

Forum on Literatures of the Environment

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Forum on Literatures of the Environment

THE FOLLOWING letters were submitted in response to a call for comments on the growing importance and expanding scope of the fields of environmental literature and ecological literary criticism. The contributors are listed below:

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A number of converging imperatives have prompted widespread professional attention to environmental readings in the humanities recently, generating ideas that can only promise increasingly focused development in the future. One general response to greater awareness of environmental context in texts has been "Here is a truly workable opportunity for the humanities to revitalize their mission and to make significant contributions to the culture at large!" In fact, scholarly pursuits arising from ecocriticism do appear like a breath of fresh air, in contrast to the recent "consensus" about the humanities, in which our profession suffers from "insularity" and "defeatism" (Robert Weisbuch, *Chronicle of Higher Education* 26 Mar. 1999: B4). When humanities students put on their "green glasses" to look at texts, excitement stirs, as the classroom yields its discursive space to issues of pressing contemporary importance. Yet to say that a critical focus on nature brings significant rewards to students and the culture at large is to state what any careful observer would consider obvious, as valuable as that perception is. Here, then, are two other ways that cultural and academic imperatives come to bear on the study of nature: ecocriticism is a scholarly site that engenders fertile cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural analysis.

Looking at texts for their ideas about the natural world results in a cross-fertilization of the humanities with other academic disciplines: when literature combines with biology, cultural theory, biochemistry, art, ecology, history, and other sciences, any combination of these fields forms a cauldron of brand-new

perspectives. Through ecocritical practice, the humanities can play a unifying role in creating a new form of knowledge. The core of this intellectual activity spills over from English departments into the increasing numbers of environmental centers on campuses across the country, where humanists and scientists collaborate.

Furthermore, "green reading" crosses ethnic and cultural boundaries, not only expanding awareness but also encouraging an understanding of a diversity of practices that could become a mutually beneficial form of knowledge with practical applications. Far from being American, ecocriticism encompasses the very earth it studies, assuming its size and shape. Imagine literature courses that explore readings of gender in relation to nature; imagine courses that cover Native American, Asian, African, Hispanic, or other traditions and draw on their literatures depicting views of nature. Studying diverse interactions with the natural world can expand cross-cultural understandings enormously.

If, in the past, ecocriticism has appeared tangential to mainstream literary criticism, that view expresses the conceptual gap between nature and culture that inhabits our reasoning apparatus. We must recognize an element of artificiality in this perceived separation, for nature and culture often overlap as twinned processes. Simon Schama, for instance, argues that when we imagine even the most pristine of wildernesses, "the landscapes that we suppose to be most free of our culture may turn out, on closer inspection, to be its product" (*Landscape and Memory* 9). The view that culture is produced by human beings and is therefore separate from nature bypasses the fact that all human culture resides in the natural world, that every penny of economic worth ultimately draws on resources of the natural world, and that we owe our very existence to its processes. To disregard the fact that human cultural production is embedded in the natural world is to entertain a selective vision that places humankind in a pre-Copernican position of centrality it does not deserve.

Human beings are obligated to monitor the technologies they have the intelligent capacity to create out of natural processes. Herein lies a moral commitment that the humanities can engender among the best and brightest minds of the future. Indeed, with technological freedom comes responsibility. Western culture must increase its awareness of the consequences of its beliefs and actions and must recognize that any action toward the natural world is eventually an action toward oneself and toward one's culture. If a mysterious nature resides outside our expanding human knowledge, the natural and cultural whole we do understand must be seen for the enclosed system that it is. It is time for all of us together to examine through criticism of written texts our own atti-

tudes toward nature and to engender a sense of accountability for the havoc the culture's left hand wreaks on its right hand through shortsighted technological practices.

How does literary criticism come to bear on this dilemma, which increasingly urges its data on our perceptions? At a time when our cultural awareness of natural systems has grown into ecological concern, a historical inquiry into past cultural relations to nature can form a vital basis for our understanding. What, in the conceptual relation between Western culture and nature, has changed, and why? And how does an understanding of the history of this relation affect current environmental thought? We can ask, for example, what culturally honed lenses have shaped Western perceptions of the natural world. Dealing with literary works formed by pastoral, Romantic, transcendental, evolutionary, scientific, bio-ethical, and environmental sensibilities, we can delve into works by authors representing each genre's period: Theocritus, Vergil, Sidney, Marvell, Shakespeare, Romantic writers, scientific writers such as Darwin and his scientific community, and American writers from Thoreau and Austin through Leopold, Abbey, Carson, Snyder, and W. S. Merwin, for instance. In the end, one may notice an evolution in this literary history that mirrors an ideological progression from the view of humanity as having dominion over the earth to humanity as the humble recipient of a bounty in the natural scheme of things. As ecocriticism takes on the task of reexamining a culture's attitudes toward nature through its history, a variety of texts become useful: plays, films, poetry, scientific treatises, stories, journals, essays, and novels have their place in this type of curriculum. What these representative lists of authors, genres, and sensibilities reveal is that "there is not a single literary work anywhere that utterly defies ecocritical interpretation," as Scott Slovic has recently pointed out ("Ecocriticism: Trajectories in Theory and Practice," MLA Annual Convention, Dec. 1998).

Is our profession interested in avenues toward expanded awareness for our culture? Are we interested in redefining our role as central to academic inquiry? Should we then embrace environmental readings of literature? Yes, yes, and yes.

JEAN ARNOLD
Harvey Mudd College

Although the study of literature in relation to physical environment dates back almost as far as literary criticism itself, only in the 1990s has it assumed the proportions of a movement, with its own professional organization, the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE, numbering some 750 members worldwide),

and its own journal (*ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*). An increasing number of scholarly journals in diverse fields are receptive to its contributions (*New Literary History's* forthcoming special issue on ecocriticism is a recent example), and since 1995 a series of major professional conferences of increasingly international scope has been held. Considered qua movement, literature-and-environment studies (increasingly lumped under the semineologicistic label "ecocriticism," however uneasy the unidoctrinalist imputation makes some practitioners, including me, feel) is thus indisputably a more coordinated venture than, say, the ethical turn in literary studies reviewed in the January 1999 *PMLA*. Yet at the same time it is more like such prior critical insurgencies as feminist, ethnic, and gay revisionisms than like New Critical formalism, deconstruction, and new historicism, in that literature-and-environment studies takes its energy not from a central methodological paradigm of inquiry but from a pluriform commitment to the urgency of rehabilitating that which has been effectively marginalized by mainstream societal assumptions. As such, the phenomenon of literature-and-environment studies is better understood as a congeries of semioverlapping projects than as a unitary approach or set of claims.

These projects include the following, and more: (1) consideration of the possibilities of certain forms of scientific inquiry (e.g., ecology and evolutionary biology) and social scientific inquiry (e.g., geography and social ecology) as models of literary reflection; (2) textual, theoretical, and historical analysis of the platial basis of human experience; (3) study of literature as a site of environmental-ethical reflection—for example, as a critique of anthropocentric assumptions; (4) retheorization of mimesis and referentiality, especially as applied to literary representation of physical environment in literary texts; (5) study of the rhetoric (e.g., its ideological valences of gender, race, politics) of any and all modes of environmental discourse, including creative writing but extending across the academic disciplines and (indeed even more important) beyond them into the public sphere, especially the media, governmental institutions, corporate organizations, and environmental advocacy groups; and (6) inquiry into the relation of (environmental) writing to life and pedagogical practice. These and other ecocritical projects are being produced both separately and in combination, and by no means with one accord. The operative word here is liveliness, not consensus. Literature-and-environment studies are anything but unanimous, for example, on the sense in which literary texts can be said to render extratextual environments or on how—if at all—literary inquiry might be based on models taken from natural science or science studies.

