

The Fourth Wave of Ecocriticism: Materiality, Sustainability, and Applicability

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A Few Basic Definitions of Ecocriticism (ecological literary criticism)

Cheryll Glotfelty, Introduction, *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996):

... the study of the relationship between literature and the physical world. (xviii)

David Mazel, *American Literary Environmentalism* (2000):

... the study of literature “as if the earth mattered.” (1)

My Own Broad Definition

Scott Slovic, “Ecocriticism: Containing Multitudes, Practising Doctrine,” *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*. Ed. Laurence Coupe. London: Routledge, 2000.

[Ecocriticism is] the study of **explicitly environmental texts from any scholarly approach** or, conversely, **the scrutiny of ecological implications and human-nature relationships in any literary text [or other artistic text]**, even texts that seem, at first glance, oblivious of the nonhuman world. (160)

Estok’s Critique of “Ambivalent Openness”

Simon Estok, “Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness,” *ISLE* 16.3 (Spring 2009).

The strategic openness that characterizes early ecocriticism has become to a certain degree ambivalent, garnering success for ecocriticism in its bid to gain footing and credibility in academia, but also resulting in some uncertainty about what ecocriticism does or seeks to do, some sense that “we’ll work it all out as we go along,” to borrow a phrase from Dr. Sarvis in Edward Abbey’s *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. [10] The edge seems to have become blunted.

The Activist Definition

Camilo Gomides, “Putting a New Definition of Ecocriticism to the Test: The Case of *The Burning Season*, a Film (Mal)Adaptation,” *ISLE* 13.1 (Winter 2006): 13-23.

Ecocriticism: The field of enquiry that analyzes and promotes works of art which raise moral questions about human interactions with nature, while also motivating audiences to live within a limit that will be binding over generations. (16)

Waves in the Ecocritical Palimpsest

Lawrence Buell, “The Emergence of Environmental Criticism,” *The Future of Environmental Criticism*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005. 1-28.

No definitive map of environmental criticism in literary studies can [...] be drawn. Still, one can

identify several trend-lines marking an evolution from a “first wave” of ecocriticism to a “second” or newer revisionist wave or waves increasingly evident today. This first-second wave distinction should not, however, be taken as implying a tidy, distinct succession. Most currents set in motion by early ecocriticism continue to run strong, and most forms of second-wave revisionism involve building on as well as quarreling with precursors. **In this sense, “palimpsest” would be a better metaphor than “wave.”** (17)

The First and Second Waves

First Wave (1980-present)

Nonfiction (“nature writing”)

Focus on non-human nature/wilderness

American and British focus

“Discursive” ecofeminism

Second Wave (mid-1990s-present)

Multiple genres (and green cultural studies)

Multicultural

Focus on local literatures around the world

Environmental justice ecocriticism

Urban and suburban

Proposing a “new *third* wave”

Joni Adamson and Scott Slovic, “Guest Editors’ Introduction: The Shoulders We Stand On: An Introduction to Ethnicity and Ecocriticism.” *MELUS* 34.2 (Summer 2009): 5-24.

Literary expression of environmental experience is as diverse as any other body of writing, of course. Yet until recently the community of ecocritics has been relatively non-diverse and also has been constrained by a perhaps overly narrow construing of “white” and “non-white” as the primary categories of ethnicity. Therefore, **this issue will explore what seems to be a new *third* wave of ecocriticism, which *recognizes* ethnic and national *particularities* and yet *transcends* ethnic and national *boundaries*; this *third* wave explores all facets of human experience from an environmental viewpoint.** (6-7)

Third Wave (2000-present)

Global concepts of place melding with neo-bioregionalism (“eco-cosmopolitanism,” “rooted cosmopolitanism,” “the global soul,” “nested bioregions,” or simply “translocality”)

Comparatist (post-national and post-ethnic?)

“Material” ecofeminism and multiple gendered approaches (eco-masculinism, green queer theory)

Animality (evolutionary ecocriticism, animal subjectivity and agency, vegetarianism, justice for nonhuman species, and posthumanism)

Critiques from within (relationship with theory, representationality, celebratory tone, “literature” too limited a focus, forgotten role of activist feminism, lack of precise definition, subfields seeking to break away)

Polymorphously activist

Methodology or Movement?

