

Affect, Emotion, and Ecocriticism

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Abstract

Our relationships to the environments that surround, sustain, and sometimes threaten us are fraught with emotion. And since, as neurologist Antonio Damasio has shown, cognition is directly linked to emotion, and emotion is linked to the feelings of the body, our physical environment influences not only how we feel, but also what we think. Importantly, this also holds true when we interact with artistic representations of such environments, as we find them in literature, film, and other media. For this reason, our emotions can take a rollercoaster ride when we read a book or watch a film. Typically, such emotions are evoked as we empathize with characters while also inhabiting emotionally the storyworlds that surround these characters and interact with them in various ways. Given this crucial interlinkage between environment, emotion, and environmental narrative in the widest sense, it is unsurprising that, from its inception, the study of literature and the environment has been interested in how ecologically oriented texts represent and provoke emotions in relation to the natural world. More recently, ecocritical scholars have started to develop a more sustained theoretical approach to exploring how affect and emotion function in environmentally oriented texts of all kinds. In this article, I will attempt to trace this development over time, briefly highlighting some of the most important texts and theoretical concepts in affective ecocriticism.

Keywords: Affect, emotion, affective ecocriticism, cognitive ecocriticism, econarratology.

Resumen

Nuestra relación con los entornos que nos rodean, sustentan y, a veces, amenazan, están llenos de emoción. Y ya que, tal y como el neurólogo Antonio Damasio ha demostrado, la cognición está directamente vinculada a la emoción, y la emoción a las sensaciones del cuerpo, nuestro entorno físico influye no sólo en cómo nos sentimos, sino también en lo que pensamos. De forma importante, esto es también cierto cuando interactuamos con las representaciones artísticas de esos entornos, tal y como las encontramos en literatura, cine, y otros medios. Por esta razón, nuestras emociones son como una montaña rusa cuando leemos un libro o vemos una película. Típicamente, esas emociones se evocan cuando empatizamos con los personajes mientras también vivimos emocionalmente en los mundos que rodean a estos personajes, con los que interactúan de distintas maneras. Dado este vínculo crucial entre entorno, emoción y narración medioambiental en el sentido más amplio, no es sorprendente que, desde su origen, el estudio de la literatura y el medio ambiente se haya interesado en cómo los textos con sesgo ecológico representan y provocan emociones en relación con el mundo natural. Más recientemente, académicos ecocríticos han empezado a desarrollar un enfoque teórico más continuo para explorar cómo funcionan el afecto y la emoción en todo tipo de textos con contenido ecológico. En este artículo, trataré de delinear este desarrollo a lo largo del tiempo, destacando brevemente algunos de los textos y de los conceptos teóricos más importantes en la ecocrítica afectiva.

Palabras clave: Afecto, emoción, ecocrítica afectiva, ecocrítica cognitiva, econarratología.

Place Attachments and Global Feelings

How writers feel about specific places and what their literary representations of those places might do to the feelings of readers was a keen interest of so-called “first-wave” ecocriticism which, according to Greg Garrard, was marked by a tendency to celebrate nature and human-nature relationships rather than necessarily querying them as concepts (1). Jonathan Bate’s *Romantic Ecology* (1991) is a typical example for ecocriticism’s long-standing engagement with the romantic tradition and its celebration of human emotions toward nature, as is Lawrence Buell’s claim in *The Environmental Imagination* that for American nature writers such as Henry David Thoreau and John Muir “a deeply personal love and reverence for the nonhuman led, over time, to a deeply protective feeling for nature” (137). Another pioneering ecocritic, Scott Slovic, drew on environmental psychology to support the argument that American nature writers were “probing, traumatizing, thrilling, and soothing their own minds” in order to sensually and affectively immerse readers in very similar ways into the natural environments they depicted and thereby provoke some kind of “awakening” or heightened modes of “awareness” (352). While none of these early texts attended in any sustained way to affect studies (which in itself was only emerging at the time), they show a keen interest not only in how writers and readers feel about literary environments and their non-literary counterparts, but also in the cognitive processes that enable such feelings.