Some of those associated with the movement would argue for the existence of an emerging ecocritical canon, the bibliography to *The Ecocriticism Reader* (ed. Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm [Athens: U of Georgia P, 1996]) being the best-known endeavor to formulate an interim list of indispensable texts. I feel much more confident in asserting simply that literature-and-environment studies will surely keep burgeoning and gaining in critical maturity than I would in claiming that a canonical understanding of what form it should take has been attained. Indeed, if ecocriticism still lacks a paradigm-inaugurating statement like Edward Said's *Orientalism* (for colonial discourse studies) or Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (for new historicism), that may be just as well.

Several other dimensions of the literature-and-environment movement deserve special note. First, its "identitarian" aspect differs from that of all other critical insurgencies purporting to speak about or for marginalized others, insofar as the other in question appears to be centered to a greater extent outside the realms of human culture and the human body (though hardly disjunct from them!). Second, unlike all the critical movements mentioned above, literature-and-environment studies began qua movement outside the main centers of Euro-American academia, within the Western Literature Association (although a number of its chief advocates had been trained at leading American graduate schools). Third and semi-related, ecocriticism initially had and still to a considerable extent maintains a distinctly up-country-and-outback orientation, focusing strongly on rural and wilderness representation as against urban and metropolitan. Fourth, more than most prior late-twentieth-century critical insurgencies, the literature-and-environment movement has sought to break down the barrier between formal criticism and "creative" writing—for example, through emphasis on the informal, nontechnical essay as a mode for unfolding critical reflection simultaneously with personal narrative. Fifth, ASLE's membership was initially and to a considerable extent still is strikingly youthful (the median age of participants at the first national meeting, in 1995, was well under 35).

All five of these factors have provoked suspicion in some quarters. I read them much more hopefully, on balance. On the one hand, they do testify to certain parochialisms, especially during the movement's beginning, chief among which perhaps have been too selective emphases on anglophone and particularly United States writing, on country landscapes, on traditional conservationist or preservationist thinking at the expense of other environmental(ist) persuasions (particularly the environmental justice movement), and on modes of criticism

excessively reactive against poststructuralist or cultural studies models instead of on direct constructive engagement. On the other hand, a certain hyperconcentration was, I think, necessary to get ecocriticism—like all critical movements—going: to give it energy, momentum, an edge of contrarian disaffection; and certain it is that literature-and-environment studies in 1999–2000, whatever the case a decade ago, has been growing and deparochializing fast. The inquiry has not yet acquired the standing as a humanistic subdiscipline presently accorded, for example, environmental history or environmental ethics. But it is only a matter of time before that takes place.

LAWRENCE BUELL
Harvard University

Reading Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* the other day, I came across these lines:

Take note what men of old concluded:
That what there is shall go to those who are good for it,
Children to the motherly, that they prosper,
Carts to good drivers that they be driven well,
The Valley to the waterers, that it yield fruit.

I think this passage opens up as many textual, ideological, and historical problems as does evaluating the beautiful but problematic songs of Woodie Guthrie about the Tennessee Valley Authority and the dams on the Columbia River.

A particular piece of land, a valley, a homeland, may be of value to a particular person or community. But the love of the natural world in which human beings find themselves embedded is not a regional or local issue. Consider the obligatory scene in the proletarian novel where the immigrant mother leaves the sweatshop in an American city and reminds herself and her children of the green world of the old country.

Literary critics, like environmental historians, have been grappling with the social construction of the natural world for decades. In a modernist mode, this problem presents itself to historians of science with the changing conceptions of a complex of ideas known as ecology. There is not one ecology but a constellation of ecological ideologies, including that of a growing literature of the ecologies of cities.

Literary critics and historians have inherited the nature-culture duality as an ideological problem. Wilderness versus the city, nature versus nurture: these dualities are constantly breaking down and yet are surprisingly eternal in our discourse.

As a young student, I read few passages from Darwin and his supporters. But as Darwinian materials have proliferated in our own time, they have broken down categories of fiction and nonfiction. Ecology is, after all, a slice of evolutionary theory, or vice versa. The American literature requiring of the reader a sophisticated knowledge of ecological theory now includes scientists like Stephen J. Gould and E. O. Wilson; historians like William Cronon, Patricia Limerick, and Richard White; essayists like Terry Tempest Williams and Barry Lopez; novelists like Wallace Stegner; and poets like Robert Haas, W. S. Merwin, and Pattianne Rogers.

I believe that writers like these require an interdisciplinary ecological criticism, and environment must be conceived of as more than their setting. Reading human beings into and out of texts is an activity that goes on in a real world humanity inhabits, a world undergoing, right now, significant climatic change as a result of concrete human activities.

It would be nice to believe, in the words of a late Borges poem, that "He who is grateful for the existence of music [. . .] / He who takes pleasure in tracing etymology / [. . .] These people, unaware, are saving the world." But it is not true that people, unaware, are saving the world. For most ecocritics, it is not sufficient to take pleasure in tracing an etymology. By definition, ecological literary criticism must be engaged. It wants to know but also wants to do.

I pursue case studies with my undergraduate students. Consider the following, not about literature, strictly speaking, but about the literature that counts to the people of arid regions.

We imagine most people living historically in temperate climates. Is this notion accurate, or does the language of climate distract us from human situations? This little case study involves global climate and our own, global conditions and the migration of human beings to particular places. I read to my students from a local environmental impact statement, for Grand Staircase–Escalante National Monument, that "[b]ecause 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 document calls these people stockmen, it also calls their region rangeland. These men stocked my region during the era when the modern idea of climate evolved.

People don't easily adapt to changes in conditions. But what temperate climates constituted the previous experiences of these hypothetical stockmen? I tell my students

that climate is referred to by *zones*, a term derived from a Greek word meaning “belt” and from classical ideas about the world’s body. Ptolemy conceived global climatic differences in terms of “daylength,” or differential illumination of *zones*. *Climate*, coming from the Greek *klimata*, indicates inclination of the sun, suggesting perspective.

I narrate the investigations leading to correlation of heat rather than of daylength with climatic zones. Beginning with Alexander von Humboldt’s first isothermal map in 1817, maps of temperature were more accurately scaled to represent worldwide averages during individual months.

All these maps represent hot (tropical) and cold (arctic) zones, and the temperate falls between them. Students readily see that the classic idea of the temperate reads a human desire into global climate.

These human desires have been relational. Data on vegetation are used to infer temperature, and temperature data are used to infer vegetative growth. By the middle of the twentieth century, maps that correlated zonal climates and vegetative growth led to maps of growing seasons for such species as deciduous trees.

As we know, to our misfortune, climate is not historically fixed. Further, the Temperate Zone “contained some of the most extreme conditions on earth and was in fact highly intemperate in regard to temperature,” as one climatologist puts it. In my region, the massive human response to extreme climate has included the Colorado River Storage Project, Hoover and Glen Canyon Dams, Lakes Powell and Mead, and consequently Phoenix and Las Vegas.

Consequently, a particular kind of culturally sanctioned reading by an interpretive community created the discourse that we now use to judge our past and create 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 read or write about it? What reading or mapping of the world does our discourse create with that phrase?

How shall writers—these writers are quite possibly my students—now speak of their region and its recent human history or place this history in a global context? Some who continue to speak of *wilderness* argue with those who prefer the term *rangeland*. Neither term is rooted in local conditions or takes cognizance of changing global climates. Ought they? Is it possible that unexamined uses of language lead to careless decisions?

Someone might say that I am not, strictly speaking, teaching the study of literature, and that is true. Environmental impact statements are not belles lettres, and that is my point. Nature writing isn’t just for the armchair hikers among us. My students will write the world and will need literacy for this endeavor.

