

Anthropocene Anxieties: Toward an Affective Ecocriticism

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Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino, editors. *Affective Ecocriticism: Emotion, Embodiment, Environment* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), 343 pp.

Kara Watts, Molly Volanth Hall, and Robin Hackett, editors. *Affective Materialities: Reorienting the Body in Modernist Literature* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2019), 264 pp.

Alexa Weik von Mossner. *Affective Ecologies: Empathy, Emotion, and Environmental Narrative* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2017), 269 pp.

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Baruch de Spinoza's *Ethics*, published in 1677, set the stage for much contemporary ecocriticism and theories of the body. Writing against figures such as René Descartes, whom Spinoza charges with “believ[ing] the mind has absolute power over its own actions” in his attempt to center humankind at the top of the chain of being (II/138, 69), Spinoza instead proffers a Nature composed of affects and bodies, of which the human body is one. He writes that the body and its *capacities* are affected by affects: its “power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained” by such external forces (II/139, 70). While Spinoza's *Ethics* ultimately explores the nature of human reason in light of these affects, with anthropocentrism reinforced by his differentiation between humans and nonhumans, nonetheless the ecological reverberations of a world enchanted by affects are significant. The relatively recent return to Spinoza in literary studies, specifically affect theory and ecocriticism, has been in part a response to the “poststructuralist overemphasis on discourse at the expense of embodied experience,” as Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino note in their introduction (4).

What is remarkable to the authors and editors of these volumes, then, is the fact that these two fields with shared investments have not yet been in more serious theoretical dialogue. Beyond the ecological resonances of some major works of affect theory, (including Sianne Ngai and Sara Ahmed) as well as the interest in how nonhuman material engenders certain affective stances evidenced in material ecocriticism (Jane Bennett, Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, for example), the authors of these volumes call for more sustained and self-conscious attention to the proliferation of affects in material environments. Specifically, these collections explore the form affects take in

an era of anthropogenic climate change. What does it mean that the world has effectively been shaped by the activity of (some) humans? In other words, what kinds of affects circulate in the Anthropocene? For a great many of the essays in these volumes, the Anthropocene engenders a host of negative affects—guilt, disappointment, frustration—as responses to/within environments seemingly always in threat of destruction. A through line of these essays, then, is the revelation that the dominant affect of the Anthropocene is anxiety, along with the concomitant question: when the future looks so bleak, how can understandably anxious affects be viewed as politically salient or even productive in the present?

I start with Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino's edited volume, *Affective Ecocriticism: Emotion, Embodiment, Environment* (2018) since it is the most generalist, and offers an overview of the strands of affect theory that clarifies each volume's contents. Bladow and Ladino write that their collection "expand[s] on what counts as an environmental affect, and... identif[ies] new affects that can be understood more clearly through the lens of ecocritical theory" (6). They define such affects as those "emerging or being redefined in the Anthropocene, including despair, resignation, climate grief, and solastalgia" (11). Solastalgia, in particular—Glenn Albrecht's coinage for the particular kind of homesickness engendered by climate disruption in one's immediate environment—is an eco-affect that many of the essays in this collection address. Beyond this commonality, Bladow and Ladino identify three major strands of affect theory at work in this collection: "the cognitive ecocritical approach", associated with cognitive scientists and neurologists such as Antonio Damasio (12); "affect theory in a cultural studies vein", most firmly grounded in Spinoza's writing, articulated by affect theorists including Brian Massumi, and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari more broadly (12); and finally what they describe as an approach centered on "formalist analysis" (11). I am terming this branch of affect studies "the emergent approach," since theorists employ close readings of texts and their aesthetics to inform politically-oriented interventions regarding race, class, gender and sexuality. This approach is associated with theorists including Sianne Ngai, Sara Ahmed, and Lauren Berlant, among others. Bladow and Ladino's volume features a preponderance of this last approach: this approach's concern with "noncathartic emotions" and "bad affects" reflects the editors' claim that "[e]nvironmentalist killjoys—green kin of Ahmed's feminist killjoys—take center stage in this project" (11). Therefore, many of the essays reflect Ngai's own call to think "the aesthetic and political together—a task whose urgency seems to increase in proportion to its difficulty in a [sic] increasingly anti-utopian and functionally differentiated society" (2005, 3). The anti-utopian environments of the Anthropocene are certainly fodder for a host of ugly affects.

