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Introduction


By Madison Jones

I am pleased to be introducing another issue of Kudzu House Quarterly. This journal is a unique blend of ecological thinking, mixing creativity and theory with applications in pedagogy, art, and activism. This issue marks the second iteration of the Kudzu Scholar, our annual issue of scholarly writing, and already our issues have begun to reflect the vast array of work covered in what is called the environmental humanities. This issue offers an three essays that range from ecocritical interpretation of T. C. Boyle’s *When the Killing’s Done*, to a discussion of cloud technology, and from theorizing ecoLove to an essay cluster, guest-edited by Alison Lacivita, on teaching ecocriticism. The wealth of diversity in this group of essays reveals the powerfully interdisciplinary nature of this discourse, and the need to embrace more than one facet of the humanities in our response to environmental destruction and our interrogation of ecological thinking.

Lacivita’s introduction to our pedagogy cluster, Jana M. Giles’ “Dog-paddling Against the Tide” and Seth T. Reno’s “Teaching Ecocriticism and Green Writing with Weebly Website Creator,” weaves fascinating connections between the vast array of topics covered in this issue. More than anything, these essays serve as more than just a guide for teaching environments in courses ranging from first-year writing to graduate work, they reveal pedagogical choices, experiments, and interactions that anyone interested in teaching in the environmental humanities will benefit from reading.

Lacivita’s discussion of Richard Louv’s *Last Child in the Woods* reminds me of Gareth Matthews’ *Dialogues with Children* (1984) in which he poses the question to a group of children, through the first half a story told at the beginning of class, of whether flowers can “be happy.” This question is particularly troubling to one student, Donald, who after two days of conversation is still plagued with this problem:

He thought flowers could be happy and that what Aunt Gertie said about their being happy when the sun shone was, in a way, quite true. “But,” he added with great emphasis, “how can they be happy without a mind? How can they possibly be happy without a mind?” He was not suggesting that I should solve this problem for him or make it go away. He accepted the problem as his own. He would deal with it (10).

1See Alison Lacivita’s introduction to the teaching ecocriticism cluster.
This question is an interesting one, especially because of the nuanced discussion of what it means to be happy, or further, what designates consciousness in the age of Ecocriticism and Object-Oriented Ontology. And if we cannot define happiness in the realm of the post-subject, how can we still experience it? Matthews applies Aristotle’s *eudaimonia* (“happiness” defined as “human flourishing”) to plant life in order to help resolve the narrative he’d given them for the previous class. Nathan Frank’s essay brief “ecoLove in an Age of Already” does something similar, integrating “ecological interconnectedness into our Age of Already through the neologistic concept of ecoLove as a way to restore Love as a thing apart, a background against which ecology can happen.”

Mike Petrik’s essay, “The Problem with the Baseline,” seeks “a new way of establishing belonging that moves away from the idea of a temporal baseline and toward a valuation of diversity/biodiversity and positive engagement with the broader environment.”

Yet, as digital technologies are increasingly being understood as embodied environments, not just as mere platforms for communication, but as vital, dialogic systems, I wonder if this Aristotelian model will suffice to explain happiness. Is Nature, as Garcia wonders, the “uncrossable boundary between the built and the natural worlds—conveniently put aside for the construction of a new highway or oil pipeline—suddenly reappears when questions about who and what causes global warming enter the frame.” Each of these essays questions the means through which we construct nature and even the concepts of ecology and systems. Is thriving, as Graham playfully asserts, no more than something “modifies, transforms, perturbs, or creates”? Frank’s essay resists what Timothy Morton calls “the recent philosophical impasse of essentialism versus nihilism,” by asking “What is love, why does it matter, and what can it do at a point in time when we are accelerating, drifting, and crashing through the ‘exits to the posthuman future’ and facing ‘the ecological thought’?”

The concept of ecoLove provides a background in which ecology can matter, neither as simple relational objects and subjects, nor as anthropomorphic symbols, but of very real, material objects of responsibility, and even, of love. Like Donald from Matthews’ course, we do not expect answers to our problems, but we will find in our conversation that these problems are our own, that we must accept responsibility for them so that we might come to understand them in some new way.

Thanks so much for reading, and as always: may the Kudzu grow!