Over the years I have taught many more classes in sophomore composition than in nature writing or in American literature. My students, who live in a state where about seventy percent of the land is federal land, write about their environment by choice. For my students’ purposes, ecocriticism needs to inform personal and political actions, in the same way that feminist criticism was able to do only a few decades ago. As a teacher, I follow an old cliché; I “think globally and act locally,” teaching local students how to read and write about the changes in their environments.

MICHAEL P. COHEN
Southern Utah University

Along the United States–Mexican border in the lower Rio Grande valley, the borderlands, once rich in flora and fauna, have been transformed into a radically postnatural landscape. The four million acres of brushland that covered the valley as recently as seventy years ago have been reduced to 160,000 acres. Since half this remaining brushland is on tracts of less than seventy-five acres, land suitable for wildlife habitat is now almost nonexistent. Toxic pollution from insecticides and herbicides creates enormous threats to the health of the land and of its people. Working to illuminate and counter this devastation are two important texts, each by a writer who has family roots deep in the region and who knows the border from both sides. Arturo Longoria’s *Adios to the Brushlands* (Texas A&M UP, 1997) delineates the advance of environmental degradation and its effect on the spirit, and Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands—La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (Aunt Lute, 1987) interrogates the patriarchal values that have shaped the dominant culture’s destruction of the borderlands.

Longoria wants to construct his discourse in the tradition of the classic American nature-writing text. The biologist turned investigative environmental reporter turned college teacher would like to privilege the traditional Thoreauvian nature walk—attentive, respectful, contemplative: “I have long felt that a day without a walk is a day lost and without purpose” (80). In the postnatural world of the Rio Grande Valley, however, nature has been so marginalized that Longoria must also construct his narrative as an expanded interrogation of still-significant issues first set forth by Rachel Carson over thirty-five years ago. Like Carson’s *Silent Spring*, *Adios to the Borderlands* is, in part, an elegy for healthy landscapes now lost; it chronicles how the widespread use of agricultural toxins feeds the area’s high cancer rates, how the bulldozer and the root plow have transformed the delta from a dense riparian monte of lakes, ponds, meandering tributaries, and

lush woodlands into an area of windswept desolation. Longoria, like Carson, writes for restoration; he believes that it can be fostered through meaningful environmental education.

Gloria Anzaldúa dedicates her thoroughly transnational text "*a todos mexicanos* on both sides of the border." Her preface presents Anzaldúa as a border woman, growing up between two cultures, "the Mexican (with a heavy Indian influence) and the Anglo (as a member of a colonized people in our own territory)." Her life as a lesbian of color raised as a Catholic has made her skilled at mitigating those dualities of status that characterize the borderlands. Her text, with its complex code switching from English to Tex-Mex to the northern Mexican dialect to Castilian Spanish to Nahuatl, conveys the myriad crosscurrents of life in the borderlands. Through it all, she draws strength from the natural world; she says in her preface, "La Madre Naturaleza succored me, allowed me to grow roots that anchored me to the earth." Anzaldúa has helped her family farm the land, and she is attuned to the damage done when farms are subsumed into massive agribusiness. Anzaldúa clearly articulates the cultural meaning of the border: "it is to distinguish 'us' from 'them'" (5). She knows that this division underlies the hate and the exploitation that support the dominant patriarchies in their social and environmental degradation.

These texts illustrate both the environmental destruction and the cultural origins of that destruction in national borderlands created to enforce ethnic, economic, and class divisions. It would be a mistake to separate these two texts entirely from the growing body of Chicana and Chicano environmental literature. From the celebration of nature in Rudolfo Anaya's classic novel *Bless Me, Ultima* (Tonatiuh-Quinto Sol Intl., 1971) to such strongly ecofeminist works as Helen María Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus* (Penguin, 1995) and the toxic work environment stories in Ana Castillo's *So Far from God* (Penguin, 1993), it is clear that contemporary Chicana and Chicano literature advances a substantial critique of environmental degradation. By voicing the damage that the dominant culture visits on those whom it marginalizes, this literature resists those national narratives that privilege metastasizing suburbs and environmentally debilitating consumption, and it emphasizes the absence of environmental justice in them.

Nonetheless, while presenting the devastation of the borderlands and the harm done by the political borders, the texts by Longoria and Anzaldúa do occupy a special place. They emphasize the truly transnational aspects of the growing environmental crisis, and in so doing they begin the important work of moving beyond national narratives that, however putatively environmental they

may be or seek to become, remain to some degree limited. Texts like these enlarge the study of environmental literature and make the all-important connections between ecological degradation and nationalism. Such texts not only help move nature away from the margins and into the center of cultural discourse but also help authorize the all-important interrogation of national borders themselves, their economic and racial origins, their social and environmental consequences.

It is increasingly clear that globalization mandates that effective environmental change be supported by networks taking shape across borders. Such transnational movements are not new (they fueled both the suffrage movements and the antislavery movement), but they are more and more necessary, and, as such alliances grow, they will delineate further the damage done by traditional political borders. In this context, it is helpful to take note of what biologists describe as the edge effect—that is, the tendency for natural life, the flora and fauna of a region, to be richer in transition zones, those borders where fields intersect with woodlands, rivers meet deserts, and so on. By illustrating the tragic environmental consequences that accompany the arbitrary political divisions between the United States and Mexico, these two texts also suggest the possibilities for effective restoration that can come with natural, instead of national, boundaries.

TERRELL DIXON

University of Houston, University Park

I applaud Martha Banta's decision to devote this Forum to ecocriticism, a genre of literary studies that has energized significant numbers of scholars throughout the past decade, and I welcome the opportunity to suggest new directions for scholarship to explore. For ecocriticism, despite its growing popularity, is "a predominately white movement" as Cheryll Glotfelty, a past president of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, has noted (Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, eds., *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* xxv). By far the majority of the presenters at the first two conferences of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (in 1995 and 1997) were white; a look at the index of *The Ecocriticism Reader* reveals that most of the authors treated by the volume's critics are also Anglo-American. Native American literature, both contemporary and traditional, does receive enthusiastic attention, but African Americans seem largely absent from this burgeoning literary, cultural, and critical movement.

One reason for this absence is that ecocritics have dedicated much of their attention to nature writing—primarily creative nonfiction in the autobiographical naturalist tradi-

tion. This genre has not attracted many black writers, who likely find that what Robinson Jeffers called inhumanism—the literary attempt to deflect aesthetic and thematic attention away from human beings or to weaken what Glen Love calls “ego-consciousness” (Glotfelty and Fromm 230)—holds little appeal for writers who already feel themselves politically, economically, and socially marginalized. And while writers such as Toni Morrison and Michael S. Harper consider questions of place—geographic locale and nonhuman nature—their work (say, *Beloved* or *Images of Kin*, respectively) treats far more visibly questions of social place, as constructed through race.

Ecocriticism, as many of its practitioners point out, seeks to complement the already well-represented critical inquiries into literature’s negotiation of race, class, and gender, and I do not intend simply to wheelbarrow familiar theses into my discussion here. I certainly do not wish to suggest, as I once heard a conference panelist declare, that all injustices are so firmly linked that if we work to promote social justice we will, without even trying, “protect the environment.” Ecocriticism, as William Rueckert envisioned it twenty years ago, attempts “to see literature inside the context of an ecological vision *in ways which restrict neither*” (Glotfelty and Fromm 105; emphasis mine). While ecocriticism underscores the ecological tenet that “everything is connected to everything else” (Rueckert [Glotfelty and Fromm 108]), as a mode of critical inquiry it necessitates attention and discussion; neither inclusions nor exclusions should be automatic and unexamined. In fact, for the field to mature, ecocriticism needs critiques of its shortcomings.

