

## Ecocriticism at the MLA: A Roundtable

### INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

On Tuesday, December 29, 1998, ecocriticism officially arrived at the Modern Language Association. After a six-year battle, former ASLE President Cheryl Glotfelty was able to win MLA Allied Group status for ASLE, thus entitling us to two sessions at every MLA convention from 1998 on. The first of our two sessions this year was "Contemporary American Ecopoetry," chaired by Elizabeth Dodd and including papers by Ralph Black, J. Scott Bryson, and John Elder. The second was "Ecocriticism: Trajectories in Theory and Practice," moderated by myself and including presentations by Lawrence Buell, Michael P. Cohen, Cheryl Glotfelty, Scott Slovic, and Louise Westling. Both panels were assembled by ASLE's MLA Liaison, Bonney MacDonald, and both were very well attended and received.

"Ecocriticism: Trajectories in Theory and Practice" is the subject of the following constellation of short pieces by the five panel participants. Although the session was dynamic, interactive, and focused largely around questions from the audience, the short statements found here are distillations of the opening remarks offered by each of the panelists. Each participant was invited to comment on the current and future role of ecocriticism in literary and environmental studies, and each was encouraged to identify important growth and problem areas within the study of literature and environment. I believe the diversity and richness of the following responses helps to indicate the vitality of ecocritical studies at the millennium.

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### WHAT WOULD BE AN ECOLOGICAL HUMANISM?

Ever since David Ehrenfeld's *The Arrogance of Humanism* twenty years ago, the realization has been growing that a major paradigm shift is needed in human culture. I believe that shift began with quantum physics in science and the closely associated modernist formal innovations and skepticism that have dominated the twentieth century. Yet in the popular mind—indeed in the assumptions that motivate most activities in the dominant countries of the globe—the radical ideas of indeterminacy, contingency, and the interrelatedness of beings and phenomena have not yet been absorbed. It is time for ecocriticism and environmental philosophy to articulate the world view that is required as much by the new physics as by ecological sciences and the increasing evidence of global environmental problems. Such

a world view must be non-dualistic, anit-Platonic, embodied, and relational. It must define human-consciousness and action within an enormously complex, interdependent community of life on earth.

We need to be aware of the basic notions of human superiority we inherited from Renaissance Humanism. Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man* articulated a confident vision of man's ability to transcend "the fermenting dung heap of the inferior world" and withdraw from the body into "the inner chambers of the mind" and in order to become "neither a creature of earth nor a heavenly creature, but some higher divinity, clothed with human flesh" (trans. Robert Caponigri. 1956, pp. 10-11). Cartesian philosophy and Newtonian mechanics of the Enlightenment era grew out of such notions, but the mechanistic model of the universe was thoroughly debunked in the earliest decades of the twentieth century.

An ecological humanism would restore us to appropriate humility, accepting the lessons of quantum physics and reawakening us to cooperative participation within the community of planetary life. In studies of our primate relatives, by Jane Goodall and Dian Fossey as well as many others, we have learned that most of the traits we claimed as demonstrative of human superiority—toolmaking, language, reasoning and innovative adaptation, cooperative social structures—are shared with animals still considered savage beasts in popular parlance. Birds also use tools, wolves have complex social arrangements much like our own, and even viruses and plants communicate and are active agents in shaping their environments and destinies. I spoke recently with a microbiologist who witnessed a geranium turning off a gene that had been introduced into it in order to prevent it from blossoming. Humans are not the unique agents among living creatures on earth.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty articulated a philosophy in *The Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Visible and the Invisible* that is remarkably congruent with quantum physics regarding the interrelation of space and time; the situatedness of our knowing, our participatory relationship with the things we perceive, and the indeterminacy of our access to precise apprehension of the world in which we are embedded. Given such an understanding, we should develop a sacramental awareness of the world, perhaps through the concept of an "ecological sublime" that accepts "confirmation of its astonishment" (*Visible and the Invisible*, p. 102) rather than seeking or presuming control.

Louise Westling, University of  
Oregon



## CLIMATE IN LITERARY STUDY

When I sent *The Garden of Bristlecones* to the environmental historian Richard White, he noted that one section—about reading past climates from timberline trees of the White Mountains—followed the interior logic of a particular investigator, Valmore LaMarche, Jr. LaMarche's contribution to paleoclimatology was to make a "relatively narrow spatial study of a biotic line in a particular place extend out to encompass events across the globe."

