

Introduction

The Four Elements and the Recovery of Referentiality in Ecocriticism

I understand the Four Elements as both an ancient and a contemporary way of thinking about the material world. And I consider ecocriticism a critical method that both evokes the responsibility of the critic and reinstates referentiality as a crucial and primary activity of literature. It is a movement with multiple aspects and theories delimiting it, particularly a drive toward multidisciplinary that bridges the humanities and the sciences. To achieve its goals and remain honest to the literature it seeks to study, ecocriticism should remain pivotal, rather than foundational, and localist, rather than global, in its grounding orientation. By that I mean that ecocriticism will constantly seek disciplinary contexts and circumstantially appropriate principles for analysis rather than relying exclusively on philosophically universalist concepts. While there are issues requiring a global perspective and there are phenomena truly global in scope, the local and the particular can never be forgotten or ignored. Localist in orientation would mean being always attentive to particular and specific places, entities, and events, even when addressing the global implications of ecological change. For instance, even with global warming, change occurs unevenly and ecological dimensions, and the people within them, are affected differentially by the same general phenomena. Tim Forsyth makes precisely that point repeatedly through a variety of concrete examples in *Critical Political Ecology*, such as the challenges posed by non-equilibrium ecology, regional deforestation, population changes, and islands of sustainability.

THE FOUR ELEMENTS: THEN AND NOW

For many years when scholars in the West would invoke the Four Elements—earth, air, water, and fire—their listeners would usually recognize the invocation

as an allusion to Aristotle and possibly think about notions of balance, unity, and indivisibility. Readers familiar with Aristotle's lecture notes might also make connections among physics, metaphysics, ethics, and poetics, or recognize the interconnectedness of nature, being and becoming, self-conscious behavior, and literature.

Modern listeners and readers, however, when they hear the four elements invoked, might not think of Aristotle. Rather, they might think of pollution and environmental crises. Perhaps not by accident biologist Sandra Steingraber, author of *Living Downstream: A Scientist's Personal Investigation of Cancer and the Environment* (1997), has titled chapters of her book "earth," "air," "water," and "fire," even though making no mention of Aristotle. In each chapter she emphasizes different types of human-caused pollutants and their relationship with spiraling rates of cancer, thereby showing the inversions of balance, unity, and indivisibility.

In "earth" she emphasizes changes in American agriculture and the exponential growth of synthetic insecticides and herbicides. In the "air" chapter, she focuses on airborne chemicals that respect no national boundaries in their acts of contamination, noting that "[t]he rising and falling movements of global distillation explain why chemicals used in rice paddies and cotton fields eventually end up in the skin of Arctic trees" (Steingraber 1997, 177). In the "water" chapter she focuses not only on the rapid reduction of biological diversity but also on water pollution's poisoning of the animals that live in rivers and lakes and through biomagnification the people who eat those animals and drink that water. And in the "fire" chapter Steingraber looks at toxic waste incinerators, which burn garbage of all kinds and release toxins into the air and dump their concentrated residues in landfills.

As the works of Aristotle are organized today, one can see first of all a linkage among the study of nature and the study of human beings in interdependent relationship with the rest of nature, which means the study of being-in-the-world. Second, one can see an attention to ethics, the character of human behavior while experiencing being-in-the-world, that includes environmental ethics, or the character of human behavior toward the nonhuman aspects of the world, thereby making ethics both human and ecological in character. Third, one can see literature, a type of poetics, in dependent relation on physics, metaphysics, and ethics, as a manifestation and shaping force of human experiential behavior. Steingraber makes explicit the interrelationship of these concerns in *Living Downstream* by showing the effects of human behavior regarding toxic waste on all aspects of nature. She also shows how research, government investigations, community stories about cancer, and public inequities in environmental cleanups contribute to, and reflect, differences across communities based on social class and private wealth.

ANY EMBODIMENT OF RESPONSIBILITY INVOKES A RECOGNITION OF REFERENTIALITY

Whether speaking of Aristotle or Steingraber, one sees that these authors believed that language embodied referentiality rather than purely self-reflexive communication. That is, words, among other functions, serve to name, identify, depict, and define the material world in which they circulate and from which they arise. Indeed, consciousness itself and human imagination form part of this material world since they depend on electrochemical and biological activity for their existence. Not only do words shape the reality that human beings perceive, but also the experiencing of reality, of corporeal existence, shapes the way that human beings use and understand language in the form of discourses, dialects, and utterances, as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have extensively demonstrated in *Philosophy in the Flesh* and other works. This referentiality links literature and all forms of writing with human agency, as Mikhail Bakhtin suggested about ninety years ago in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. Human agency, in turn, evokes the matter of responsibility.