Therefore we must consider further the absence of black writers from existing ecocritical discussion. A major reason for this absence, I suspect, may be that academic inquiry—including the work of ecocritics—already expects black literature to focus almost exclusively on the social realm; as categorized by literary studies, its interest in environment is similar to the interest in socioeconomic environment that characterized naturalist novels at the close of the nineteenth century. I believe, however, that as ecocritics work to articulate the complex and often conflicted attitudes toward the North American continent that contribute to what we frequently call sense of place, we should not overlook black writing whose obvious focus is sociopolitical.

An examination of the underlying (and often nuanced) attitudes toward nonhuman nature that are encoded in literary works can contribute to what Neil Evernden calls “what it *feels* like to have a territory” (Glotfelty and Fromm 97)—or what it feels like not to. As Leonard Lutwack notes, human “use of the earth’s resources, [our] alteration of places in every corner of the globe, must

proceed now with a view not only to present profit and pleasure but to the survival of the very next generation” (*The Role of Place in Literature* 2). African American writers who focus on the Anglo-European long relation with slavery have a unique perspective on both profit and pleasure, and an ecocritical examination of their work can illuminate unrecognized aspects of it, as well as discovering its insights into how sense of place and ethical awareness intersect. Ecocritics would do well to consider the implications suggested by this convergence of ethics.

First, we are reminded that issues of race in ecological theory or politics extend well beyond where landfills or toxic industries are located, though these are certainly important matters. Second, and more crucial for literary studies, we must continue to develop the examinations of both genre and aesthetics for what Lawrence Buell has defined as an “ecological text” in his important book *The Environmental Imagination*. Even as Michael Branch, Joni Adamson, Terrell Dixon, and other scholars have begun to call for recognition that inner city and urban residents (regardless of race) may not feel the appeal of wilderness literature, we should not inadvertently ghettoize black literature, as if it had nothing to contribute to our understanding of the vexed human relation to the nonhuman world. In fact, this work has much to tell us, if we pay close enough ecocritical attention.

ELIZABETH DODD
Kansas State University

The bulk of the “ecocriticism” being done restricts itself to American nature writing. For most people, this does not seem to be a problem. At some point, though, we have to acknowledge what ecocriticism’s xenophobia will mean for the field. Equating nature studies and ecocriticism is a dangerous practice that runs the risk of leading us into thematic criticism of the traditional, baldly detached sort that many of us were reared on in our undergraduate programs—thematic criticism, though, that is all dressed up in a flashy and fashionable new outfit, criticism that underneath the fluff is really the same old tedious rubbish, criticism that does not promise to get us far in changing the way we think about the world in which we live.

Until Cheryl Glotfelty’s 1996 *The Ecocriticism Reader*, ecocriticism had no real home, no real identity, and was an area of study not “recognized as belonging to a distinct critical school or movement.” Instead, as Glotfelty points out, ecocritical voices appeared under headings as varied “as American Studies, regionalism, pastoralism, the frontier, human ecology, science and literature, nature in literature, landscape in literature,” and so on (xvi–xvii).

While it was possible in 1996 to say that the English literary profession was not responding in any significant way to the issue of the environment, such is no longer the case—witness, for instance, this *PMLA* Forum. *The Ecocriticism Reader* was a major step toward organizing the field and bringing literary studies into closer contact with what is generally recognized as a contemporary crisis, but ecocriticism needs to continue taking steps. For this to happen, we need to ask ourselves a number of questions.

What goals and definitions, for example, do we envision for ecocriticism? What counts as ecocriticism? What is ecofeminism? Are they different? Can a person practice one and not the other? How far can ecocriticism go from “nature” and still be ecocriticism? What can discussions about texts that are silent on nature give us? Can someone such as Shakespeare fit into all this? How? How serious are we about making connections? Do these connections extend to our personal lives? Does practicing ecocriticism (and feminism) demand something that moves beyond mere academic interest, toward a kind of personal and political commitment that other theories don’t demand? Can a man who stuffs dollar bills in women’s underwear at strip clubs by night be a feminist critic by day? Can a person who chows down on a fat roast beef on rye at lunch be an ecocritic at the two o’clock seminar? Why bother with ecocriticism? Are there revealing links between environmentally and socially oppressive systems, overlapping and interlocking structures that need to be examined? How far can we go with avoiding anthropocentrism? When Lawrence Buell says in *The Environmental Imagination* that we ought to “relinquish the superintending human consciousness” completely in our work (164), just how are we to accomplish this task in such an eminently human area as writing?

Literary critical interest in the natural environment is nothing new, but for far too long questions about the relation between social and environmental issues in texts outside the genre of nature writing have been kept in separate theoretical circles. This is particularly apparent with Shakespeare.

There is no shortage of books and articles that look at the representations of natural environments in Shakespeare. In general, these studies fall into two general categories: the formalist camp and what we might call the protoecocritical group. The formalists have examined birds, plants (especially flowers), gardens, the relation between nature (as a general theme) and genre, the way the natural environment could be seen to fit into cosmic patterns, and so on. The difference between this group and the protoecocritical one is in the kinds of analyses undertaken. While the former is structuralist (concerned primarily with enumerating thematic clusters, with com-

paring them, with trying to get idealist pictures of the English Renaissance, and so on), the latter is poststructuralist in its various theoretical discussions of the ways that thinking and talking about the natural world interrelate with other early modern discourses. Jeanne Addison Roberts has analyzed the evolution of Shakespeare’s ideas about the wild in a largely formalist attempt to expose metaphoric linkages between Shakespeare’s writing of women and of the natural world. John Gillies elegantly maps the coordinates linking geographic difference with social exclusion and otherness; Richard Marienstras, a proto–new historicist, tries to unearth early modern environmental laws, the background against which Shakespeare wrote. Linda Woodbridge looks at interconnected representations of land and body, penetration and pollution, at how sexualized landscapes form part of semiotic systems she calls “the discourse of fertility,” and at ways that this discourse overlaps and interacts with discourses of magic.

Indeed, a lot has been written about the environment in Shakespeare, but none of it is properly ecocritical, ecologically revolutionary, or explicitly geared toward effecting change in the way we think about and produce the environment. While much of the work, both from the protoecocritics and from the formalists and structuralists, is useful, it is clear that there is much work yet to be done in ecocriticism.

Almost all ecocritical work is conducted in texts that have what Lawrence Buell calls “environmentally focused perspectives” (430n20). I have no interest in belittling or criticizing the project of recouping professional dignity for what Glotfelty called “the undervalued genre of nature writing” (xxx1); rather, I think it is important for all literary scholars to take the environment seriously, to see it as vital, to bother with the ways that we conceptualize and speak about (or are silent about) the natural environment. Otherwise, ecocriticism will just be one of those trends that temporarily guarantee an audience, publications, tenure, promotions, and so on. It won’t change things.

SIMON C. ESTOK
Chungwoon University

To those outside ecocriticism, this new area of study often seems defined as a subfield of American literature: a narrow canon of nature writing, mostly in prose, from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, by such authors as Emerson, Thoreau, Mary Austin, Aldo Leopold, and Edward Abbey. Sometimes a few poets—Gary Snyder, Wendell Berry—are included, and, more rarely, Native American literature is mentioned. To those of us who ap-

proach ecocriticism from a comparatist perspective, this characterization resembles one of those cartoon posters meant to satirize regional parochialism, which show local landmarks in monumental size but national and international ones either in diminutive size or not at all.

