

**The Third Wave of Ecocriticism:
North American Reflections on the Current Phase of the Discipline**

Scott Slovic

University of Nevada, Reno

Joni Adamson and I didn't realize we would spur such an eager response in the international community of ecocritics when we mentioned in our introduction to the Summer 2009 special issue of *MELUS: Multiethnic Literature of the United States* the possibility that the current interest in exploring ethnicity through the study of environmental literature might represent one dimension of a new "third wave of ecocriticism." What we actually wrote in the *MELUS* introduction went as follows:

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

The articles collected in that issue seemed, for the most part, to be doing something different than ecocriticism we had observed during earlier phases of this scholarly discipline, focusing on cultural background and ethnic identity more intensely than had been the case in early ecocriticism, but also seeking to overcome the limiting, isolating focus on specific cultures as unique phenomena. The impulse to study human experience in relation to the more-than-human world and to compare human experience across cultures, in particular, struck us as an altogether different tendency than we had observed during the first two "waves" of the field.

Let me back up for a moment and quickly outline, in general terms, the history of ecocriticism. The term "ecocriticism" was first used in William Rueckert's 1978 article "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism," and it is common, at least in North America, to mark the initial phase of ecocriticism as beginning around 1980 with the following principle foci: nonfiction "nature writing"; non-human nature and wilderness

experience; American and British literature; and “discursive” ecofeminism (that is, the *idea* that women and the rest of nature share a special bond). Of course, the actual practice of exploring themes of nature in literature, and even sometimes adopting sophisticated ecological ideas in examining literary texts, started long before Rueckert coined the term ecocriticism. David Mazel charted some of this history in this 2001 volume *A Century of Early Ecocriticism*, focusing on English and American publications between 1864 and 1964.

The adoption of the wave metaphor to describe the development of ecocriticism occurred in Lawrence Buell’s *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, although he did not actually offer a detailed breakdown of the specific emphases of each wave when he identified a first and second wave. In fact, he apologized for the use of the wave metaphor almost immediately, writing:

No definitive map of environmental criticism in literary studies can [...] be drawn. Still, one can identify several trend-lines marking an evolution from a “first wave” of ecocriticism to a “second” or newer revisionist wave or waves increasingly evident today. This first-second wave distinction should not, however, be taken as implying a tidy, distinct succession. Most currents set in motion by early ecocriticism continue to run strong, and most forms of second-wave revisionism involve building on as well as quarreling with precursors. In this sense, “palimpsest” would be a better metaphor than “wave.” (17)

I also prefer the idea of a “palimpsest,” or layering, of ecocritical trends, but perhaps it’s simply more difficult to visualize multiple layers of scholarly habits than it is to imagine successive *waves* rolling ashore from the sea of ecocritical ideas. The wave metaphor, apparently borrowed from the idea of first and second wave feminism, breaks down in the ecocritical context because the waves do not simply end when a new wave begins. “First wave ecocriticism” remains vibrant and important even in 2009, with many scholars still writing about nature writing, wilderness, and other familiar aspects of environmental literature. Ecofeminism, which called for social justice early on during the era of modern ecocriticism, continues to be central to the movement.

Circa 1995, though, some distinctly new tendencies became commonplace in Anglophone ecocriticism: the study of multiple literary genres (no longer so much focus on nonfiction) and the development of “green cultural studies” (exceeding the boundaries of literature per se); an attention to the artistic representation of environmental conditions and experiences of various cultural groups around the world (such as Japanese environmental

literature and Mexican-American writing about nature); the emergence of environmental justice ecocriticism; and a new attention to urban and suburban experience, not just the valorization of wilderness. I don't have space in this brief article to go into depth about specific examples of second wave ecocriticism, but well-known exemplars of this phase include Laurence Coupe's collection *The Green Studies Reader* (2000), Karla Armbruster and Kathleen Wallace's *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, and *The Environmental Justice Reader*, edited by Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein.