Like Aristotle, who believed that multiple affects worked to generate motion, like Steingraber, who believes that the information and call to action in her book can make a difference in human behavior and environmental interaction, and like Bakhtin, who believed “I exist in the world of inescapable actuality, and not in that of contingent possibility” (1993, 44), I believe that the theories, texts, and pedagogies that teachers choose to emphasize do make a difference in the world, that professors do act positively and negatively as agents of change or of stasis, and that we must accept our responsibility for the effects of our behavior on others and their worldly interactions. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a social psychologist, states quite succinctly the position that each of us occupies in this world:

Whether we like it or not, our lives will leave a mark on the universe. Each person's birth makes ripples that expand in the social environment: parents, siblings, relatives, and friends are affected by it, and as we grow up our actions leave a myriad of consequences, some intended, most not. Our consumer decisions make a tiny difference in the economy, political decisions affect the future of the community, and each kind or mean act modifies slightly the total quality of human well-being. Persons whose lives are autotelic help to reduce entropy in the consciousness of those who come in contact with them; those who devote all their psychic energy to competing for resources and to aggrandizing their own self add to the sum total of entropy. (1997, 131)

Speaking more specifically to literary critics, Karl Kroeber opens *Ecological Literary Criticism* (1994) with these words: “an ecologically oriented

literary criticism . . . seizes opportunities offered by recent biological research to make humanistic studies more socially responsible. . . . Humanists willing to think beyond self-imposed political and metaphysical limits of contemporary critical discourse can use these scientific advances to make literary studies contribute to the practical resolution of social and political conflicts that rend our society" (p. 1). Indeed, we should.

A single decision to rewrite the curriculum of American literary studies in other countries, such as Korea or Japan, Austria or Estonia, to emphasize a different set of texts and a different range of authors from those commonly taught and clearly established to date will ripple, even if ever so faintly, through those societies for decades to come. Faculty working on curricular revision and adjustments to the canon of commonly taught works in both national literature and foreign literature departments around the world can ask themselves: how might the long-term attitude of our students and other members of our culture toward environmental protection and restoration be affected by the teaching of works in our national and foreign literatures that are devoted to nature and environmental topics? The ideas taught today can become the practice of tomorrow, but only if they are taught today.

According to Csikszentmihalyi's ideas, we either contribute to the reduction of entropy, which is to say for the expansion of balance and harmony in the entire world, or for the expansion of entropy, the increase in chaos and destruction. We are not agents of change simply because we have decided to think so. We engage in particular types of thinking because we are participants in a long evolutionary activity through which matter achieves consciousness and self-awareness. The ongoing reproduction with variation and adaptation of DNA in the lives of all animal species on the planet is one manifestation of this seeking. And human theorizing, which arises out of this manifestation and which depends on a particular temporary confluence of earth, air, water, and fire in the formation of each individual, constitutes a component of this quest. From the vantage point, then, of reducing entropy and advancing matter's development of consciousness in a way that works toward our world's indefinite human sustainability, I evaluate and develop the theories that I adopt, adapt, or reject in the course of my scholarly and pedagogical practice.

The possibility of referentiality functions as a key to such selection. Literature can only affect the minds of its readers if it has the ability to orient their thinking not only toward the world in the text but also the world in which the text materially and ideationally exists at the moment of reading. Throughout ecocritical theory, the return to referentiality has been addressed both in opposition to postmodernism and poststructuralist theories and as a complement or corrective to them. Here I want to review three of the more successful of

these addresses. Terry Gifford, Leonard Scigaj, and Laurence Coupe, among others, have developed various positions promoting referentiality.

In 1995, English poet and critic Terry Gifford published *Green Voices*, which treats poetry. Gifford concerns himself in this study with the issue of referentiality and arguments about the social construction of nature. Commenting on his own text and its ostensible subject, Gifford notes that “this book is not ultimately about reading and writing poetry, but about our living relationship with the material reality we sometimes call ‘the environment’ or ‘nature’ or ‘our inner selves’ or ‘our bodies’” (1995, 10). And, arguing against Alan Liu, who critiqued Wordsworth claiming “There is no nature” and that “Nature is the name under which we use the nonhuman to validate the human, to interpose a mediation able to make humanity more easy with itself” (quoted in Gifford 1995, 15), Gifford notes that Liu “is wrong to deny the general physical presence that is one side of that mediation” (1995, 15). That is not to say that such a physical presence is simplistically and literally identified in any text in a transparent one-to-one idea and matter correspondence. Rather, as Gifford notes, “Any reference will implicitly or explicitly express a notion of nature that relates to culturally developed assumptions about metaphysics, aesthetics, politics, and status, that is, in many cases, ideologies” (1995, 15). But mediation does not dissolve extratextual materiality into pure textuality. Rather than there being nothing outside the text, as Derrida is repeatedly quoted as claiming and generally misinterpreted in the process, Gifford emphasizes that texts and the languages of their composition intellectually mediate sensuous human experience, personal and collective, immediate and historical.