LaMarche studied geology at Berkeley and Harvard, and ended in Tucson correlating climate change to volcanic events. He was a sort of "Nature Reader." Like most scientists, before he did his writing he accumulated data, created models, made detailed small-scale maps, and then extended them through time and space until, as Professor White said, they encompassed the globe.

Like LaMarche, I engage in case studies. Like him, I am imperialistic, aim to construct from them a more than local discourse about the natural—and the way humans read themselves into and out of the natural: This has not normally been called literary study. Like LaMarche, I have failed to settle on a single discipline.

So much for introduction and apology. Humans read themselves into the natural in diverse ways. For instance, we imagine most people living historically in temperate climates. Do they, or does our discourse distract us from our situation? Here might be a little case study, of global climate, and of our own, of global conditions and of migration of humans to particular places. I read recently in a piece of literature of the genre DEIS (Draft Environmental Impact Statement for Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument) that "Because experience of stockmen was in more temperate climates, they knew little about the carrying capacity of these arid lands. Consequently, the range was stocked beyond its capacity, causing changes in plant, soil, and water relationships. Some speculate that the changes were permanent and irreversible . . ."

When the DEIS calls these people stockmen, it also calls their region rangeland. These stockmen were at work in my region during the era when the modern idea of climate was being established by climatologists.

People don't easily adapt to changes in conditions. But, what temperate climates constituted the previous experiences of these hypothetical stockmen? Climate is normally spoken of in terms of "zones," derives from Greek, meaning "belt," and from classical Greek ideas about the world's body. Ptolemy conceived global climatic differences in terms of "daylength," or differentially illuminated zones. Indeed, the term climate, coming from *klimata*, indicates inclination of the sun, and suggests perspective.

After investigators decided that heat rather than daylength identified climatic zones, Alexander von Humboldt used observed data in 1817, to draw the first isothermal map. Over several decades, maps of temperature were more accurately scaled to represent worldwide averages during individual months.

All of these maps represent hot (tropical), and cold (arctic) zones, with the temperate falling between them. Clearly,

the classical idea of the temperate reads a human desire into global climate.

These zonal maps are relational. Data on vegetation is used to imply temperature, and temperature data is used to imply vegetative growth. By the middle of this century, maps correlated zonal climates and vegetative growth, and led to maps of growing seasons for such species as deciduous trees.

Unfortunately, zones are not historically fixed. They shift. Worse, the Temperate Zone "contained some of the most extreme conditions on earth and was in fact highly in-temperate in regard to temperature," as one climatologist puts it.

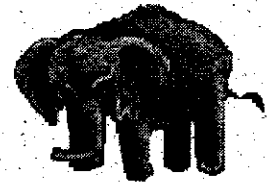
Among climatologists, some question whether the concept of zones ought to be used at all, since "the contours of the continents, the arrangement of mountains, and the courses of ocean currents introduce modifications."

No surprise here. A particular kind of culturally sanctioned reading by an interpretive community created the discourse that we now use, to judge our past and plan our future. But my brief survey leads to a set of questions for which I have no ready answers. Is there such a thing as a temperate climate? If so, what do we mean when we use the phrase? What reading or mapping of the world does our public discourse create with that phrase?

How shall writers now speak of my region and its recent human history, or place it in a global context? Some of my friends continue to speak of wilderness. Others in my region prefer the term rangeland. Neither term is rooted in data about local conditions, or takes cognizance of changing global climates. Ought they? Is it possible that unexamined uses of language lead to careless decisions?

I believe these kinds of questions can shape an important and socially useful arena for ecocriticism.

Michael Cohen, *Southern Utah University*



## ECOCRITICISM: CONTAINING MULTITUDES, PRACTICING DOCTRINE

Each of us has only a few minutes to speak at today's session, so I suppose I'd like to use my time to make two central points about the field of ecocriticism.

I'll anchor each of my points in a well-known quotation. The first is a parenthetical statement from the end of a famous American poem: "I am large, I contain multitudes." This is one of my favorite lines from Whitman's "Song of Myself."