Some of the crucial urgings toward a more comparative, trans-cultural approach to ecocritical studies began to emerge just as second wave ecocriticism was getting started, at the beginning of the new millennium. In his chapter called "Refining Through Redefining Our Sensibilities: Nature-Oriented Literature as an International and Multicultural Movement" in the book *Farther Afield in the Study of Nature-Oriented Literature*, Patrick D. Murphy exhorts his colleagues as follows:

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

Murphy himself demonstrated this strong impulse toward looking beyond the borders of one's own ethnic group and national culture in his consideration of Mexican-American Pat Mora's poetry and prose and in his discussion of the important Japanese author Ishimure Michiko (following up on Karen Colligan-Taylor's *The Emergence of Environmental Literature in Japan*, which was published way back in 1990 and went out of print long before there was audience of fellow ecocritics ready to receive it!). Particularly salient in Murphy's formulation here is his call for ecocritics to place their own national literatures "in an internationally relative and comparative framework." This would become one of the central

traits of the new “third wave” of ecocriticism, which began appearing shortly after 2000, even though the phase was not labeled the third wave until 2009.

As I see this “new” third wave of ecocriticism (which began noticeably emerging in 2000 and continues energetically at present), its main characteristics are as follows: global concepts of place are being explored in fruitful tension with neo-bioregionalist attachments to specific locales, producing such neologisms as “eco-cosmopolitanism, “rooted cosmopolitanism,” “the global soul,” and “translocality”); strong comparatist impulses are raising questions about the possibility of post-national and post-ethnic visions of human experience of the environment, while some (as in the 2009 special issue of *MELUS*) consider the importance of retaining ethnic identities but placing ethnically inflected experience in broader, comparative contexts (including postcolonial contexts); earlier varieties of ecofeminist scholarship have evolved into the new wave of “material” ecofeminism, which has become part of the general trend toward new gendered approaches in ecocriticism, ranging from eco-masculinism (see Mark Allister’s 2004 collection *Eco-Man: New Perspectives on Masculinity and Nature*) and green queer theory (Catriona Sandilands, Simon Estok, and Greg Garrard are among the scholars who have been writing and lecturing on this in recent years); intensified focus on the concept of “animality” (evolutionary ecocriticism, ecocritical discussion of animal subjective and agency in works such as Wendy Woodward’s 2008 *The Animal Gaze: Animal Subjectivities in Southern African Narratives*, linkages between ecocritical practice and lifestyle choices such as vegetarianism or omnivorianism, and expansion of the scope of environmental justice to encompass non-human species and their rights). In addition to the traits of third wave ecocriticism I’ve just listed, this new phase of the discipline has exhibited “critiques from within” that never occurred during first and second wave ecocriticism: in particular, Dana Phillips, Michael P. Cohen, and others have taken the field to task for its lack of engagement with critical theory, its embracing of representationality in literature, its celebratory tone, its limited focus on “literature,” the forgotten role of ecofeminist activism, and the lack of a precise methodological definition of ecocriticism. Scholars in specific subfields, ranging from ecomposition specialists to animal studies scholars, have threatened to break away from ecocriticism or have resisted “colonization” by the broader discipline. Finally, I see in the third wave of ecocriticism what I call a “polymorphously activist” tendency, with scholars and teachers finding new and old ways to connect their work to social transformation; some are now using literature as a means of illustrating sustainable lifestyles, while others, such as

John Felstiner in his 2009 *Can Poetry Save the Earth?*, are employing poetry as an agent of environmental activism.