The same is true for the works that challenged ecocriticism’s sustained focus on place attachment and other “local” feelings in the first decade of the 21st century. Under the impression of a swiftly changing climate and other global environmental crises, Buell himself called for extending the ecocritical imagination “from local to global” (*The Future* 62). Citing geographer Yi Fu Tuan’s insight that “places are centers of felt value” (Tuan 4), Buell concedes that we tend to get emotionally attached to relatively small and bounded areas we know well and that such topophilic feelings inevitably “thin out as the territory expands” (*The Future* 68), making it more difficult for us to care for more distant and less accessible spaces or the planet as a whole. Buell nevertheless advocates the development of a more “global sense of place” (69) that might enable us to engage with the trans-local nature of many environmental problems without getting trapped in a debilitating feeling of placelessness. Ursula Heise’s *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (2008) takes Buell’s argument one step further, arguing that ecologically oriented thinking must come to terms with postmodern processes of deterritorialization and thus not only with the feeling but the *fact* of placelessness (10). If that is a difficult endeavor emotionally, because our attachments beyond the local are too thin, the question arises what cultural texts can do to enliven our imaginations and thicken our feelings. It is a question that has been of interest to many ecocritics since the publication of Heise’s influential book, and some, as we will see below, draw on affect theory and/or affective science in their work.

However, this is not to say that a growing interest in the global and de-territorialized has subsumed ecocriticism’s longstanding interest in place attachment. Jennifer Ladino’s *Reclaiming Nostalgia: Longing for Nature in American Literature* (2012) is a good example for the continuing relevance of the concept, since it makes clear that, in

addition to the longing for an inaccessible (or inexistent) Edenic past, certain forms of ecostalgia also anticipate *future* feelings of loss and regret. Ladino's more recent *Memorials Matter* (2019) engages affects in the physical world rather than in literary texts, and ecomedia scholars Salma Monani et al. (2017) have demonstrated that place attachment can be used as a tool in climate change communication. Nancy Easterlin, conversely, draws on evolutionary psychology in her direct rebuttal of Heise's call for a deterritorialization of ecocriticism, reminding us that humans are "a knowledge-seeking, wayfaring" species, who have evolved to explore new domains but whose felt attachment to given locals is nevertheless adaptive" ("Ecocriticism" 228). Easterlin's evolutionary argument resonates in interesting ways with Axel Goodbody's cultural memory perspective (2011), which similarly insists on the continued relevance of place-identity for environmentalist projects in an increasingly globalized and deterritorialized world.

Rather than leaving place attachment behind, then, ecocriticism seems to have widened its circle of concern over the past decades while remaining sensitive to the continued importance of the deep feelings we develop for the local, bounded places that have personal meaning to us. This is also evidenced in a number of edited collections on the topic, among them Tonya K. Davidson, Ondine Park, and Rob Shields's *Ecologies of Affect: Placing Nostalgia, Desire, and Hope* (2011), Christine Berberich, Neil Campbell, and Robert Hudson's *Affective Landscapes in Literature, Art and Everyday Life: Memory, Place and the Senses* (2015), and Lisa Ottum and Seth T. Reno's *Wordsworth and the Green Romantics: Affect and Ecology in the Nineteenth Century* (2016).

Ecophobia, Ecohorror, and Irreverence

But not all feelings toward our environments—real or imagined—are positive. In recent years, ecocritics have also explored the "dark side" of human-nature relationships. In *The Ecophobia Hypothesis* (2018), Simon Estok argues that positive emotional attachments such as biophilia (Wilson) and topophilia (Tuan) have done very little for the health of our planet and that in order to understand the affective states driving humanity's highly destructive behavior in the Anthropocene, we must acknowledge that our feelings toward nature are often negative and harmful. "Ecophobia," Estok explains, "is a uniquely human psychological condition that prompts antipathy towards nature" (1). It is a form of phobia that "has largely derived from humanity's irrational fear of nature" and in which "humans view nature as an opponent" (1). From here it is a small step to the related concepts of ecohorror and ecogothic, which have been theorized extensively by scholars such as Bernice M. Murphy (2013), Brad Tabas (2015) and Elizabeth Parker (2020), and by the contributors to collections on *Plant Horror* (Dawn Keetley and Angela Tenga 2017) and the *Ecogothic* (Andrew Smith and William Hughes 2016; Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils 2017).