Cheers,

M.P. Jones Editor-in-Chief

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2Nathan Frank.
3Mike Petrik, “The Problem with the Baseline: Postcolonial Identity, Endemic Ecology, and Environmental Activism in T.C. Boyle’s *When the Killing’s Done*.”
5Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks*, p. 95.
Bibliography


The Problem with the Baseline:

Postcolonial Identity, Endemic Ecology, and Environmental Activism in T.C. Boyle’s *When the Killing’s Done*

Mike Petrik

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Abstract:

Set on the Channel Islands off of California, T. C. Boyle’s novel *When the Killing’s Done* conflates invasive species ecology and postcolonial ideas of invasion and belonging using the device of shipwreck that has so often played a role in island colonization. Using Boyle’s conflation I argue for a new way of establishing belonging that moves away from the idea of a temporal baseline and toward a valuation of diversity/biodiversity and positive engagement with the broader environment. This idea of belonging is represented in the non-human and human characters of *When the Killing’s Done* who are best able to make a home within the broader system on the Channel Islands.

Keywords: post-colonialism, invasion, invasive species, endemicism, ecocriticism, ecology.

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I. Shipwreck

T.C. Boyle’s novel *When the Killing’s Done* (2011) is a novel that takes shape around a number of shipwrecks, as the author has himself noted. The book opens with “The Wreck of the Beverly B.” in 1946 off California’s Channel Islands—the locale where the novel’s central conflicts play out. Onboard the Beverly B. is protagonist Alma Boyd Takesue’s grandmother, Beverly. When the ship goes down (along with her husband) in a storm, the unknowingly pregnant Beverly is left adrift on an ice chest until she washes ashore on Anacapa, the smallest of the Channel Islands. As the novel unfolds, this moment of shipwreck on Anacapa is revealed to have forged an inextricable link between her, her family, and the islands (*When the Killing’s Done* 3-19).

The story of Beverly’s survival and rescue on Anacapa is followed immediately by the stage-setting narrative of another shipwreck, this time a historically accurate and environmentally significant one, the 1853 wreck of the SS *Winfield Scott*—a steamship out of San Francisco. This ship too, runs aground near Anacapa, and her passengers are forced to make a landing on the island and await rescue. However, as the novel describes, those human passengers remained
on the inhospitable island for only a short time, but the *Rattus rattus* (black
rats) that also escaped the *Winfield Scott* remained and proliferated on Anacapa. These are far from the only shipwrecks that occur within *When the Killing’s Done’s* pages, and that organizing principle is clearly used with intent by Boyle, as the wrecks drive most of the major plot points, environmental dilemmas, and character arcs of the novel (43-47).

I’ve begun by highlighting this event of shipwreck in the novel, because it serves as a common trope in the two fields of thought that, I believe, Boyle joins in an original manner within this novel—eco- and postcolonial criticism. In combining them, Boyle juxtaposes our consideration of the problematic relationship between invasive and endemic species with that of endemic and post-colonial peoples. This is a bold and a useful conflation, one that I feel can lead to a functional and inclusive idea of belonging in postcolonial and post-ecological invasion landscapes. Reviewers of this novel tend to fall into two categories, those who address the human characters and those who discuss the non-human, environmental elements of the novel. Missing has been any discussion of how these two angles of vision work upon one another. This concurrent development of the two subjects allows Boyle to examine both the idea of ecological and postcolonial baselines—ways of thinking that work to pass judgment on who and what “belong” to a place. His recognition of the problematic nature of these baselines serves as an important development in furthering (and drawing useful parallels between) post-post-colonial and ecocritical thought, and might allow us to understand belonging in a less-exclusionary fashion that champions diversity and connection.

II. The Castaways: Human and Non-Human

The conflation of human and ecological migration that is so important to Boyle’s examination of this concept of baseline belonging is highlighted not only through the narrative structure’s emphasis on the two aforementioned initial shipwrecks as necessary for conveying both the human and non-human migrants to the Channel Islands, but also through the scenic description of their first interaction in the novel. After a long ordeal adrift at sea, when Beverly Boyd has been cast upon Anacapa and after she has made her way to the shelter of an abandoned camp, she quickly realizes that she is not alone in the cabin. As her eyes adjust she sees “the shapes manifesting themselves all at once—furred, quick-footed, tails naked and indolently switching, a host of darkly shining eyes fastening on her without alarm or haste” because, as she recognizes, “she was the interloper here, the beggar, she was the one naked and washed up like so much trash” (*When the Killing’s Done* 32). These are the descendants of the rats once cast up by the SS *Winfield Scott*, much as she has been by the wreck of the *Beverly B*, now at home on Anacapa.

Even the language used to describe these shipwrecked rats depicts their experience as similar to Beverly’s. When she wakes in the morning and sees that she
still shares the shelter of a shack with the rats, they are “leisurely, content, taking their ease, draped over the chair pulled up to the counter...” (35). I’ll forgive Boyle this heavy bit of anthropomorphizing, because it so clearly illustrates his conflation at this early point in the novel. The rats belong; they are at home, as much if not more than the scene’s human character, despite their similar method of arrival and fundamental ecological invasiveness. This gives pause to the easy identification of both the rats and Beverly as invaders, though, as they react with perturbation at her incursion. Looking through her eyes, the reader is led to empathize with these rats who were also unwillingly cast up and have since made a home.