Bladow and Ladino have organized the volume around four streams: the first section highlights the three approaches to affect theory in action; the second part is centered around issues of environmental justice; the third explores animal studies and animality; and the fourth tackles politics and pedagogy through the lens of negative affects. While this organization is productive for the threads and tensions it fosters, I thought it would be helpful to classify chapters based on their approaches to affect.

The cognitive approach is inaugurated by Alexa Weik von Mossner, to whose monograph this review will return. Her chapter builds on cognitive approaches to environmental narrative, including insights from Patrick Colm Hogan and Antonio Damasio, in concert with psychological studies that track the “motivational power of nostalgia” (65). She brings these findings to bear on a reading of Dale Jamieson and Bonnie Nadzam’s short story collection *Love in the Anthropocene* (2015), and the “imaginative power of science fiction” more broadly (52). Jobb Arnold’s chapter describes the 2016 forest fire that devastated enormous swaths of land near the Canadian tar sands in Fort McMurray, Alberta. He argues that the fire created a “surge of affective intensity” that enabled people to register the *land affect*, that is, “nontechnologically mediated experiences of affective energy that cause people to *feel with the land*” (97), a process that Arnold likens to the “process of synaptic transmission” in the brain (98). William Major’s contribution examines the scale of local politics advocated by Wendell Berry in his new agrarianism as a response to the global frames of multinational capital, drawing on “neurocognitive research telling us that empathy is more apt to occur when it registers locally” (124). In a slightly different vein, Tom Hertweck’s writing on food affects revisits Silvan Tomkins, “the foundational psychological affect theorist,” and his classification of hunger as a drive (133). In so doing, Hertweck is interested in food as an “embodied ideology,” one that “proceeds from physiological hunger...to webs of affective discourses used to compel the subject to eat” (134).

The cultural studies approach is introduced by Neil Campbell’s chapter, where he develops an environmentally-oriented reading of Kathleen Stewart’s *Ordinary Affects* (2007), toward an “affective critical regionality as a way of seeing the local as both charged and dynamic, working critically across the social, mental, and environmental spheres” (72). His reading is informed by Guattari’s elaboration of “a new gentleness,” that is, a proliferation of “affective experience, responsibility, attunement, and mutuality” in the face of “capitalism’s deleterious effects” (73). Ryan Hediger’s chapter offers a reading of Phil Klay’s 2014 short story collection *Redeployment* to draw ecocritical attention to the environments of war. Hediger applies Massumi’s concept of “openness” to wartime affects, including homesickness, to imagine “new potential ways of being” for veterans (155-156). Robert Azzarello’s chapter, “Desiring Species with Darwin and Freud,” offers a re-examination of the affect of desire as articulated by Darwin and Freud, reflected through Spinoza’s contention that “the essence of all beings, organic and inorganic alike, is a striving to persevere in its own being” (184), opening for Azzarello an ethical question about how non-human desire is framed in literary depictions.

The emergent approach is modeled first by Nicole Merola’s analysis of Juliana Spahr’s poetry. Merola argues that Spahr’s poetic forms successfully “tug at two registers—poetic and earth systems,” which “enable Spahr to register and produce the specifically Anthropocene malady” of “Anthropocene anxiety” (32-33). Allyse Knox-Russell takes up Behn Zeitlin’s 2012 film *Beasts of the Southern Wild* as a model “for improvising new ways of living that can meet the environmental challenges” that face us all (217), taking great care to parse the racial and class-based violence depicted in that film that cannot be glossed over in favor of the film’s ludic beastliness. Brian Deyo’s

chapter is equally concerned with beastliness as a vector for environmental ethics. Reading the tragic form of Shakespeare's *King Lear* alongside the theories of Descartes, Deyo suggests that to "cognize ourselves as ecological beings requires a measure of affective attunement to what it is to be a sentient, vulnerable, and, perhaps most agonizingly, mortal animal" (204).

The fourth section of the volume is specifically dedicated to the emergent approach. First, Nicole Seymour posits affective attachments, especially negative or campy investments, as forms of queer affect, in a comparative reading of the culture of the queer club scene alongside Kim Anno's film work. Lisa Ottum's chapter continues Seymour's interest in "bad" affects, with her essay on disappointment as a productive environmental stance in romantic literary travel narratives, specifically Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1805). Greg Uhlin turns to film, specifically Kelly Reichert's *Old Joy* (2006) and Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011), to argue for a non-cathartic affective environment that triangulates character, setting, and spectator. Finally, Sarah Jaquette Ray puts forward a plan for affect-informed undergraduate pedagogy in Environmental Studies curricula. She discusses how courses designed around hope are less constructive than those which foreground negative affects, which, she argues, allows for students to build reflective communities, as well as to reframe the scale of meaningful action.

