

Timothy J. Cooley (ed.)

Cultural Sustainabilities: Music, Media, Language, Advocacy

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In mid-November of 2019, the news media worldwide documented the disastrous flooding of the city of Venice, Italy. Founded as a refugee settlement in the fifth century, Venice was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1987. That same year, the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) published the study, *Our Common Future*. Also known as the *Brundtland Report*, the publication introduced the concept of sustainable development, linking current needs and resources with the anticipated needs of future generations. The 118 islands, and 50,000 km² of lagoons of the City of Venice comprise a unique ecosystem, a striking example of human enterprise, and the foundations of an architectural masterpiece of human ingenuity. This extraordinary organisation of land and waterways demonstrates the dynamism that animates human culture in the natural environment. Adaption and resilience are key variables that explain enduring ecosystems and cultural traditions. Nevertheless, in the face of rapidly accelerating climate change, the irreversible loss of cultural landmarks like Venice poses a new set of challenges for the future of vulnerable communities and folk traditions, both large and small, worldwide.

Cultural sustainability is a concept whose syntax is derived from a series of ecological concepts focused on the finite and renewable natural resources of the global community. Since its conception in the natural sciences, the term ecology and its processes have evolved to create new fields of inquiry related to climate change, economic and social justice, environmental philosophy and religious studies, and the environmental humanities. In turn, these fields have created a recursive forum for complex dialogic exchanges using the language and processes of ecology to understand how cultural traditions are preserved, transmitted and sustained. Technology is an essential mediator of the exchange of natural and humanistic values.

In *Cultural Sustainabilities: Music, Media, Language, Advocacy*, Cooley creates a five-part series of critical essays exploring a diverse field of study generated by the life works of the renowned ethnomusicologist, Jeff Todd Titon. Emeritus professor of ethnomusicology at Brown University and Fellow of the American Folklore Society, Titon continues to publish timely works on topics of musical and cultural sustainability, including regular posts to his research blog, *Sustainable Music*. The foreword, written by Titon, sets the tone and scope of the book. His fieldwork in international folklore and ethnomusicology helped to create new interpretations of ‘sound ecology’, or ‘soundscapes’. In the systematic documentation of communal participation in the creation and transmission of unique musical systems, Titon broke new ground for

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integrating scientific knowledge and the aesthetics of the humanities to create a 'third culture in which humanists and scientists are co-investigators ... reminding us that 'all beings, human and otherwise, are interconnected' (p. xxiv). As editor, Cooley elaborates on the book's tribute to Tilton's conceptual foundations, noting that it is structured as a conversation among a community of scholars committed to creating new knowledge in the field of the environmental humanities.

Part 1: Thinking, Writing, and Musicking About Sustainability lays bare the wires that connect the universes of ecology and culture. Language, syntax and metaphor are essentials of the exchanges. The essayists in this section present key concepts and terms and explore how their meanings have been appropriated, retooled and expanded over time. In Chapter 1, Sustainability Clashes and Concordances, Robert Baron and Thomas Walker delve into the linguistic junctions that drive cultural sustainability's praxis in the world of environmental inquiry. Key terms readily applicable to the study of cultural ecologies include adaptation, intervention, cooperation, competition, interdependence and resilience. Equally important are the 'contradictions, paradoxes, incongruities, and the inchoate' that are essential features of the 'binary oppositions of nature and culture' (p. 4).

In Chapter 2, *Dialogues All the Way Down*, Mary Hufford explores in depth the essentials of transdisciplinary discourse devoted to understanding culture as a driver of ecological sustainability. The contributions of Mikhail Bakhtin, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Charles Sanders Peirce, John Dewey, Brian Norton, Aldo Leopold, Karl Marx and David George Haskell are noted as precursors to contemporary understandings of basic, 'in the dirt' ecological processes as metaphors for communication and exchange within human communities. Of note is the essential role of 'rumors, anecdotes, and tales' in the self-referential understanding of landed communities.

Rory Turner challenges the traditional categorical norms used to define the term 'culture' in Chapter 3, *Radical Critical Empathy and Cultural Sustainability*. Moving beyond its 'epistemological reduction: as commodity, resource, analytic tool, arena for contestation, invention, and so on ...' (p. 32), Turner suggests that the symbiotic juxtaposition of the terms culture and sustainability opens a new forum for understanding the dynamics that allow cultures to flourish. In this context, culture is understood as a process inviting a radical participation in the work, play, and expressive genres of a community. This requires a radical critical empathy that embraces the well-being of self and others as an indispensable factor of co-existence.

Aaron S. Allen brings closure to this foundational set of essays in Chapter 4, *Sounding Sustainable; or, The Challenge of Sustainability*. Emphasising the broader contradictions inherent in its definition, he conceives sustainability as a binary concerned with stopping and changing behaviour as much as it is with continuity. With that in mind, he proposes that the oxymoronic nature of the

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term can be used as a prism or lens to ‘analyze and solve cultural problems that impinge on and rely on nature’ (p. 51). Within a framework of values including the environment, equity and equality, Allen adds the realms of ethics and aesthetics as philosophical foundations essential in the process of evaluating critical issues affecting our common future.

In a recent article in *Science*, W. Tecumseh Fitch and Tudor Popescu (2019) explore universal principles of sung music as a set of cognitive mechanisms that unify their expression across cultures despite the amazing variation of performance. The successive parts and chapters of Cooley’s collection of essays corroborate these findings, providing beautifully curated case studies organised around the concepts of anthropogenic change (Part 2: contributors Nancy Guy, Jennifer C. Post, Mark F. Dewitt, Susan Hurley-Glowa and Denise Von Glahn); media technologies (Part 3: contributors Daniel Cavicchi, Bary Dornfield, Tom Rankin, Patrick Hutchinson and Joshua Tucker); vocal traditions (Part 4: contributors Jeffrey A. Summit, Bert Feintuch, Michelle Kisliuk and Margaret Mazo); and sustainable models of music-making (Part 5: contributors Dotan Nitzberg, Michael B. Bakan, Roshan Samtan, Thomas Faux, Pauleena M. MacDougall and Timothy J. Cooley). Each chapter includes reference notes, and the volume concludes with a detailed index of terms.

Written to introduce the reader to the universal practice of ‘musicking’ and the influence of real-time environmental upheaval on its conception and performance, and the physical and technological systems that support and maintain its integrity, the scope and scale of the literature illuminates the immense challenges of survival in a time of climatic upheaval. The rich diversity of human culture and its musical expression, deeply woven from the natural world and our relationships with it, are critical bellwethers of the environmental challenges confronting humanity in the years to come.

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Reference

W. Tecumseh Fitch and T. Popescu. 2019. ‘The world in a song’ (Perspectives: Ethnomusicology), *Science* 366, Issue 6468, 22 November: 944–945. [Crossref](#)