The comparatist's perspective on ecocriticism could be outlined with three statements that are less provocative than they may appear. First, ecocriticism has nothing specifically to do with American literature. This means, of course, not that ecocriticism does not or should not deal with American literature but that it is not in principle more closely linked to American than to any other national or regional literature. Western Europe and Latin America have long traditions of nature writing, as do Chinese and Japanese literature, to name only a few examples. Just what is meant by *nature* in these different cultural traditions is the first question the comparatist ecocritic investigates: some cultures see nature most clearly manifested in wilderness untouched by humankind, but for others nature includes cultivated rural areas, and in yet other cases it also encompasses a historical heritage of monuments and buildings. By the same token, the literary language available for writing about nature in a particular culture differs vastly depending on historical circumstance: whereas American poets who began to concern themselves with environmental issues in the 1960s and 1970s could look back on a long national tradition of writing about the natural and the local, German poets in the same period had to grapple with the prior Nazi appropriation of such natural symbols as the forest and the oak and had to invent a new kind of nature writing divorced from fascism. Ecocriticism examines, in other words, how concepts of the natural are constructed in different cultures and expressed through a variety of literary practices.

Second, ecocriticism has nothing specifically to do with *nature* writing. Again, this does not imply that ecocriticism does not ever deal with nature writing; clearly, it often does. But to suggest that it deals with nothing else is comparable to claiming that feminism is only applicable to texts by or about women. Ecocriticism analyzes the ways in which literature represents the human relation to nature at particular moments of history, what values are assigned to nature and why, and how perceptions of the natural shape literary tropes and genres. In turn, it examines how such literary figures contribute to shaping social and cultural attitudes toward the environment. In this project, nature writing has a role to play as one particular way of figuring the natural, but there are many others—in fact, no genre is in principle exempt from this kind of analysis. To give just one example, one of the contemporary genres in which questions about nature

and environmental issues emerge most clearly is science fiction: from the novels and short stories of Brian Aldiss, John Brunner, and Ursula K. Le Guin in the 1960s and 1970s to those of Carl Amery, David Brin, Kim Stanley Robinson, and Scott Russell Sanders in the 1980s and 1990s, science fiction is one of the genres that have most persistently and most daringly engaged environmental questions and their challenge to our vision of the future.

Last, ecocriticism has nothing specifically to do with nature *writing*. Again, this statement in no way denies the value of ecocriticism's engagement with literature, in which I am myself involved. But ecocriticism is not limited to literature: it has for a considerable time been a highly interdisciplinary field with research not only on written texts but also on different media, such as photography and the documentary film, and in other disciplines, such as history, art history, anthropology, and philosophy. A considerable amount of this work reaches far beyond the boundaries of American culture. The body of scholarship in these branches of ecocriticism is vast—dauntingly vast, in fact, although many literary critics may not yet be aware of it. No doubt, ecocriticism's first task must be to make at least a part of this rich array of cross-cultural scholarship available to the discipline at large.

URSULA K. HEISE
Columbia University

Ecocriticism is marked by a tremendously ambitious intellectual, ethical, political, and even (sometimes) spiritual agenda. Though there is already great diversity of opinion in the field, ecocritical dialogue often aims at nothing less than the transformation of human environmental and ecological consciousness. Roughly speaking, this means guiding the historically egocentric Western imagination—man a little lower than the angels but well above the rest of earthly creation, imposing rational design to improve his earthly habitat—toward a newly emerging ecocentric paradigm, with its deeper respect for the integrity of the many other forms of life with which humankind shares the earth. Unsurprisingly, this agenda has located ecocriticism beyond the traditional boundaries of literary studies. This is well and good, so long as literary ecologists retain some sense of what they can contribute distinctively to an interdisciplinary ecocriticism.

Ecocriticism is in some ways similar to the new cultural geography but puts greater emphasis on the biological processes and relations that precede and contribute to the sociocultural production of space. By and large, ecocritics tend to believe that a considered (and scientifically informed) appreciation of these processes can help restore a harmonious balance between nature and human

cultures. Biologically oriented ecocritics are themselves divided between a kind of primitive naturalism that looks to pristine nature for redemptive recovery (as epitomized by Thoreau's often cited tag "In wildness is the preservation of the world") and a kind of postmodern interrogation of such concepts as nature, wildness, and wilderness that seeks a transformation of consciousness (and, by extension, of patterns of human action) by cultivating less-naturalized thinking about the world and the role of human beings in it. As this internal division reveals, one major intellectual challenge facing ecocritics is to determine the precise relation between nature and culture.

This is a topic about which there is currently much vigorous debate in a wide variety of disciplines, from literary studies to evolutionary psychology. What participants in this debate sometimes refuse to acknowledge is that nature and culture are mutually entangled in complex and inherently elusive ways. To acknowledge this is not to abandon the project of thinking rigorously about their relation but is rather to set that project on an alternative track, one less devoted to resolving once and for all a long-standing sociophilosophical problem than to entering the space of the problem in new ways. Literary ecologists should be poised to challenge their audience to recognize that reading texts and participating, as human beings, in natural ecologies are structurally similar processes: both involve interpretive postures that precede any specific experience, yet both unfold as primary experiences that themselves refine and recast interpretive postures. To say that nature and culture are subtly and intricately interconnected is to open human imaginations to the many diverse and often competing ways in which the natural world can be read and experienced, both in what has here been styled the literatures of the environment and in what might be called, more broadly, an environmental hermeneutics.

As I have already indicated, some ecocritics will still prefer to retain a stronger sense of the natural world that precedes the various cultural institutions and representations that intervene between humankind and nature. Some literary representations of the natural world are typically exempted from such radical naturalism (works by "environmental writers" like Thoreau, John Muir, and Rachel Carson come quickly to mind) but only to the extent that these representations can be identified with the effort to resist prevailing (which is to say environmentally destructive) cultural values. I think this view is mistaken in its failure to acknowledge that experience is necessarily mediated, in advance, by sociocultural attitudes. But I would also caution ecocritics from leaping to the conclusion that our theoretical sophistication about such inescapable attitudes should lead us to reject

the perspective of experience. Much recent work, based in fields as diverse as phenomenology, pragmatism, communications theory, evolutionary biology, and cognitive science, encourages us to take seriously the ways in which our sense of the world, cognitively given as immediate experience, is indispensable to all intelligent activity. Experience is always situated, in ways that no amount of theoretical reflection can transcend, and no matter how valuable that reflection may be, we should recognize the advantages (evolutionary and cultural) of living as experientially situated beings. Our bodies, our language, our sociocultural environment all shape our distinctive styles of being in the world. Without them, we would not recognize the natural environment, let alone express concern for it. The choice is not between culture and nature, as if to locate redemption either in a fuller recovery of nature from culture or in a more complete and rational application of culture to nature, but rather among different styles of dwelling in the world. We need to pay careful attention to how we experience the natural world, as well as our literary representations of it, in order to devote a greater consideration to the many ways in which we invariably shape the world we inhabit, for good and ill.

Whether or not ecocritics will actually transform human environmental and ecological consciousness, they have already begun to reveal how cultures have historically rendered nature meaningful and with what particular consequences. Ecocritics should aim to understand how and with what effects we are implicated, as embodied individuals and as cultural agents, in natural environments. They should also offer models of how we might cultivate other styles of engagement with the world. It will fall more specifically to literary ecologists to underscore the ways in which language and literary and interpretive traditions mediate our relation to the natural world, from the Puritan idea of an "errand into the wilderness" to the current rage for things wild and uncultivated. While interdisciplinary approaches will (rightly) remain central to this project, literary ecologists should also retain a strong sense of their own distinctive contribution to ecocriticism's interdisciplinary mix.