In the year 2000, another British critic, Laurence Coupe, provided a preface to his edited volume *The Green Studies Reader*, that begins by identifying the affinities between this reader and previous Routledge-published anthologies, the *Cultural Studies Reader* and the *Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, immediately taking this volume out of the realm of purely textual studies and into the realm of material culture and nature. In his “General Introduction” he goes on to emphasize, as did Gifford before him, that “green studies does not challenge the notion that human beings make sense of the world through language, but rather the self-serving inference that nature is nothing more than a linguistic construct.” Coupe approvingly quotes Kate Soper who observes that “it is not language which has a hole in its ozone layer; and it is the real thing that continues to be polluted and degraded even as we refine our deconstructive insights at the level of the signifier” (quoted in Coupe 2000, 3).

In the previous year, 1999, American critic Leonard Scigaj developed the most sustained theoretical challenge to emphases on pure textuality and Derridean *différance*. Observing that the origin of language itself is to be found

in nature, both in the physical production of the sounds and signs that embody language and in the sensuous engagement of human beings in a world larger than themselves, which they sought to explain, Scigaj develops a theory of “*référance*,” a neologism that labels an experience:

référance turns the reader’s gaze toward an apprehension of the cyclic processes of wild nature after a self-reflexive recognition of the limits (the *sous rature*) of language. After this two-stage process, a third moment often occurs, the moment of atonement with nature, where we confide our trust in (*sen référer*) nature’s rhythms and cycles, where reading nature becomes our text. (1999, 38)

Scigaj bases this definition on his claim that “Within ecopoetry and environmental poetry, language is often foregrounded only to reveal its limitations, and this is accomplished in such a way that the reader’s gaze is thrust beyond language back into the less limited natural world that language refers to, the inhabited place where humans must live in harmony with ecological cycles” (1999, 37–38). Here, as with the other writers cited, responsibility and referentiality are perceived as coterminous. Ecocriticism, then, at least as formulated by these writers and myself, sets itself against any conception of criticism as disinterested, aestheticist, or purely intertextual.

ECOCRITICISM AN ACTIVIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE

Ecocriticism as the study of literary works with special attention to the representation of relationships among human beings and the rest of the “more-than-human” world has always been concerned with the agency of human beings and the need for rethinking social behaviors and actions. However one goes about teaching and analyzing nature-oriented literature, it inevitably involves challenging students to bring to consciousness their views about the world, their sense of personal responsibility in that world, and to consider the impact of contemporary society on the environments in which everyone lives and dies. Ecocriticism, then, tends to focus on the relationship of the reader’s attitude toward the text’s representation of the extratextual world more so than the world imaginatively represented in the text.

This orientation is not what Lawrence Buell once labeled, borrowing the idea from Barry Lopez, as “outer mimesis” (*Environmental Imagination*), which would take us back to an Auerbachian sense of realism, but reflects what Rey Chow has referred to as “indirection” in her critique of poststructuralism’s “exercise of bracketing referentiality” (1912, 1911). In that essay, “The Interruption of Referentiality: Poststructuralism and the Conundrum of Critical Multiculturalism,” she fruitfully suggests a reformulation of referen-

tiality “precisely as the limit, the imperfect, irreducible difference that is not pure difference but difference thoroughly immersed in and corrupted by the delusions of history” (Chow 1918). That is to say, that while no representation may accurately capture the plenitude of the world, no representation can avoid reference to it, either direct or indirect, because materiality comprises an inseparable and indissoluble component of human existence and cognition. As a result, Chow, in part quoting Johannes Fabian, argues that we ought “to acknowledge the inevitability of reference even in the most avant-garde of theoretical undertakings, and to demand a thorough reassessment of an originary act of repudiation/exclusion in terms that can begin to address the ‘scandal of domination and exploitation of one part of mankind by another’” (1919). While Chow limits her focus here to interhuman conflict, we can easily extend her claim beyond the human.