Altogether, the story of literary ecotheory’s relation to critical models has been unfolding less as a story of dogged recalcitrance—though there has been some of that—than as a quest *for* adequate models of inquiry from the plethora of possible alternatives that offer themselves from whatever disciplinary quarter. Cybematics, evolutionary biology, landscape ecology, risk theory, phenomenology, environmental ethics, feminist

theory, ecotheology, anthropology, psychology, science studies, critical race studies, postcolonial theory--all these and more... **The environmental turn in literary studies is best understood, then, less as a monolith than as a concourse of discrepant practices. (11)**

Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005)

“Is a place-responsive ecoliterature of a global scope an impossibility, then?” (92)

Lawrence Buell, “Space, Place, and Imagination from Local to Global.” *The Future of Environmental Criticism*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005. 62-96.

[F]ewer and fewer of the world’s population live out their lives in locations that are not shaped to a great extent by translocal—ultimately global—forces. (63)

[T]hose who speak on behalf of place-attachment [...] face certain intractable ambiguities inherent in the concept of place” [such as the danger of] fall[ing] into a sentimental environmental determinism. (66)

Neo-bioregionalism: new sense of urgency

Tom Lynch. *Xerophilia: Ecocritical Explorations in Southwestern Literature*. Lubbock: Texas Tech UP, 2008.

Bioregionalism promotes the maintenance of at least some degree of local self-reliance against increasing dependence upon inter-regional and global trade. It seeks to develop and maintain diverse vernacular cultures—their music, food, rituals, and other traditions—against the spread of global monoculture. Bioregional practice means supporting local organic agriculture via farmers markets, food co-ops, and community supported agriculture associations. It means supporting locally owned businesses instead of national or global chains. (19)

Move aside bioregionalism— Hello, “eco-cosmopolitanism”

Ursula K. Heise, “Deterritorialization and Eco-Cosmopolitanism.” *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*. New York: Oxford UP, 2008. 50-62.

The point of an eco-cosmopolitan critical project [...] would be to go beyond the aforementioned “ethic of proximity” so as to investigate by what means individuals and groups in specific cultural contexts have succeeded in envisioning themselves in similarly concrete fashion as part of the global biosphere, or by what means they might be enabled to do so; at the same time, as the work of Vandana Shiva, among others, highlights, such a perspective needs to be attentive to the political frameworks in which communities being to see themselves as part of a planetary community, and what power struggles such visions might be designed to hide or legitimate. (62)

Third-wave boundary-breaking

Patrick D. Murphy, “Refining Through Redefining Our Sensibilities: Nature-Oriented Literature as an International and Multicultural Movement.” *Farther Afield in the Study of Nature-Oriented Literature*. Charlottesville and London: U of Virginia P, 2000. 58-74.

If ecocriticism has been hindered by too narrow an attention to nonfiction prose and the fiction of nonfictionality, it has also been limited by a focus on American and British literatures. **In order to widen the**

understanding of readers and critics, it is necessary to reconsider the privileging of certain genres and also the privileging of certain national literatures and certain ethnicities within those national literatures. Such reconsideration will enable a greater inclusiveness of literatures from around the world within the conception of nature-oriented literature. **It will also enable critics and readers such as myself, who focus primarily on American literature, to place that literature in an internationally relative and comparative framework.** I see such reconsideration as one of the ways by which we can refine our awareness and expand the field of ecocriticism. (58)

My Editor's Note for the for the Fall 2012 issue of *ISLE* (19.4)

It now seems to me, as we near the end of 2012, that the material turn in ecocriticism is broadening to the extent that it may well represent a new “fourth wave of ecocriticism.” I see a proliferation of studies and courses emphasizing the fundamental materiality (the physicality, the *consequentiality*) of environmental things, places, processes, forces, and experiences. Ranging from studies of climate change literature to examinations of the substance of ecopoetic language, there is a growing pragmatism in ecocritical practice. **One might even propose that “academic ecocriticism” is now spawning a new mode of “applied ecocriticism,” with applications encompassing basic human behaviors and lifestyle choices, such as eating and locomotion and clothing and dwelling.**

We are now immersed in a fourth wave of ecocriticism (2008–present)

What are the emerging discourses of materiality (place-attachment, corporeality) and commitment (ethical awareness, political engagement) in this global era?

Image to the right is reprinted from Stacy Alaimo's 2010 article “The Naked Word: The Trans-corporeal Ethics of the Protesting Body” from issue 20.1 of *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*.