JONATHAN LEVIN
Columbia University

Regarding environmental literature and ecological literary criticism, I want to comment first on the way this movement arose from the social concerns of teachers and students as have other critical movements in literary studies over the last forty years. What perhaps distinguishes ecocriticism from these other movements, such

as feminism, multiculturalism, and postcolonialism, without setting it apart from them, is that it has altered the gestalt by which characters, readers, and authors are understood in relation to the rest of the world. While feminism, multiculturalism, and postcolonialism are focused on extending equitable moral considerability and social justice to excluded, exploited, and oppressed peoples, ecocriticism—like the various forms of ecology on which it is invariably, although somewhat tenuously, based—extends that considerability to nonhuman nature (at the same time, the relation between ecocriticism and these other movements is being developed through ecofeminism, environmental justice, and multicultural ecocriticism). Environments are no longer limited to an understanding of setting, nor are character and authorial attitudes about the environment limited to narrative development; they are seen instead as a fundamental feature of the ideological horizons of literary works.

Like the other socially based critical movements identified in the preceding paragraph, ecocriticism is altering our conception of the criteria we should use in defining literary canons. Not only authors and texts but also genres and the very concept of a national literature are affected. In addition, ecocriticism is undertaking a rethinking of the relative merits of the works that compose the oeuvre of already canonical authors, such as Cather, Hemingway, and Faulkner in the United States; of Welsh and Scottish poets in the United Kingdom; and of the German Romantics, particularly those associated with fantasy writing. Two recently published works contributing to this reassessment are *American Nature Writers* (2 vols.) and *Literature of Nature: An International Sourcebook*. The reconsideration of canon, then, is an international phenomenon.

Although much of the early ecocriticism focused on American and British writers, particularly essayists and the Romantic poets, ecocriticism has increasingly broadened its purview by developing both a working relation with poststructuralist theories and a knowledge of international literature. Essays comparing the work of the American poet Gary Snyder with that of the Japanese novelist and poet ISHIMURE Michiko, ecocritical analyses of Caribbean writers across languages and nationalities, comparative analyses of nature in Latin American poetry, and cross-national studies of environmental fiction in the Caribbean, Africa, and Japan, all appearing this year in such journals as *Studies in the Humanities*, the *Hispanic Journal*, and *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, attest to the rapid internationalization of this field of literary criticism. Besides redefining the idea of comparative literary analysis, ecocritics who conduct such analyses are researching an interdisciplinarity of interests unprecedented in literary studies.

Often literary ecocriticism relies not only on the insights of literary studies to analyze fictional and non-fictional prose, poetry, and drama but also on those of environmental studies, environmental history, postmodern geography, neurobiology, cognitive rhetoric, and a host of other related disciplines. Along with this type of interdisciplinarity, we are witnessing ecocriticism's alliance with multicultural studies and postcolonial studies, particularly in the arena of environmental justice; for example, a bioregional activist participating in the defense of the autonomous village of Tepoztlan in Mexico has written about the inspiration he finds in the prose and poetry of Gary Snyder, and international nature literature is published as a regular section, "Arts and the Natural Environment," of the journal *Organization and Environment*, which is edited at a college of business.

Although ecocriticism is not a new movement—one can think, for instance, of F. O. Matthiessen's inclusion of Thoreau in *American Renaissance* or a text such as Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden*—the offering of courses in it did not expand significantly until the 1970s. Now, in the 1990s, literary criticism is finally catching up and teaching such texts, primarily as a result of the founding of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, which in turn has led to the interest of a good number of academic presses in establishing series for the publication of nature literature and ecocriticism. Certainly not everyone needs to become an ecocritic, but every department in which MLA members hold tenure ought to include an ecocritic among its ranks, if only to respond to the interests and needs of undergraduate and graduate students. At the undergraduate level, this appointment would enable literature departments to link up with other departments, as in environmental education programs and programs such as the BA in Nature and Culture at the University of California, Davis. And the degree of interest at the graduate level can easily be measured by the number of dissertations being completed in this field.

PATRICK D. MURPHY
Indiana University of Pennsylvania

The ecofeminist belief that people of color have long been subsumed into the category of nature in the mainstream imaginary is confirmed by Chicano history. Issues of environmental racism compelled Chicanos and Chicanas to political and social action in the 1960s. Indeed, it was the all too real threat of pesticide poisoning that gave rise to the grassroots organization of the United Farm Workers under César Chávez. With the support of plastic and performance artists such as Luis Valdez and the popular traveling theater El Teatro Campesino, the political

and the artistic coalesced in a galvanization of Chicanos and Chicanas across the nation, engendering what is now known as *El Movimiento* or the Chicano Movement.

Land and its reappropriation figured largely in the Chicano imaginary of that period, especially in the ethnic nationalism related to the mythic Aztlán, the sacred homeland of the Aztec people. Aztlán gave rise to a mythopoetics of which the poetry of Alurista and the novels of Rudolfo Anaya provide fine examples. The recovery of a symbolic homeland was preceded by a land rights campaign in the Southwest, led by Reies Tijerina, who represented citizens of Mexican descent whose families had been wrongfully dispossessed of their lands since the signing of the treaty of Guadalupe in 1848.

Although Aztlán and the ethnic nationalism it inspired ultimately failed to sustain a committed political activism, a renewed interest in indigenous land movements and a valorization of the connection between women and nature have recently prompted several Chicana writers to embrace ecofeminist agendas. The writings of Ana Castillo, Cherríe Moraga, and Gloria Anzaldúa exemplify the appeal of ecofeminism to women of color who aim to reappropriate and redefine their connection with the natural world, a political position informed by an oppositional consciousness, as theorized by Chela Sandoval. Sandoval encourages political unity without embracing the taxonomic approaches of mainstream feminism, a standpoint that allows for the blurring of clean distinctions typical of dualistic thought. Questioning the boundaries between human and nonhuman nature, ecofeminism constitutes one such oppositional strategy. On another front, Donna Haraway, whose cyborg politics undermine the radical separation of human beings and machines, rightly argues for the simultaneity of such oppositional approaches as a means of provoking the downfall of existing systems of domination.

Ecocritical literary theory, such as that advocated by Patrick Murphy and Greta Gaard, and the reworkings of contested terms like *nature* and *environment* promoted by Lawrence Buell are necessary for the reassessment of the relation between human imagination and the environment. Since constructions of nature inevitably involve naming and thus a dynamics of power, language and literary constructions must be scrutinized rigorously. As Laura Pulido points out, the prevailing conception of nature is informed by racial and class bias, often resulting in a preservationist stance that has “no place for people, even when they are a historical component of the rural landscape and habitat.” Redefinition of *the environment* to include both urban and rural landscapes will allow for the critical study of not only the desert flowers of Pat Mora but also the freeways of Lorna Dee Cervantes and the suburban dumps and strip malls evoked in Junot Diaz’s fiction.

It is worth noting that while Chicano and Chicana writers often address ecological and environmental issues in their literary production, Chicano and Chicana critics have been rather slow to take up the literary ecocritical cause, as it were. Like mainstream feminism, perhaps ecocriticism has been constituted as primarily an Anglo domain. This was certainly the impression I got at the panel devoted to ecocriticism at the MLA convention last December, where faces of color were few and far between. I believe it was Louise Westling who openly expressed her concern that ecocritical discussions had failed to attract a more racially diverse audience.

The subsuming of people of color into nature in the popular imaginary derives from Western conceptions of identity based on rigid dualistic thought that continues to prevail at the end of the twentieth century. People of color remain steadfastly present in both urban and rural landscapes yet are invisible as human beings to the mainstream eye. The persistent deconstruction of these dualisms promoted by ecofeminist philosophers such as Val Plummer and Karen Warren enable the visualization of alternative models of identity previously unrecognized by the Western eye. Ecofeminism offers one approach to the reexamination and dearticulation of these landscapes.