Alexa Weik von Mossner's monograph *Affective Ecologies: Empathy, Emotion, and Environmental Narrative* (2017) details how the neurocognitive approach can make sense of the effect of environmental narratives on reading publics. Her meticulously researched volume is a primer in cognitive neuroscience and narratology, especially as they inform affect and cultural studies. Weik von Mossner endeavors to explicate how fields including "neuroscience, cognitive psychology, and evolutionary biology...can give us a better understanding of how certain narratives impact readers in ways that resonate beyond the immediate reading experience" (8-9). Her argument is centered around the model of "embodied cognition," which details how in both reading texts and watching films, "our bodies act as sounding boards for mental simulations of storyworlds and of characters' perceptions, emotions, and actions within those virtual worlds" (3). Moreover, she continues that it is not only the characters that readers perceive and embody, but also "the environments that surround them, including the deliberations, emotions, and actions of nonhuman agents" (3).

The three parts of Weik von Mossner's book are oriented around specific genres of American environmental writing; the first part is concerned with the sensory and affective environments of realism. Her argument revolves around "liberated embodied simulation," in which readers process in their body (via mirror neurons) what is happening in a fictional environment (26). She demonstrates how there is no difference between the immediacy of first-person narratives and the distancing of third-person description in terms of embodied cognition. The first chapter examines these concepts through John Muir's 1894 *The Mountains of California* and Bonnie Nadzam's post-modern novel *Lamb* (2011). The second chapter extends these findings to filmic environments, specifically the fictional *Twister* (1996) and the documentary *Gasland* (2010). Here, Weik

von Mossner points to movement and motion on film as the key for prompting viewers' mapping, through embodied simulations, of on-screen environments beyond characters.

The second part of the book focuses on environmental justice narratives. Centered around the concepts of "insider perspective," where the focalized character offers first-person testimony of their suffering, and "outsider perspective," where the focalized character comes to learn about the oppression of a group or population, Weik von Mossner develops Suzanne Keen's concept of "authorial strategic empathizing," in order to evaluate how narratives "encourage readers to feel moral allegiance with victims of environmental injustice" (79). The third chapter presents a diverse literary and filmic archive, ranging from first-person insider narratives via Helena Maria Viramontes's novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995), to complex insider/outsider focalized character Ray Levoi in the film *Thunderheart* (1992). Weik von Mossner pushes the concept of insider/outsider even further in the fourth chapter, where she discusses the focalization of animal characters and narrators. She examines the problem of anthropomorphization, arguing that neurocognitive accounts of empathy, as well as cognitive ethology, explain more compellingly why human audiences respond empathetically to animal distress, and in so doing turns to the documentary *The Cove* (2009), and the biopic *Gorillas in the Mist* (1988). Ultimately, she argues that both forms of perspective engender "empathetic distress," which is alleviated by "prosocial action" (80). While she details some of the problematics of empathy, the idea of an insider/outsider perspective as delineated here seems to assume a privileged position for the reader. What would embodied cognition look like for viewers from other positionalities?

Her most thought-provoking discussion occurs in the final part, where she evaluates the cognitive effects of dystopian and utopian literatures. Inquiring how such narratives promote positive environmental change, she turns to the discourse of risk to make sense of anticipatory environments. Building off Paul and Scott Slovic's research on risk analysis, she avers that the usual discourse of impending climate catastrophe located in the nonnarrative scientific genres of "graphs and numbers" does not engender embodied cognition (138-139). Instead, she agrees with Slovic and Slovic that a blend of quantitative information with emotions and narratives are key to effective climate communication (141). Pushing past the apathetic impasse of despair, dystopian narratives are most effective when they register with other affects, including humor and irony, in order to engender a critical distance where ethical action is possible. Her extensive dystopian archive includes the 2004 film *The Day after Tomorrow*, as well as T.C. Boyle's novel *A Friend of the Earth* (2000). Similarly, by examining Kim Stanley Robinson's novel *Pacific Edge* (1988) alongside James Cameron's blockbuster film *Avatar* (2009), she argues that utopian narratives are most affectively successful when they create a similar critical distance that emplaces reader responsibility in achieving such a promising environment.