Importantly, such dark and negative emotions toward the natural world are deeply affected by cultural factors. As Estok acknowledges in his introduction to a 2019 thematic cluster on ecophobia in *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* with reference to a contribution by Rayson K. Alex and S. Susan Deborah, "what is

ecophobia in New York may not be ecophobia in New Delhi” (380). Equally important is the insight that cultural texts have used ecophobia as entertainment (Yilmaz 2019). We must not forget that there is often a distinct element of pleasure involved in our engagements with texts that invite feelings of ecophobia. As the philosopher Noël Carroll has shown, the “paradox of fiction” allows audiences “to find pleasure in what by nature is distressful and unpleasant” (128). Instead of fleeing from a monstrous nature, as they would in real life, people are enabled to experience the excitement of the emotional upheavals caused by it.

Even the dark side of human-nature relationships, then, can have its affective upsides. This is precisely the point developed by Timothy Morton in his 2016 *Dark Ecology*. In Morton’s understanding, ecological awareness in the twenty-first century is inevitably “dark-depressing,” “dark-uncanny,” but also, potentially, “dark-sweet” (5). He suggests that we should find and develop positive emotions within that inevitable darkness. “Find the joy,” he writes, “without pushing away the depression, for depression is [an] accurate” response to the current state of the world (117). Faced with multiple interlocking global ecological crises, Morton wants us to embrace the playful and the weird, which he believes will help us arrive at the joy that is necessary to “brighten the dark, strange loop we traverse.”

In a somewhat different vein, Nicole Seymour has also suggested that we must lighten up if we want to find ways to live meaningfully in the Anthropocene. In her 2018 *Bad Environmentalism*, Seymour states that the “troubling times” we currently live in are “defined by ironies and riddled with absurdities” (1). Like Morton, she sees potential in the weirdness of our condition and calls upon us to pay attention to “related affects and sensibilities such as irreverence, ambivalence, camp, frivolities, awkwardness, sardonicism, perversity, playfulness, and glee” (1). In another recent publication, Seymour argues that queer theory is an essential resource for affective ecocriticism (“The Queerness” 235). In the understanding of these scholars, then, the “weirding” and “queerness” of environmental affect and ecological consciousness alike allows for a different engagement with the world around us. As Tabas points out, “weird literature can help us to develop an utterly different, if not less important, critical conception of the role of literature as prompting us to think deeply about the reality of the places that we inhabit” (n.p.). The emotions we feel in response to such weird and uncanny worlds might even help us get to the “dark sweet” state that Morton considers conducive for (psychological) survival in the Anthropocene.

Ecology, Emotion and Narrative: New Directions

While our affective engagements with environmentally oriented texts are therefore a longstanding and multifaceted interest within ecocriticism, it is only in recent years that the field has begun to engage more explicitly with affect theory and cognitive approaches to emotion. In their introduction to *Affective Ecocriticism*, Bladow and Ladino observe that “the ‘affective turn’ has deep roots in Marxist, psychoanalytic, feminist and queer theory and is understood at least in part as a corrective to a

poststructuralist overemphasis on discourse at the expense of embodied experience” (4). The latter part is certainly true although, as I will explain below, there is also another broad orientation within contemporary affect studies which is rooted in post-classical narratology and affective science. The more theoretically inclined orientation of affect studies evoked here by Bladow and Ladino, however—epitomized in the work of philosophers and cultural scholars such as Gilles Deleuze, Brian Massumi, Charles Altieri, Sara Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, and Sianne Ngai—broadly understands affect as a force that “fuses the body with the imagination into an ethical synthesis that bears directly on the micro-powers inherent in everyday interactions” (Davidson et al. 5). Heather Houser’s *Ecocriticism in Contemporary U.S. Fiction* (2014) is a good example for an ecocritical text that draws on affect theory in its exploration of the affectivity of characters’ bodies and their environments while also paying close attention to the ways in which those affects “are attached to formal dimensions of texts such as metaphor, plot structure, and character relations” (3). Next to a pronounced interest in embodiment, then, the analysis of narrative form is also an important component of recent explorations into the emotional valance of environmental texts. The same is true for connecting the affective turn to the material turn, which is evidenced by *Affective Ecocriticism’s* engagement with material ecocriticism (Iovino and Oppermann 2014) and its distinct interest in the narrative agency of the more-than-human world.