Ecocriticism, however, should not be misconstrued as a singular theory but rather as a movement with common concerns among its participants. These participants diverge wildly and widely on which theories and texts ought to be included or be made the focus of attention. As a result, one can pick up a work of ecocriticism and find it focused on the Romantic poets and the issue of the politics of Wordsworthian nature appreciation or find it focused on contemporary novels of ecological disaster, or find it devoted to something called “nature writing,” which is usually defined as creative works of nonfiction focusing on individual experiences of wilderness and natural phenomena. Along these lines, numerous ecocritics have been intent recently on delimiting the distinction between nature writing and environmental literature, between those texts that extol individual encounters with the wild and those that focus on destructive human interaction with specific environments, including the urban, such as Lawrence Buell’s *Writing for an Endangered World* (2001) or *The Nature of Cities* (1999), edited by Michael Bennett and David W. Teague. Likewise, ecocritics draw on a highly diverse range of theories and fields of study for supplementary material in developing their arguments and critiques.

DIVERSITY IN METHOD AND DIVERSITY IN INTELLECTUAL RESOURCES

Ecocriticism necessarily draws on a far wider range of disciplines and intellectual traditions than most other forms of literary criticism. The following works demonstrate this diversity and are drawn from neurobiology, genetics, Native American studies, and globalization studies. Other fields could also be drawn in here, such as environmental history, forestry, geology, geography, urban studies, and more. But these examples will have to suffice.

Nobel Laureate Gerald Edelman in *Bright Air, Brilliant Fire: On the Matter of Mind* (1992) comments on theories of language from a neurobiological perspective:

Cognitive models are *created* by human beings, and in this sense they are idealized—that is, they are abstractions. But they depend on the formation of images as a result of sensory experience and they also depend on kinesthetic experience—the relation of the body to space. . . . The important thing to grasp is that idealized cognitive models involve conceptual embodiment and that conceptual embodiment occurs through bodily activities *prior to language*. (1992, 246–47; emphasis in original)

Further, he argues that “we must incorporate biology into our theories of knowledge and language—an account of how we know and how we are aware in light of the facts of evolution and developmental biology” (Edelman 1992, 252). Incorporating biology into theories of knowledge would also mean paying attention in literary criticism to representations of human interaction with the rest of the natural world, to human representations of cultural and economic effects on local environments, and to environmental effects on human existence, psychology, and relationships.

One effort to bring science into literary criticism has come from proponents of the ideas of E. O. Wilson and the field of sociobiology. Often these works, such as Robert Storey’s *Mimesis and the Human Animal*, provide valuable theoretical material, but then lapse into highly reductionist interpretations of specific literary works. Storey, Joseph Carroll, Frederick Turner, and others, tend to lapse into a desire for monocausal explanations on the one hand, and deterministic allocations of power and agency to systems, on the other hand. Granting all power, whether to genetics, to capital, or to the unconscious, fails to recognize the everywhere revealed multiplicity and variability of daily life.

In contrast to the genetic determinists and their literary followers, other scientists offer nondualistic and potentially more salubrious arguments for the advancement of ecocriticism. Edelman, already quoted, certainly fits here. Also, the paleontologist Niles Eldredge, the microbiologist Lynn Margulis, and the biologist Steven Rose offer more multifaceted arguments about nature-culture and nature-nurture relationships that have a strong bearing on literary analysis. Eldredge, for instance, points out that art and language both involve the necessity of attention to external stimuli and the luxury or perhaps illusion of gaining “a sense of control over the natural world”: “Being able to talk about, to describe, to draw and paint a wild animal requires observation, thought, analysis, even intimate experience. It requires knowledge, and in human life, knowledge is power” (1995, 91). And, therefore, Eldredge in *Do-*

minion (1995) after discussing the long history of human evolutionary and cultural change, in particular its relationship to climate and the development of agriculture, asserts that “The symbolic legacy of this ecological revolution—the stories we began to tell ourselves about who we are, where we came from, and how we fit into the world—still grip our collective consciousness.” Unfortunately these agrarian stories of dominion over the earth “have outlived their usefulness” (Eldredge 1995, 99). People today “continue to rely on local ecosystems, but because the vast majority of us are no longer functional *parts* of them, we simply do not see the importance of sustaining them” (Eldredge 1995, 123; emphasis in original). Therefore, “We need a new vision, a revised story of who we are and how we fit into the world” (Eldredge 1995, 166). Nature writing, environmental literature, ecopoetry, the Gaia hypothesis represented in the animated film *Final Fantasy*, and other artistic works represent diverse attempts to create such a revised story.