Despite this clear parallel experience of the human and non-human, thus far, the discussion and reviews of *When the Killing’s Done* have, as noted, been limited to one of two categories: either turning their focus to the human characters and their arcs with regards to their connections to the Channel Islands or to the environmental issue of invasive species which is centered on the impacts of castaways like the rats on the endemic, or “native,” species (sea birds, island foxes, etc.) that are so classified due to their presence in the ecologist-established baseline ecosystem of the islands. Interestingly, though perhaps expectedly, these focuses have been influenced by the respective reviewers’ intended audience—in some instances literary readers, in others members of the scientific community.

In one review of the former sort that is aimed at the general readership of popular literature, Angela Alaimo O’Donnell initially does note Boyle’s interest in the “urgent subject” of the “disastrous effects of human encroachment upon the natural world,” but quickly shifts her focus to the main human characters and Boyle’s techniques in complicating our feelings for them, largely through their respective relationships with and actions toward the Channel Islands. As with many other reviewers of the novel, she notes how the characters fit into recognizable types, such as the passionate environmentalist (Alma Boyd Takesue) and the “bleeding-heart” card-carrying PETA member and lover of all animals great and small (Dave LaJoy). But rather than focusing on the character’s connections to their non-human fellow actors in the novel’s plot, her final words on the novel emphasize that it is “faithfully portraying the obsessions of our era, but also [serving] as a timeless reminder of the flaws and frailties that have characterized human beings from the beginning of our history” (O’Donnell 31). In this reading of the novel’s emphasis, the turn is to a solace providing affirmation of humanity’s quirks and away from the novel’s deliberations regarding the ethics and efficacy of exterminating invasive species.

Reviews focused on the novel’s animal characters and its engagement with invasive species remediation, in contrast, have thus far largely come from the scientific community. In one such review, Daniel Simberloff (an ecologist writing for the *Nature* sponsored periodical *Biological Invasions*—which has a clear non-human bias in its coverage) not surprisingly reads the novel through the lens of invasive species studies and discusses the treatment of the non-human *When the Killing’s Done* characters and Channel Island denizens. Simberloff
tracks Boyle’s interest in non-native species and their impacts through his other works and notes that in this novel as opposed to in his previous works Boyle presents these species in a way that is “generally not metaphoric” but rather where “their impacts and management are the explicit context of action in the novel” (369). Importantly, Simberloff notes that this action is effectively a roman a clef though not of the author’s milieu, but of the actual actions and history of the changing cast of Channel Islands flora and fauna—a diverse cast that includes the aforementioned rats and other “invasives” including sheep, pigs, sweet fennel, and golden eagles, to name a few; and “endemic” species such as bald eagles, various marine birds, the island fox, the island spotted skunk, and various rare and threatened plants. But again, Simberloff’s reading seems to lose sight of one-half of the novel—that of the human element—when he deems the characters mere types meant to serve to illuminate the ecologically relevant debate regarding the response to invasive species.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the reviewer who gestures the most toward both the human and nonhuman threads is Barbara Kingsolver, who in her own fiction frequently grapples with the intertwined destinies of humans and non-humans. Indeed, novels such as her The Bean Trees (1988) and Animal Dreams (1990) do just that, though not with the same focus (on invasive and immigrant dilemmas) that Boyle has, and they are worth further discussion in the growing field that combines the work of postcolonial and ecocritical theory (“Once on this Island”). But while Kingsolver notes the connectedness of the human and nonhuman plots in the novel, she does not examine in detail the import of this connectedness, which, I argue, lies in Boyle’s effort to grapple with the idea of belonging that is often valued for both groups through a line drawn in the sand—a baseline before which species and groups belong, and after which they are deemed invaders.

The first of those fields, ecocritical thought, is, as one group of reviewers has pointed out, focused by Boyle on non-human environmental issues—in this case those of invasive species and the manner in which they act and are dealt with. Shipwreck as a vehicle for ecological invasion and as a catalyst for the numerous threats to endemic species and ecosystem health is a recognized reality of environmental thought, especially in island ecology. One needs look no further than the castaway rats left on Anacapa whose plight Boyle describes in When the Killing’s Done’s opening chapters.