If I had more space here, I would point to the fascinating tension between Ursula Heise's *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* and Tom Lynch's *Xerophilia: Ecocritical Explorations in Southwestern Literature*, which appeared simultaneously in the fall of 2008 and indicate the contradictory views of "place" during this new phase of ecocriticism, as we strain to bring together our local and global dimensions of experience. I would also point to Randy Malamud's search for "an expansive paradigm for human-animal relationships" in Mesoamerican poetry and religion, which results in the fascinating cross-cultural experiment of *Poetic Animals and Animal Souls* (2003). I would suggest that the growing number of postcolonial ecocritical projects, such as the collection *Caribbean Literature and the Environment*, coedited by Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, Renée K. Gosson, and George B. Handley in 2005, illustrate third wave ecocriticism's conjoining of cross-cultural comparative impulses and the activist energies of ecofeminist literary criticism and environmental justice ecocriticism. And I would point to Stacy Alaimo's "Trans-corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature," which appeared in the volume *Material Feminisms* that Alaimo edited with Susan Hekman in 2008, as a particularly clear and striking articulation of the new *material* direction in ecofeminist literary criticism.

When I look at the field from a North American perspective at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first question, three general questions seem to be taking on particular importance for ecocritics: 1) What are the emerging discourses of materiality (place-attachment, corporeality) and commitment (ethical awareness, political engagement) in this global era?; 2) How do today's narratives of environmentally and socially sensitive lifestyle changes support or undermine meaningful systemic transformation?; and 3) When is it useful to merge and compare texts across regions, languages, cultures, historical eras, and disciplines, and when do such comparisons offer little traction in responding to today's pressing concerns? Of course, as I stated above, practitioners of the first and second waves of ecocriticism continue to offer exciting and meaningful publications (and classes). What I've tried to sketch out in this small essay, though, is an overview of some of the new trends in ecocriticism, trends that seem to represent a third wave, a third *phase*, since the field was named and became a self-conscious scholarly movement three decades ago.

Works Cited

- Adamson, Joni, and Scott Slovic. "Guest Editors' Introduction: The Shoulders We Stand On: An Introduction to Ethnicity and Ecocriticism." *MELUS* 34.2 (Summer 2009): 5-24.
- Alaimo, Stacy, and Susan Hekman, eds. *Material Feminisms*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2008.
- Allister, Mark, ed. *Eco-Man: New Perspectives on Masculinity and Nature*. Charlottesville and London: U of Virginia P, 2004.
- Armbruster, Karla, and Kathleen R. Wallace. *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*. Charlottesville and London: U of Virginia P, 2001.
- Buell, Lawrence. *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literature Imagination*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005.
- Cohen, Michael P. "Blues in the Green: Ecocriticism Under Critique." *Environmental History* 9.1 (January 2004): 9-36.
- Colligan-Taylor, Karen. *The Emergence of Environmental Literature in Japan*. New York and London: Garland, 1990.
- Coupe, Laurence. *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*. London: Routledge, 2000.
- DeLoughrey, Elizabeth M., Renée K. Gosson, and George B. Handley, eds. *Caribbean Literature and the Environment*. Charlottesville and London: U of Virginia P, 2005.
- Festiner, John. *Can Poetry Save the Earth? A Field Guide to Nature Poems*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2009.
- Heise, Ursula. *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*. New York: Oxford UP, 2008.
- Iyer, Pico. *The Global Soul: Jet Lag, Shopping Malls, and the Search for Home*. New York: Vintage, 2001.
- Lynch, Tom. *Xerophilia: Ecocritical Explorations in Southwestern Literature*. Lubbock: Texas Tech UP, 2008.
- Malamud, Randy. *Poetic Animals and Animal Souls*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- Mazel, David. *A Century of Early Ecocriticism*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2001.
- Murphy, Patrick D. *Farther Afield in the Study of Nature-Oriented Literature*. Charlottesville and London: U of Virginia P, 2000.
- Phillips, Dana. *The Truth of Ecology*. New York: Oxford UP, 2003.

Rueckert, William. "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism." 1978. In *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1996. 105-23.

Woodward, Wendy. *The Animal Gaze: Animal Subjectivities in Southern African Narratives*. Johannesburg, South Africa: Wits University Press, 2008.