ANDREA PARRA
Columbia University

The phenomenal global growth in environmental literature and ecological literary criticism in the 1980s and 1990s is evident everywhere in world literary communities. Like a global tsunami, “ecolit” and “ecocrit” have flooded journals, academic publishers, and conference programs with a spate of monographs, essays, and papers. This tide of interest is felt most strongly in Euro-American metropolitan centers and in Japan. But it has also left a watermark on the literatures and criticism of marginalized groups such as Native Americans and Australo-Aborigines.

Ecolit and ecocrit have not experienced the same levels of interest or production among writers and scholars in the black Atlantic communities. Why has the Green Wave had only minor ripple effects back and forth across the Atlantic? The reasons are complex and numerous. An important factor is the lack of nature-writing traditions, which have been exceedingly strong in the Euro-American Romantic movements as well as in the literary histories of China and Japan. This reason is contravened to some extent by the rich oral nature narratives in black African and diasporic traditions, particularly in the American South. Perhaps most important is the indiffer-

ence or even resistance to ecolit and ecocrit among the canonized scholars and writers within black Atlantic cultural communities who have already made waves in world literature and literary scholarship and who hold positions of power in high-profile academic institutions. For the generations of writers and scholars formed by colonialism and postcolonialism; by liberation, independence, and civil rights movements; and by various struggles to overcome political, cultural, and linguistic domination, surfing the Green Wave is for those with the luxuries of board, wet suit, and lots of time and energy. Ecocrit and ecolit appear to many academic and literary observers positioned around the margins of the black Atlantic as another whiteout of black concerns, by going green.

But the environmental disengagements and disincentsives in the black Atlantic are changing. A quick review of the recent reference work *The Literature of Nature: An International Sourcebook* (Chicago: Fitzroy, 1998) reveals three essay entries for African literature by African scholars and one for Caribbean literatures, although there is none for African American. However, the reference *American Nature Writers* (New York: Scribner's, 1996) contains "African Americans, Writing, and Nature," a survey article. Not much, actually, for a large two-volume work. The beginnings are there, but much more work remains to be done.

I have noticed that younger scholars and writers in and out of the black Atlantic have been very receptive to ecocritical approaches to black literature. Also, writers in Africa, the Caribbean, and America are increasingly concerned with environmental degradation and neocolonialist depredations of their bioregions. The controversy surrounding the Nigerian writer and ecoactivist Ken Saro-Wiwa has brought global attention to the delta region of Nigeria. The Nobelist Wole Soyinka has voiced his concerns about Nigeria's environment in numerous interviews and essays. The Nigerian poet Niyi Osundare has also written and lectured extensively about environmental problems, especially the destruction of forests. In the Caribbean Derek Walcott and Edward Brathwaite have taken positions on environmental problems, and Alice Walker is perhaps the closest African American match to a literary ecoactivist. Her collection of poems *Her Blue Body Everything We Know: Earthling Poems* (New York: Harcourt, 1991) celebrates natural regions and landscapes she has inhabited. The poems in this collection do not exhibit an environmentalist commitment like the one found in the ecopoetry of Gary Snyder, Wendell Berry, or W. S. Merwin. But her poems have their own environmental resonances. The social histories of African American involvement in environmentalism and the literary histories of African American nature writers

and ecocritics remain to be written. There is Melvin Dixon's study *Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1987). Lacking is a special issue of *Transition* or *Callaloo* devoted to environmental topics in Africa and in the diaspora. Given the heightened interest in environmental literature and in critical practices that have adopted ecological discourses and methodologies, it is likely that such special issues are being discussed and planned. The Green Wave is forming in the black Atlantic, but it has not yet made landfall.

Dominic Head, in his essay "The (Im)Possibility of Ecocriticism" (*Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature*, ed. Kerridge and Sammells [London: Zed, 1998]), demonstrates the difficulties of maneuvering through the tricky currents of a postmodern eco-centered whirlpool without getting sucked into the center and drowning in a deep green pool of ecological activism and concern for the nonhuman other. His reading of the South African writer J. M. Coetzee leads him to the conclusion that literary interpretations of nature are often incoherent and contradictory, but they must be attempted. I think this is good advice—even if tentative and uncertain—for new scholarship on writing and writers in the black Atlantic. In the case of ecolit and ecocrit, going with the global flow has the advantage of putting black Atlantic literature and literary interpretation in the mainstream, which carries with it easy availability and access to the global trade in topical ideas. Of course there are disadvantages to fashionable imitation, such as false consciousness. Caliban is justifiably tired of the master's voice and deserves a respite on what's left of his historically encumbered island. Nonetheless, as Head concludes, ecocrit and ecolit are both necessary and (im)possible.

My own Derridean move would be to put that "(im)" under erasure, reduce "necessary" to "needed," and add "probable" to the final formula. Since there has been little literary production by black Atlantic writers that might be called environmentalist or ecological and since ecocriticism has been tenuous in this arena of literary scholarship, now is the time to fill in those aporias. It is probable that the Green Wave will gather size and momentum as it rolls on. It is not probable that the considerable globalized interest in environmental literature and ecological literary criticism will diminish the further they recede in space and time from the eruptions that spawned them. And there is little danger that Atlantis will be submerged or spoiled by neoimperial or metropolitan debris that accompanies the impending green tidal wave.

WILLIAM SLAYMAKER
Wayne State College

I would like to propose that, in the future, *PMLA* special Forums be open to contributions not only from MLA members but also from the community of authors and scholars at large. The current invitation asks for letter writers to comment on “the growing importance and expanding scope of the fields of environmental literature and ecological literary criticism.” There are many people in a good position to comment on these issues; however, in contacting several dozen leading practitioners during the past two months and encouraging them to contribute to the special forum, I have inadvertently gathered concrete evidence of something I’ve long suspected: avant-garde authors and critics do not always belong to the MLA. I would guess, too, that this is true not only of nature writers and ecocritics but also of literary rebels working on other topics and issues. If the purpose of a special Forum is to attract diverse and significant viewpoints, it seems counterproductive to limit statements to members of “the club.”

It is now routine to complain that ecocriticism is the limited province of American literature scholars and, furthermore, that it is concerned only with contemporary literature and lacks theoretical sophistication. Even a quick survey of current ecocritical scholarship explodes these misperceptions. During the past two decades, it is true, there has been particular energy devoted to ecocriticism in the United States, but there is also a rapidly expanding international movement in this field. When I contacted Ken-ichi Noda, president of the Japanese branch of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, and encouraged him to contribute to this special Forum, he apologized for not being an MLA member and then mentioned that, in recent years, many literary scholars in Japan have been asking, “What happened to Japanese society over the past 150 years, after the introduction of European and American social and cultural institutions to this country?” “This question,” he continued, “leads scholars to explore modern Japanese literary history in terms of nature, while, on the other hand, they are trying to clearly define what is traditional and what is not.” The most recent issue of the Tokyo-based literary journal *Folio A* (number 5) is devoted to studies of Japanese literature of nature. In my own capacity as editor of the journal *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, I regularly receive submissions from countries as far-flung as Australia, Mexico, Malta, and Nigeria. And over the past year I’ve been in correspondence with ecocritics in China and Estonia. The notion that environmental literature is an exclusively Americanist subject holds little water.