A part of the process of revising that story involves rethinking such concepts as competition, the key term in the reductionism of sociobiologists but also many poststructuralists, who see the competitive exercise of power in and through systems as the fundamental determinant of cultural practice. Lynn Margulis and Steve Rose call into question the very concept of competition as the explanation for biological and cultural behavior. In *Symbiotic Planet* (1998), Margulis argues that symbiosis—the living together of species in the same space and time, such as the bacteria in our intestines that help us digest food, or ants that feed and feed upon butterfly pupae—represents the dominant form of organic interaction rather than competition. Rose in *Lifelines: Biology Beyond Determinism* (1997) concludes his book with these words: “Thus for humans, as for all other living organisms, the future is radically unpredictable. This means that we have the ability to construct our own futures, albeit in circumstances not of our own choosing. And it is therefore our biology that makes us free” (1997, 309). Not only do Margulis and Rose offer alternative orientations to competition and determinism but also, like Eldredge, suggest at least indirectly the significance of studying alternative theories, conceptions, and practices of human interactions with various environments as represented in literature, rather than just focusing on human-human interactions or human-culture interactions.

It comes as perhaps no surprise that Native American literature and native cultural studies would focus frequently on human interactions with the non-human world in the local ecosystems in which all people live. But the understanding of representations of such cultural interaction requires attention not only to history, politics, economics, and sociology, but also to biology and environmental science. And hence, ecocriticism must also take these into account.

Winona LaDuke, who was at one time Ralph Nader's running mate on the Green Party presidential ticket, has written *All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life* (1999). In it LaDuke builds her argument not only on native cosmology, customs, and community practices, but also environmental science. The traditional beliefs that she depicts coincide beautifully with Margulis's argument for symbiosis. And at the same time, LaDuke's discussions of the environmental struggles for survival of native peoples throughout North America and in Hawai'i inform our understanding and interpretation of Native American literature. Without the kind of cultural and scientific knowledge relayed by LaDuke, one simply cannot understand in any significant way the environmental issues addressed by such authors as Linda Hogan, Leslie Marmon Silko, Louis Owens, Simon Ortiz, and Haunani-Kay Trask. These writers as a group invariably point readers toward the issue of environmental justice, as demonstrated by LaDuke's foreword to *New Perspectives on Environmental Justice*, edited by Rachel Stein, and the discussion of Native American struggles in *The Environmental Justice Reader*, edited by Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein.

Another concern emerges in regard to Native American cultural studies and literature, which takes us back to the issue of referentiality, which is the various reductionist interpretations of Derrida's privileging of text over speech leading to the creation of a hierarchy of literacy over orality. Keith Basso in *Wisdom Sits in Places* (1996) has used his training as an anthropologist and his experience as a rancher to demonstrate the integrated relationship between oral stories and relationship to place among the Western Apache. In the circumstances that Basso relates no radical separation exists between speaker, listener, language, and referent. Instead they are integrated into the spatial and temporal existence of not only the individuals involved but also the community, with a continuous interplay of absence and presence, metonymy and metaphor, literal and figurative understanding.

Gregory Cajete, a Tewa Indian from the Santa Clara Pueblo, has written *Look to the Mountain: An Ecology of Indigenous Education* (1994). In this work he argues strongly for the need to combine the oral and the written, the scientific and the mythic in the educational process:

The philosophical perspective received in modern non-Indian school courses, that the world is an inanimate mass of matter arranged by chance into a set of shapes and energy patterns, is a matter of belief, not experience, and is the polar opposite of the traditional Indian belief. Indian educators thus face the question of whether they will move the substance of education away from this essentially meaningless proposition toward the more realistic Indian model that sees the world as an intimate relationship of living things. (Cajete 1994, 12-13)

In emphasizing the need for maintaining oral instruction alongside of textual instruction, Cajete's argument complements neurobiological research that indicates that brain development, memory, and comprehension are affected differently by oral and textual learning. The ways that Native American literature and environmental writing attempt to incorporate an appreciation for and a promotion of orality need to be addressed theoretically in ecocriticism.