Material feminism, trans-corporeality, and the new call to human-nature co-extensiveness—the first murmurs of an ecocritical fourth wave in 2008

Stacy Alaimo, “Trans-corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature.” *Material Feminisms*. Ed. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2008. 237-64.

Crucial ethical and political possibilities emerge from this literal “contact zone” between human corporeality and more-than-human nature. **Imagining human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world, underlines the extent to which the corporeal substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from “the environment.”** [...] Indeed, thinking across bodies may catalyze the recognition that the “environment,” which is too often imagined as inert, empty space or as a “resource” for human use, is, in fact, a world of fleshy beings, with their own needs, claims, and actions. By emphasizing the movement across bodies, trans-corporeality reveals the interchanges and interconnections between human corporeality and the more-than-human. But by underscoring that “trans” indicates movement across different sites, trans-corporeality opens up an epistemological “space” that acknowledges the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, non-human creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other actors. [...] (238-39)

Here are some newer voices of North American ecocriticism, focusing on ethnicity and environmental

expression

Two newly prominent ecocritics: Stacy Alaimo and Rob Nixon

Key concepts from Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011)

“slow violence”: structural violence, which emphasizes “vast structures that can give rise to acts of personal violence and constitute forms of violence in and of themselves” (10);

“apprehension”: “To engage slow violence is to confront layered predicaments of apprehension: to apprehend—to arrest, or at least some degree mitigate—often imperceptible threats requires rendering them apprehensible to the senses through the work of scientific and imaginative testimony” (14);

“environmental writer-activists”: “Writer-activists can help us apprehend threats imaginatively that remain imperceptible to the senses, either because they are geographically remote, too vast or too minute in scale, or are played out across a time span that exceeds the instance of observation ... (15)

Material feminism, trans-corporeality, and the new call to human-nature co-extensiveness—the first murmurs of an ecocritical fourth wave?

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Editor’s Note for Summer 2012 issue of *ISLE*

Scott Slovic, Editor’s Note, *ISLE* 19.3 (Summer 2012):

Material ecocriticism is really heating up. For me, the challenges and possibilities of matter-focused ecocriticism first began to stir when Lance Newman published his article on “Marxism and Ecocriticism” in these pages in 2002, revealing some of the fertile connections between Marxist materialism and ecological concerns, but it was actually in 2009, when I had the opportunity to read Stacy Alaimo’s article “Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature” in the collection *Material Feminisms*, that things actually began to crystallize. **Alaimo’s notion of “trans-corporeality,”** extended in her monograph *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* and extended further in her contribution to the special cluster in this issue, **has helped to launch an entire new direction in contemporary ecocriticism, it seems to me.** (443)

A Few Key Theoretical Texts for Material Ecocriticism

Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*.

Durham: Duke UP, 2007.

Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke UP, 2010.

Re-affirming the new material theory: matter no longer merely “instrumentalized”

Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010):

Why advocate the vitality of matter? Because my hunch is that **the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption**. It does so by preventing us from detecting (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling) a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies. (ix)

I now emphasize even more **how the figure of enchantment points in two directions: the first toward the humans who *feel* enchanted and whose agentic capacities may be thereby strengthened, and the second toward the agency of the things that *produce* (helpful, harmful) effects in human and other bodies**. (xii)

From Serenella Iovino’s contribution to “Theorizing Material Ecocriticism: A Diptych,” *ISLE* (Fall 2012) **Against the extreme shifts of linguistic constructionism** (and not against postmodernism as a whole, as Serpil Oppermann’s part of this diptych illustrates), **social scientists, philosophers, and feminist thinkers** (in particular, theorists in feminist science studies and corporeal feminist theory) **have recalled the concreteness of existential experience, with regard to both the bodily dimension and nonbinary object-subject epistemological structures**. (452)

Material Ecocriticism, edited by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2014

American Literary History (Spring 2012). Special Issue: **Sustainability** in America

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Summary of Fourth-Wave Directions

Ongoing multiculturalism among American ecocritics and interest in multicultural experience and voices **Environmentalism of the poor** (from Guha/Martinez-Alier to Nixon); cultivating ecocritical voices in the developing world (Bangladesh, Brazil, Cameroon, etc.)

Material ecocriticism and its various spinoffs (material ecofeminism, nonhuman/nonanimate agency, public health narratives)

Studies of perception/**apprehension**/vast and minute scales; **empirical psychonarratology**

Applied ecocriticism (material culture, sustainability, energy, food, etc.)