Likewise, many critics are now using the lenses of ecocriticism to study pre-twentieth-century literary works

and nonbelletristic forms of expression. And theoretical discourse, ranging from environmental justice to the science of ecology, thoroughly permeates the discipline. One prominent, recently retired ecocritic, unable to contribute to this special Forum because he has never been an MLA member, encouraged me to mention his recent *ISLE* article that urges literary scholars to pay more attention to evolutionary biology and to realize that “the opportunities for pioneering a new and scientifically valid theoretical basis for ecocriticism and for literary study as a whole may be more attractive than the fear that some of your colleagues will inch their chairs away from yours in faculty meetings” (Glen A. Love, “Science, Anti-science, and Ecocriticism,” *ISLE* 6.1 [1999]: 78). Yet another non-MLA member invited me to allude to his forthcoming book on ecopoetry, which uses “Merleau-Ponty’s notions of the flesh of the visible and the primacy of perception in the corporeal schema of the lived body as the starting point for all human experience” in responding to “the poststructural dualism that relegates nature to the immanence of a dissociated human mind and assumes a dualistic divorce of text and ecocontext.”

When I hear colleagues disparage the “narrow focus” of ecocriticism and environmental literature, I think inevitably of a parenthetical line from section 51 of Walt Whitman’s *Song of Myself*: “(I am large, I contain multitudes.)” Likewise, ecocriticism is large and contains multitudes. There is no single, dominant worldview guiding ecocritical practice—no single strategy at work from example to example of ecocritical writing or teaching. Cheryll Glotfelty neatly defines *ecocriticism* as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty and Fromm, *The Ecocriticism Reader* [Athens: U of Georgia P, 1996] xviii). When I am asked for a broad description of the field, I say that it is the study of explicitly environmental texts by way of any scholarly approach or, conversely, the scrutiny of ecological implications and human-nature relations in any literary text, even texts that seem, at first glance, oblivious of the nonhuman 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, not a single literary work anywhere utterly defies ecocritical interpretation, is off-limits to green reading. This is an important point, because I often find that, despite my best efforts and the efforts of colleagues throughout the world, many people continue to have a rather ungrounded and dismissive attitude toward ecocriticism and environmental literature, as if ecocritics somehow represent merely a nostalgic, millennialist fad, a yearning to resurrect and reexplain a limited tradition of hackneyed pastoral or wilderness texts. I hope that this special Forum

will be a first step toward educating *PMLA* readers about the breadth and vitality of this important field.

SCOTT SLOVIC
University of Nevada, Reno

Since other contributors to this Forum will probably give general overviews of ecocriticism and environmental literary studies, I'd like briefly to suggest one particular direction for further inquiry in this emerging discipline: studying the ways in which literature shapes and records the interrelation of economy and environment. Such study might begin with early speculations about "the economy of nature"—formalized in Linnaeus's famous essay of that title (1749) but long antedating it—and continue through recent theories of sustainable or steady-state economics, which define the economy as an open subsystem of the ecosystem.

"God sells us all things for our labour," asserted the anonymous author of *A True Declaration of the Estate of the Colonie in Virginia* (1610), while the colonists were starving. It is a long way from early Jamestown to current crises such as the debate over genetically engineered food crops. However, I think we can trace some continuities. The Virginia colonists and their English contemporaries asked, What is the role of human labor in nature's economy? In the case of crop engineering we must ask, What does it say about our relation to nature that, facing the problem of world hunger, we find it easier to alter DNA than to redistribute wealth? Other formulations arise in other contexts, all of them versions of a single question: How do we understand the engagements with the natural environment by means of which we sustain our lives and produce our cultures?

In addressing this question, literary scholars might begin by reassessing the cultural importance of various genres, to recognize the centrality of the less belletristic—natural histories, colonial promotional tracts, and the like—to our engagements with nature. Promotional literature, which—dating at least from the 1570s through the 1910s—has a longer history than the English novel, theorizes the human economy's dependence on the environment for input and output capacities, asking questions that sustainable economics theory is only beginning to answer. Not that more belletristic forms are irrelevant to such concerns. In *Culture and Imperialism* (Knopf, 1993), Edward Said has demonstrated, for example, how Jane Austen's social world depends on the extraction of wealth from the West Indies. In natural history, however—a genre as old as Pliny's writings and as new as Mike Davis's *The Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (Metropolitan, 1998)—we find

the most substantial record of our economic relation to the environment, not as a mystified cause but as a basic theoretical problem.

Given its economic emphasis, the line of inquiry I'm suggesting may seem inconsistent with the pastoral sensibility that has often characterized ecocriticism and environmental literature. Donald Worster, for example (*Nature's Economy*, 2nd ed. [Cambridge UP, 1994]), opposes an exploitative tradition of natural history originating with Francis Bacon to an Arcadian tradition exemplified by Gilbert White's *The Natural History of Selborne* (1789) or Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac* (1949). Yet (as Worster recognizes) White and Leopold had their utilitarian sides as well. The two traditions, emphasizing either human use of or communion with nature, continue to be intermixed—and this intermixing will, I believe, define an important locus for future inquiry and debate in ecocritical and environmental literary studies.

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Ever since David Ehrenfield's *The Arrogance of Humanism* twenty years ago, the realization has been growing that a paradigm shift is needed in the so-called developed world. That shift has been under way for some time, I believe, beginning with quantum physics in science and the closely associated modernist formal innovations and skepticism that have dominated twentieth-century cultural activity in the West. Yet in the popular mind—indeed in the assumptions that motivate most activities in the industrialized countries of the globe—the radical ideas of indeterminacy, contingency, and the interrelatedness of beings and phenomena have not yet been absorbed. Ecocriticism and environmental philosophy are beginning to articulate the worldview that is required as much by the new physics as by ecological sciences and the increasing evidence of global environmental problems. Such a worldview must be nondualistic, embodied, and relational. It must define human consciousness and action within an enormously complex, interdependent community of life on earth.

The need for change must be defined against 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 human possibility transcending "the fermenting dung heap of the inferior world." According to Pico, we can withdraw from the body into "the inner chambers of the mind" and become "neither a creature of earth nor a heavenly creature, but some higher divinity, clothed with human flesh" (trans. Robert Caponigri [Regnery/Gateway, 1956] 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, even though dominant rhetorics fail to move away from it.

An ecological humanism would restore appropriate humility, absorbing the lessons of quantum physics and emphasizing cooperative participation within the community of planetary life. From 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 actively shape their environments and destinies. I spoke recently with a microbiologist who witnessed a geranium turning off a gene that had been introduced into it to prevent it from blossoming. Human beings 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*, remarkably congruent with quantum physics, regarding the interrelation of space and time, the situatedness of our knowing, our participatory relation with the things we perceive, and the indeterminacy of our 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 “confir-

mation of its astonishment” (*Visible and the Invisible* [Northwestern UP, 1993] 102) instead of seeking or presuming control. Such a vision would be congruent with other contemporary scientific enterprises, such as James Lovelock’s geophysiology (formerly called the Gaia hypothesis) and the biologist Lynn Margulis’s work on symbiosis as the process underlying major evolutionary novelty (*Symbiotic Planet: A New View of Evolution* [New York: Basic, 1998]).

An ecological humanism would reorient the evaluation of literature and other cultural forms. The new fields of environmental literature and ecocriticism are already exploring the possibilities of such reevaluation, and they provide immensely fruitful results that intersect with feminist theory, postcolonial theory, cultural studies, and indeed basic readings of every kind of literary text. My own work has been focused on twentieth-century American literature and the ways ecocriticism revises the American pastoral tradition, but ecocriticism offers useful approaches to texts as disparate as Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, *Winter’s Tale*, and *Tempest*; Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*; Romantic poetry of the sublime; postcolonial works like Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*; Native American and African American fiction and poetry; and works from many other cultural traditions, such as Basho’s *Narrow Road to the Deep North*. If, as I believe, the human place in the living community of the planet is at issue, ecocriticism is a crucial approach for literary study in the next century.

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