And even when the mode of invasion is not explicitly a shipwreck, that language still works as metaphor in its reliance on both human activities and some element of chance or mishap, as in the case of many well-researched and often discussed North American examples of biological invasion. For example, the zebra (Dreissena polymorpha) and quagga (Dreissena rostriformis) mussels that now plague lake and river ecosystems across the country, were initially carried in larval planktonic form into the St. Lawrence Seaway and eventually the Great Lakes by ballast-water dumped by cargo ships making their way from across the Atlantic. And these mollusks were then likely spread by recreational boat
traffic until the problem was pervasive (Brown, Stepien). In another similar example, a number of other invasive aquatic species were initially brought over to be aqua-farmed or raised for decorative purposes in contained ponds before likely being unintentionally released by flooding. So, much of what we consider ecological invasions, have resulted from passive action and subsequent outcompetition and opportunism—a fact that might give pause to those whose goal is extermination of these invaders, as it does to a number of characters in the novel.

Other ecological invasions have been much more intentional, such as the well-known introduction of the European or common starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) which was initially released in Central Park in 1890 in the hopes of their establishing every species of bird mentioned in the works of William Shakespeare. But whether initial invasions were the product of accidental or intentional release, the incursive species were indeed shipwrecked in their new environs, incapable of a voluntary departure from their new homes, acting with the similar species serving opportunism displayed where they are considered native, and potentially as deserving of inclusion and empathy, as Beverly noted with the rats so early in *When the Killing's Done*.

Similarly, the image of shipwreck is common to postcolonial discourse. Nobel prize winning poet Derek Walcott, in seeking to establish and advocate for a unified post-colonial Caribbean identity, frames his arguments using the metaphor of shipwreck to represent the shared experience of the Caribbean people—whether they be descendants of European colonists, forcefully transported African slaves, or the relatively-late arriving East Asian immigrants who were pressed into an often brutal and oppressive indentured service upon their arrival. As he says of these varied groups in his essay “The Muse of History” (1974), “their degraded arrival must be seen as the beginning, not the end, of our history” (41). Walcott’s use of the recurring image of shipwreck as a means of conflating this “degraded arrival” is particularly useful when looking at Boyle’s own use of the image because the Caribbean’s history of migration and colonization is fraught and complex in much the same manner as that of the Channel Islands. Both these forward focused works ask us to reconsider how we navigate this complexity in order to understand who and what can claim to belong to these spaces.

My argument stems from this focus on shipwreck and its utility in encapsulating the complicated ambiguity of forward progress in the face of postcolonial circumstances, along with a similar ambiguity in the idea of progress for post-invasive/invasion ecosystems. *When the Killing's Done* calls into question the idea of being native/endemic versus immigrant/invasive/exotic, and is interested in dealing with the complex and often cited policy of looking to how the immigration/invasion occurred in order to establish how the species (or race, class, ethnicity, or wave of migration) should be considered and valued. This movement beyond a reliance on a temporal baseline as a means of justifying a species, culture, or race’s place in the identity of a space and toward an un-
derstanding of arrival and current contribution is an important step forward, and one that can incorporate both human and non-humans in its definition of belonging.

Here, I conflate this human and non-human vocabulary very intentionally, because, again, I believe it to be a conflation Boyle himself makes in the novel. Indeed, for Boyle’s characters, the challenge always turns toward passing judgment on who and what belong to a place or ecosystem, and what the requirements are for belonging. By setting these problematic topics in conversation with one another, T.C. Boyle presents a compelling commentary that adds to the existing theories, rather than merely reflecting them. His triumph in *When the Killing’s Done* comes from his daring to conflate the discussion regarding invasive species and immigration to argue for a means of establishing connectedness to place that considers all living things.

### III. Invasion and Immigration and Colonization

Part II of *When the Killing’s Done* is focused on Santa Cruz, the largest of the Channel Islands, and set initially on Scorpion Ranch in 1979, the location of an incursion that is useful in understanding the connection between human immigration and nonhuman invasion. The scene also serves as an excellent example of a proposal for assessing belonging by means other than the baseline concept. The main characters of this set-piece (human and non-human) are Rita (the eventual mother to Anise, the girlfriend, and co-conspirator in a PETA-esque extremist group, of Dave LaJoy) and a large flock of free roaming sheep. The section opens with Rita, listless on the mainland, migrating to the island to take a position as camp-cook at Scorpion Ranch, her young daughter in tow. The sheep assume the role of a classic human introduced invasive species, as they are yet another attempt by humans to derive some profit from the island.