Affective Materialities: Reorienting the Body in Modernist Literature, edited by Kara Watts, Molly Volanth Hall, and Robin Hackett (2019) is an important interlocutor in the fields of affect theory and environmental humanities; if these fields both need to reframe the body's interactions with its surroundings, then modernist art and literature is

paramount in this recentering, owing to the “radical alterations to how the body was conceived and construed in the early twentieth century” (12), including the rise of the clinic, the reconceptualization of the body as machine, the *croissance* of psychoanalysis, and the dismemberments and diseases of both World Wars. This volume is of clear interest to scholars of modernism, by introducing new approaches to interpretation, and by introducing new authors or works that have eluded canonization. Moreover, the editors are successful in their aim to show how “affect theory and ecocriticism have something to gain from modernist literature,” in this thorough volume that “aims to initiate a historicization of the body” (2).

The chapters are organized chronologically by the texts under examination (and the editors offer ways of reading certain essays in suites toward certain “reorientations”), yet I trace here engagements with the branches of affect theory. The editors are careful to note that many of the essays here engage primarily with new materialism—Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter* is a common touchstone—but nonetheless, the three distinct approaches are evident. Mary Elene Wood contextualizes the rise of neuroscience and (often coerced) psychiatric treatment in her neurocognitive reading of New Zealand writer Janet Frame, whose fiction explores the dichotomous conceptions of the brain as the source of “humanness” and organic matter. While not dealing specifically with neurological issues, Cheryl Hindrichs’s analysis of John Dos Passos’s *Three Soliders* (1921) alongside Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) evaluates the confluence of the 1918 pandemic and wartime disease, toward a “spatialization” of the clinic that lyrically interrupts the hypermasculine rhetoric of war.

Many of the contributors bring the cultural studies approach to bear on their respective texts. Stuart Christie reveals that E.M. Forster’s reading of Spinoza during his time in Egypt in 1917 shifted Forster’s colonial investments. Spinoza’s description of *conatus*, as a non-rational desire informed by moving through and being moved by the material environment, opened Forster to queer desire and non-oppressive attachments. William Kupinse contextualizes Herbert Read’s speculative novel *The Green Child* (1935) through Alfred North Whitehead’s process philosophy and twentieth-century developments in theoretical biology, in order to complicate Massumi’s differentiation between affect and emotion, instead showing that both “exist on a continuum, with significance immanent at all stages” (148). Kathryn Van Wert offers a comparative reading of Rainer Maria Rilke’s materialist poetry alongside John Coetzee’s post-Apartheid non-fictional writing to examine the limits of Massumi’s conception of the virtual. In other words, she questions whether the dissolution of the subject in new materialism is incompatible with identity, especially when certain identities are victim to historical trauma.

The essays engaging with the emergent approach represent a wide variety of methodologies, from focused close-readings to positionings of modernist texts as interlocutors in political and theoretical frames. Karen Guendel’s fascinating chapter puts Walt Whitman in conversation with William Carlos Williams to place Williams’s articulation of his Objectivist aesthetic earlier in his career, an aesthetic, as she demonstrates, centered on the interaction between the material poem and the lived

environments of the embodied reader. Kim Segouin finds across H.D.'s novelistic and non-fictional writing a cinematic interest that envisions entanglement and contingency between human viewer, technology, and environment, in a way prescient of Stacy Alaimo's concept of "trans-corporeality." Anna Christine turns to Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* (1936) and its abject cuteness as the site of the novel's non-reproductive and non-anthropocentric sexuality, thereby extending Ngai, Berlant and Edelman's theories of cuteness and the avant-garde. Judith Paltin builds on new materialist and critical race theories to posit frustration as central not only to the aesthetics of modernist fiction produced by women and writers of color, including Nella Larsen, Jean Rhys, and Virginia Woolf, but also how negative affects can open "differential new assemblies" within the space of the novel (106).

Robin Hackett's epilogue begins the work of bringing the theorization of the body in modernity's affective environments into contemporary spaces. By tracking anecdotally how the circulation of affects (ranging from anger to "well-meaning" sympathy) serve to police public space for people, especially women, of color, she posits blank affect—"a quiet, nonemotive response"—as a form of social work, the "strategic public deployment of private emotion for anti-racist effect" (251). Hackett's words put all three volumes into conversation: how best can scholars, activists, and readers mobilize this proliferation of ugly affects and anxieties in the Anthropocene, especially in the service of the most vulnerable bodies among us?

Works Cited

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