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I use it whenever someone tells me of strange goings-on in the organization ASLE, such as fracasos on the e-mail list or odd presentations at a conference of one kind or another. Well, I say, "ASLE is large and it contains multitudes"—it's my way of saying, "It takes all kinds of people...." The same is true of ecocriticism as a scholarly perspective, as an academic "movement." There is no single, dominant worldview guiding ecocritical practice—no single strategy at work from example to example of ecocritical writing or teaching. Cheryl Glotfelty neatly defines "ecocriticism" as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty and Fromm, *Ecocriticism Reader*, xviii). My own definition, when asked for a broad description of the field, is "the study of explicitly environmental texts by way of any scholarly approach or, conversely, the scrutiny of ecological implications and human-nature relationships in any literary text, even texts that seem, at first glance, oblivious of the non-human world." In other words, any conceivable style of scholarship becomes a form of ecocriticism if it's applied to certain kinds of literary works; and, on the other hand, there is not a single literary work anywhere that utterly defies ecocritical interpretation, that is "off limits" to green reading. How's that for an encompassing definition?

This is actually an important point, because I often find that, despite my best efforts and the efforts of colleagues like those sitting up here with me this afternoon, many people continue to have a rather narrow and dismissive attitude toward ecocriticism and environmental literature, as if we somehow represent merely a nostalgic, millennialist fad, a yearning to resurrect and re-explain a limited tradition of hackneyed pastoral or wilderness texts. In the fall of 1997, I proposed a special issue of the journal *PMLA* devoted to ecocriticism and environmental literature, taking great pains to indicate that ecocriticism does not merely mean studying a narrow body of nineteenth- and twentieth-century American literature. In February of 1998, I heard that the proposal had been turned down by the *PMLA* board, in part because, as editor Martha Banta put it in her sympathetic letter, "Environmental literature is generally deemed to be almost entirely an 'Americanist' issue, and the Board feared being taken one more time around the track with a flood of essays about Emerson, Thoreau, etc. MLA members still need to be educated to the realization that this is a global concern, not tied to the American situation" (Banta, letter, 4 Feb. 1998). Hence my ceaseless effort, as the editor of *ISLE*: to recruit studies of international environmental literature and to solicit submissions from practicing environmental writers throughout the world; hence the importance of such recent books as John Elder and Hertha Wong's *Family of Earth and Sky: Indigenous Tales of Nature from Around the World* (Beacon, 1994), Robert M. Torrance's *Encompassing Nature: A Sourcebook* (Counterpoint, 1998), and Patrick D. Murphy's *Literature of Nature: An International Sourcebook* (Fitzroy Dearborn, 1998); and hence my reiteration that both ecocriticism and environmental literature "are large and contain multitudes."

My second point, if I have time, is that ecocriticism has no central, dominant doctrine or theoretical apparatus—rather,

ecocritical theory, such as it is, is being re-defined daily by the actual practice of thousands of literary scholars around the world. The quotation that always surfaces when someone asks me about the 'theory of ecocriticism' comes from Edward Abbey's 1975 novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang* in which a brief dialogue near the beginning of this narrative of eco-sabotage goes as follows:

"Do we know what we're doing and why?"

"No."

"Do we care?"

"We'll work it all out as we go along. Let our practice form our doctrine, thus assuring precise theoretical coherence" (Abbey, 65).

Another routine way of dismissing ecocriticism is to claim that the field has no "theory," no substance. In her letter to me about the proposed special issue of *PMLA*, Professor Banta's second key point about the board's response was as follows: "However unfair this may be, another general perception is that environmental studies is 'soft.' As several board members put it (although they themselves know better), it is characterized as 'hug-the-tree stuff' (Banta, letter, 4 Feb. 1998). Of course, all of us actually working in the field can point to any number of examples of lucid, practical "ecocritical theory," ranging from Larry Buell's far-reaching perceptions of American culture to the insights of Molly Westling, Annette Kolodny, Patrick Murphy, Greta Gaard, and many others regarding the gendered understanding of landscape. We have many ecocritics helping to demonstrate a new theory and praxis of "narrative scholarship." Still others are finding ways of applying rhetorical theory, geographical discourse of "place," and concepts from ecology and conservation biology to the study of literature. Perhaps the overriding feature of ecocritical theory, though, is that it is nearly always attached to an accessible, helpful application, sometimes making it almost unrecognizable as theory. We do not (yet) have any Lacans or Foucaults in our ranks (although we certainly have our share of colleagues and students applying Lacanian and Foucaultian perspectives to green texts). If you're looking for ecocritical theory, look for it in our practice.

Scott Slovic, *University of Nevada, Reno*

## WHAT'S NEXT FOR ECOCRITICISM?

Today ecocriticism is being published at an astounding rate. In the last two issues of *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, for example, 67 new books were reviewed, and another 177 were briefly noted. More than 200 books in this field in the last five years! We've made it. We're there. We're here at the MLA. We've become institutionalized.

