graduate students are pursuing projects in ways that accommodate for these kinds of critical and creative responses. For the last 5 years we have been engaged in the [Critical Anthropocene Research Group \(CARG\)](#) a research project that includes a reading group and visiting speakers events open to all interested, students and faculty. There is a recent article about one of our events this past February with Dr. Philip Aghoghowia on the topic of ["Postcolonial Nature"](#).



Did you always see yourself pursuing higher education as a researcher or did something else come into your life and direct you towards this line of work?

My parents always encouraged me to pursue university education even though neither of them had done that when they were younger. I did my undergraduate degree in English at Queen's University. Then I got involved with Canadian Crossroads International, which is an organization that brings people from the Commonwealth to work on community organizations in Canada and sends Canadians to work on community organizations in other Commonwealth countries. It's really about learning from the communities that you go to work in and how they approach solutions for the social challenges they

face. Placement and activities overseen by Crossroads did not espouse ‘development rhetoric’, but rather prioritize respect for cultural diversity, community expertise, and are undertaken with a knowledge of the ongoing effect of colonialism in Canada and other Commonwealth countries. That experience, which took me to India right after I finished my undergraduate, was really inspiring to me.

There were no courses in postcolonial studies at Queen's University when I was an undergraduate but when I came back to Canada from my Crossroads experience, I pursued an MA with a concentration in postcolonial studies in the department of English at York University. I was privileged to continue at the PhD level at York with a focus on South Asian literature in English under the supervision of Dr. Arun Mukherjee. I was also awarded SSHRC funding and a [Shastri Indo-Canadian graduate research fellowship](#) that allowed me to also study under Meenakshi Mukherjee at Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi as part of my doctoral field work. My doctoral dissertation on how gender shaped India’s ‘national imaginary’ as reflected in literature and writing concerned with India’s partition in 1947 was the seed for my first book, [Unsettling Partition: Literature, Gender, Memory](#).

I didn’t start graduate work at the MA level with the plan to do a PhD, but things fell in place, and the chance to pursue research in postcolonial studies at York and as a visiting graduate student at JNU in Delhi was a wonderful experience. I was very lucky to be hired at Concordia just before I finished my PhD, which is fairly unusual given the level of competition in the tenure-track job market. The curriculum in the English department at Concordia had recently been revised to include a number of courses on literature from formally colonized regions –Africa, South Asia, the South Pacific and the Caribbean– and was not just limited to one general postcolonial studies course, so there has always been capacity to specialize in these areas in our program. As I mentioned above, my work has since gravitated toward postcolonial studies and the environmental humanities and I am the co-editor of an early work that brings these two areas of research together, [Global Ecologies and the Environmental Humanities: Postcolonial Approaches](#).

How would you define sustainability?

We need to think more about how culture shapes the way we understand sustainability. The OED defines ‘sustainable development’ as “economic development which can be sustained in the long term,” and, “economic development in which natural resources are used in ways compatible with the long-term maintenance of these resources, and with the conservation of the environment.” Of course, the phrase ‘sustainable development’ only began to enter into common usage in the early 1970s in response to a growing sense that there was a need to reconcile escalating environmental challenges and their social impacts with an unwillingness to give up the idea of economic growth — a cornerstone of capitalist accumulation. Maybe to think and act sustainability requires “degrowth” as a necessary pivot? I worry sometimes that the idea of ‘sustainable development’ has come to signify an innocent universalism, obscuring the history of colonialism and resource extraction that has produced the environmental crisis we are currently experiencing. The way we think about sustainability needs to go beyond science, social science, and scientific approaches to include a greater understanding of the cultural contexts that have led us toward the Anthropocene. I think research in the environmental humanities can help understand that context better and redefine sustainability in a more relational, just, and inclusive manner. We have a lot to learn from different communities and cultures if we hope to reduce anthropogenic climate change without perpetuating long standing global inequalities.

How Dr. Didur suggests anyone could get involved/engage with her work specifically and/or environmental humanities:

Within your studies:

- 🔍 Elizabeth Miller in Communication Studies
- 🔍 Dr. Kregg Hetherington in Sociology and Anthropology
- 🔍 Dr. Peter C. van Wyck in Communication Studies
- 🔍 Dr. Jesse Arseneault in English
- 🔍 Dr. Cynthia Quarrie in English
- 🔍 Dr. Nalini Mohabir in Geography, Planning and Environment
- 🔍 Anya Zilberstein in History

“We have a really strong concentration of faculty at Concordia pursuing outstanding academic and research creation work related to the environmental humanities.”

“While we don’t yet have a program in the environmental humanities, I would suggest taking courses with some of these people as part of your electives. At the end of the day, it’s what you learn and experience in all your undergraduate classes (not just your major) that shapes what you might go on to do after you graduate, or as a graduate student.”

Extracurriculars:

- 🔍 [Priscilla Joly, PhD candidate at Concordia](#)
- 🔍 [Crossroads International](#) or similar volunteer programs
- 🔍 [Les Amis du Champs des Possibles](#)
- 🔍 [Concordia community gardens](#)
- 🔍 Propose your own initiatives and take advantage of funding opportunities such as the [Sustainability Action Fund](#) at Concordia
- 🔍 Look for events on campus
- 🔍 Get involved with the Milieux Institute:
 - [The Speculative Life Cluster event page](#)
 - [Become an undergraduate fellow](#)
 - [Sign-up for the newsletter](#)
 - Participate in the [CARG](#)’s reading group or any events which are open to all
- 🔍 Explore Montreal’s urban green spaces and urban wilds.
- 🔍 Partake in a [BioBlitz](#)
- 🔍 Use Dr. Didur and collaborators’ app [Global Urban Wilds](#) to explore the Champs des Possibles
- 🔍 Check out this open-access journal: [Environmental Humanities](#)
 - Dr. Didur serves on the [Management Committee](#) for Concordia, one of the top 7 international universities who fund and collaboratively manage it
 - For [more info](#)

“There’s a lot of different ways to find spaces in the community to think more about sustainability locally and globally.”

“It’s just really liberating to have a kind of free-flowing discussion where nobody’s grading you or expecting you to write an essay after you’re done. Decouple your scholarly work from evaluation and connect more with personal interest.”

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