The concern for environmental justice evident in LaDuke and Cajete leads to another area informing the development of ecocritical theory, globalization studies. Arjun Appadurai in *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (1996) gives scant attention to ecology, but echoing Raymond Williams he does focus on a crucial cultural activity in resistance to the homogeneity promoted by corporate globalization and that is the "the production of locality as a structure of feeling" (Appadurai 1996, 181). If nothing else, all nature-oriented literature attends to locality. And Appadurai emphasizes the importance of locality in a postmodern world by noting that "Local knowledge is substantially about producing reliable local subjects as well as about producing reliably local neighborhoods within which such subjects can be recognized and organized" (1996, 181). Human beings need contexts in which to live and these contexts always include a natural environment and, rightly, in Appadurai's view these environments become an integral part of the identity of their inhabitants, who are contextual beings—what Cajete would call a "geopsyche." Thus, for Appadurai, globalization studies needs to develop "a theory of intercontextual relations" (1996, 187), of which ecocritical insights must necessarily constitute a component.

Along with economic globalization has also come global pollution by transnational corporations and government entities, the Union Carbide plant explosion in Bhopal and the Chernobyl nuclear accident being just two examples. David Naguib Pellow comprehensively studies this issue in *Resisting Global Toxics: Transnational Movements for Environmental Justice*, while Vandana Shiva takes up local resistance to transnational corporations and economic development in such books as *Soil Not Oil: Environmental Justice in an Age of Climate Crisis* and addresses globalization's commodification of seeds and water in *Water Wars: Privatization, Pollution, and Profit* and *Stolen Harvest: The Hijacking of the Global Food Supply*.

Likewise in addressing the question of whether or not the nation-state is declining in the face of multinational and transnational growth, Thom Kuehls in *Beyond Sovereign Territory* (1996) points out how environmental pollution, global warming, and scientific theories of environmental change have called into question the very concept of national sovereignty. Kuehls and Appadurai's analyses, coupled with work on local environmental justice movements, such as those recorded in *Feminist Political Ecology: Global Issues*

and *Local Experiences* (1996), edited by Dianne Rocheleau, Barbara Thomas-Slayter, and Esther Wangari, and theorized by cultural geographers, such as David Harvey, can help ecocriticism understand both the attention to the local paid by authors around the world and maintain attention to the particularities and specificities of the literary representations of such local inhabitation and struggles.

ECOCRITICISM ALWAYS NECESSARILY A PIVOTAL LOCALIST THEORY

Such attention to diversity and particularity requires that ecocriticism always remain a pivotal localist theory. Proceeding from the recognition that biological diversity and cultural diversity necessarily interanimate each other, ecocritics would want to avoid the tendency to turn description into prescription and to make the new and the different old and familiar through assimilation. Theories should not allow critics to ignore that which doesn't fit or to force literatures from other traditions and cultures into the categories created by our local knowledge of national or regional textual practices. Amateur national history in the United States has given rise to a prose genre known as nature writing, but we have to be careful not to go looking for exact reproductions of this form in other national literatures in order to find literary treatments of nature. The use of broader categories, such as my own "nature-oriented literature," allows for an openness to a wide range of artistic forms, including those that freely cross the great fiction/nonfiction divide argued over in the United States and the United Kingdom. The tenets of ecocriticism, then, ought to remain pivotal rather than foundational—a starting point, a place to step in order to engage in any kind of interpretation, but not a throne on which to sit, or a foundation on which to stand unmoving (see Murphy 1995, chapters 2 and 9). Encouraging localist interpretations will help ecocriticism to remain pivotal and to maintain foundational assumptions as tentative constructs open to correction and emendation. A localist orientation also helps to maintain heterarchy, a nonhierarchical appreciation of the diversity of literary production. Canon formation, then, ought always to be temporary, provisional, and reactive to local circumstances.

CONCLUSION

Fundamentally, the theories that we develop, domesticate, dissect, and discard are all trying to explain what people are already doing. The autumn 2001

issue of *Orion Afield*, for example, is devoted to the topic of “Saving Stories” and contains an article titled “Can Stories Save a River?” It relates how a group of writers and academics used a book of stories to encourage a local community to clean up a polluted stream. Poets and novelists don’t have to understand consciously what they are doing; they can just do it. Theorists and critics, in contrast, must articulate what we observe happening and forecast where we think the literature is going. Our theories don’t bring literary activity into being or create readers; rather, theorists affect the coordinates of the directions they are already taking, nudging, and shoving each other along. Teachers, though, do create readers through designing courses and selecting classroom texts. If we are doing this work well we will reduce entropy and increase sustainability for the more than human world in which we live and for the literary production and appreciation that comprises one tiny pathway of the energy channeled by the universe through human material life.