Now what? What's in store for ecocriticism? Well, earlier this month I attended an ALA-sponsored sympo-



sium on Nature and Environmental Writing. The paper titles were stunning: "Sublimity and Ethics: Relating Natural and Social Othernesses," "Coming Out of the Country: The Theory of Environmental Constructivism and the Problem of Cultural Dualism," "The Word Incarnate: Language, Landscape and the Sacred," "Next to Nature: Intimacy and Desire in Frost," "Luminence and Luminescence in Thoreau," and so on. My prediction is that these sorts of intellectual projects will proliferate for many years to come. Why? Because they're interesting. These are the sorts of things we think about when we're in this profession. And that's okay. That's just fine.

But now I'm thinking maybe we should also take some initiative to investigate the environmental policies of our professional institutions. We now have a voice in the profession; maybe we ought to exercise it a little for environmentally friendly policies in our universities and professional organizations. I'm thinking of David Orr's book, *Ecological Literacy*, in which he argues that "Environmental education ought to change the way people live, not just how they talk" (91). He advocates a study of institutional resource-flows that would result in "a set of policies governing food, energy, water, materials, . . . and waste flows that meet standards for sustainability" (106-07).

In our profession of literary studies, paper use and waste must certainly rank high on the list of environmental impacts we make on the earth. Why not start with paper in reforming our praxis? For example, all those 200-plus recent books on literature and environment—what kind of paper were they printed on? What kind of paper are our conference papers printed on? Our syllabi? Is your university's letterhead printed on recycled paper? Mine's not. How about the MLA? Does it use recycled paper? Can paper use be reduced in the MLA?

I did a little investigating. I called the MLA and spoke with Judith Altruder in publications and with executive director Phyllis Franklin. Both Judy and Phyllis told me that the number one criterion for MLA paper use is "preservation." "Preservation" made me think of John Muir, so I was puzzled until I realized that they meant preservation of the MLA documents themselves. Namely, their first mandate is to use acid-free paper so that MLA publications will last as long as possible. Beyond that mandate, the MLA does, when possible, try to print materials on recycled paper, but they could not tell me what percentage of the time it is in fact possible.

From the production end, there are multiple factors to consider, primarily cost and time. The MLA staff is always under the gun to keep costs down because MLA members complain bitterly when dues are raised. Furthermore, pressing deadlines have to be met; if no recycled paper is available and affordable when production must happen, then they have to go with whatever acid-free paper is available. The MLA uses a number of different printers, and paper availability and costs vary from printer to printer.

So, my understanding of the MLA's paper use policy is that there is no written guideline that the MLA should

strive to use recycled paper, but the current MLA staff is environmentally sympathetic and does their best within the constraints they face. I asked Phyllis whether it might be possible to reduce paper use by giving MLA members the option of not receiving some of the MLA publications. Problematic, she said, because the MLA depends upon paid advertisements, and advertisers base their payment on circulation. Large circulation equals more money. Ahhhh, the light begins to dawn. The MLA operates in the context of a capitalist economy as, of course, do our own universities.

The MLA has a Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession, a Committee on Disability Issues in the Profession, a Task Force against Campus Bigotry, and many others. Why not form a Committee or Task Force on Environmental Practices in the Profession, I wonder? We could ask a variety of questions about the policies and procedures of the MLA, but also of universities in general, with the goal, of course, of reforming those practices.

I queried Phyllis about how one goes about establishing such a committee. She answered that she would be the one to establish a committee, with the approval of the Executive Council. BUT, she warned me, committees cost the MLA money, because the MLA pays transportation, meeting, and lodging costs for its committees. The bottom line is that the MLA is short on money. Her suggestion is that ASLE establish a committee through its own channels and that this committee come up with a list of desirable standards—some criteria, a core set of good practices, a page of recommendations—that she would then be happy to publish in the MLA Newsletter to elicit feedback from the membership, the Executive Council, and the Delegate Assembly. This seems to me to be a reasonable first step. It is a direction I would like to see ASLE pursue. One way to begin might be to hold a planning session on "Paper Use in Literary Studies" at the upcoming ASLE conference in June.

If we're not going to take responsibility for the environmental practices of our institutions, who will? We're demonstrating that we can think interesting ecocritical thoughts. Let's also be willing to take ecological action in this our home profession.

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