Another noteworthy recent development is the introduction of cognitive approaches to affect and emotion into ecocritical analysis. As mentioned above, the affective turn in literary and film studies was in part brought about by researchers like Patrick Colm Hogan, Suzanne Keen, Greg Smith and Carl Plantinga, whose work has roots in post-classical narratology, cognitive film theory, and affective science. The first scholar who introduced cognitive narratology into ecocriticism was Nancy Easterlin who, in a 2010 essay entitled “Cognitive Ecocriticism” declared that “knowledge of human perception, cognition, and conceptual articulation is more crucial to the key issues underlying ecocriticism than it is perhaps to any other area of contemporary literary study” (92), which is why she considered it imperative that ecocritics engage with the insights of cognitive and affective science. Erin James’s *The Storyworld Accord* (2016) was the next milestone, developing an econarratology that is informed by cognitive and contextual narrative theory. My own research has also contributed to this branch of affective ecocriticism. In my monograph *Affective Ecologies* (2017) and over a dozen of book chapters and articles, I explore the role of empathy and emotion in our engagements with environmental literature and film. The volume I edited, *Moving Environments: Affect, Emotion, Ecology, and Film* (2014), features cognitive approaches alongside chapters that engage affect theory and phenomenology in their explorations of affect and emotion in environmental film. It includes a contribution by Adrian Ivakhiv, whose *Ecologies of the Moving Image: Cinema, Affect, Nature* (2013) offers a deep exploration of cinematic affect that, while not cognitivist in its approach, is interested in the mental and emotional journeys that might start in a viewing experience and end up reshaping our understanding of ourselves and our planet.

What unites all these publications is the conviction that the emotions we experience when engaging with cultural texts are no different from the emotions we experience in everyday life, and since emotions create memories and drive behavior, there is reason to believe that such engagements might also resonate beyond the immediate reading or viewing experience. Emotion, Houser has argued, “can carry us from the micro-scale of the individual to the macro-scale of institutions, nation, and the planet” (223). And, as Scott Slovic and the psychologist Paul Slovic explain in their introduction to *Numbers and Nerves* (2015), understanding information about that macro-scale “requires both cognitive apprehension of data that defines our human-sized frames of reference and emotional resilience in the face of dauntingly vast problems” (3). Recent studies in the emerging field of empirical ecocriticism suggest that cultural texts can indeed carry our level of concern beyond the realm of purely personal, for example by changing how much we care about the welfare of nonhuman animals (Małecki et al. 2019; Małecki, Weik von Mossner, and Dobrowolska 2020), and about the issue of climate change (Schneider-Mayerson 2019, 2020; Brereton and Gomez 2020). But more research is needed to either confirm or refute the idea, cherished by many of us, that the affective engagement with environmentally oriented texts can have a meaningful impact on the places we live in and the state of our imperiled planet.

Affective ecocriticism, then, is a highly interdisciplinary endeavor that seeks to better understand our manifold emotional engagements with cultural texts and the environment. And as Hogan points out in *Literature and Emotion*, the most promising interdisciplinary integrations might be those that combine “the empirical and analytical vigor of affective science” (38) with the political vigor that animates not only affect theorists but also most ecocritics. Among the most recent examples of this interdisciplinary vigor are Sarah Jaquette Ray’s *A Field Guide on Climate Anxiety* (2020) and Glenn Albrecht’s *Earth Emotions: New Worlds for a New World* (2019), along with other works that scrutinize the affective dimensions of our current cultural, political, and ecological moment. We can therefore be hopeful that the coming years will see a burgeoning of exciting new research at the intersection of affect studies, broadly conceived, and the equally multi-faceted field of ecocriticism.

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