It is notable how localized Boyle’s ecological perspective is in this section of the novel. Elsewhere he is naturally somewhat limited by island biogeography, but here he is even more focused on just the ecosystem of Scorpion Ranch and its surrounds. I should note that in recent trends in eco-criticism in particular, this local-only focus on sense-of-place as a means for conservation has largely fallen out of style. As Ursula K. Heise points out in the introduction to her book *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*, this “rootedness in place” has been of particular importance in the history of the American environmentalist movement (9). The connotation here and elsewhere in both Heise and numerous other ecocritical works is that overemphasis on local place can be dangerous in that it allows for an obliviousness to larger global level environmental issues.

But Heise provides a useful counterpoint to her own argument against overemphasis on “rootedness in place” in her metaphor of environmental thought needing a Google Earth like perspective where the frame can rapidly shift from the broad “spaceship earth” level thoughts to the “street-view” local perspective (10-11). This ability to transition seamlessly between levels of discourse regard-
ing the environment, is something I believe Boyle engages with, but for now I merely hope to display a continued value in the local rootedness that Boyle depicts, particularly on the part of Rita, but also in the simple small scale ecosystems presented by the Channel Islands.

Upon Rita’s arrival the plot moves quickly and draws a parallel between the sheep’s rapid impact on the island and Rita’s own near-immediate connection to the island. Both are explicitly shown shaping their world. In the case of the sheep it is effects such as overgrazing that allows for both massive mudslides and soil run-off during the short rainy season and the proliferation of the also-invasive weed, sweet fennel that grows where the grass and soil have been eaten-away. For Rita it is depicted in her competent work in every facet of camp life when the ranch-boss, Bax, is laid up with a broken leg. The section is too long and nuanced to quote in enough detail, but in short it displays a day of work for Rita in which her every action seems both unconscious and crucial in furthering their inhabitance in Scorpion Bay, while also making use of all of the tools, foods, and geographies around her (146-151). Boyle does not at all shy away from depicting the massive negative impact that these two conspiratorial invaders are having upon the island, while also depicting the previously argued rootedness they have with regards to their new island home. In a moment of omniscient intrusion he considers the presence of the sheep: “If rats are the single most devastating invasive species when introduced to a closed ecosystem, then goats and sheep, with their ability to seek out even the most inaccessible niches and their capacity to consume and digest practically anything short of the dirt itself, are a close second” (167). In the same way that he does not shy from depicting the negatives associated with human colonization on the islands (really, even the introduction of the sheep is a facet of this) he also does not tip-toe around the destructive nature of many of the “invading” non-humans–again drawing together these incursions that are so often considered independently.

It is still potentially easy when viewing the massive impact the sheep are having on the island with their grazing to see them as the only true invasive in this local scenario, but the interconnectedness between the sheep and Santa Cruz’s humans is driven home by a particularly violent scene—one that stands out in the novel. Not only is the connection dramatized in this scene, but Boyle seems to set forward an alternative to baseline ecology in which use-of space and behavior might be a better gauge, if still tenuous, for belonging.

While Bax is still laid up, Rita—her teenage daughter Anise in tow and with the help of a sheep-dog and one old, Gaucho ranch-hand—is left to tend to the flock during the lambing season. The looming danger is another invader—this time a transient species, the raven, that, carrying the conflation forward, might take on the role of an opportunistic temporary invader looking to exploit some postcolonial space. During the birthing of the lambs, a trio of poachers on ATV’s chase a boar (another human facilitated invasive) through the ranch and fire shots wildly, spooking the ewes from the nearby lambs. What happens next is easily the most chilling moment in the novel, and is worth presenting in
Boyle’s words.

The first of them careened into a lamb, going for the head, always the head. Bewildered, abandoned, unsteady, on its neophyte’s legs, the lamb went down as if it had been struck with a club. And then the bird, implanted, rose up to stabilize itself on the cross trees of its wings and strike out the eyes, even as the next arrived to rip open the breast where the thin new tegument of skin was as yielding and soft as a vat of cream cheese (163).

The slaughter continues as the mob of ravens rushes from one kill to the next, trying to bring down as many lambs as possible, and waiting to glut themselves on the carcasses later. Unsurprisingly, Rita, and particularly the young Anise, are scarred by this experience, but Boyle seems to be using the grim event as more than a mere moment of character development that will drive Anise to her later activism and Rita to leave the island where she had made a home and had felt she belonged for the first time (163-164).

The transience of the perpetrator’s of this slaughter, the ravens, seems somehow important for Boyle, and he highlights it in a number of places. It seems that in this scene he values species and individuals who identify closely with the islands. More than anything else, this seems to be Boyle’s proposal for a way out of baseline belonging. The ravens travel to the Channel Islands with the intent to use the island’s resources and then depart. This new assessment of belonging fits well with the post-colonial frame that I am arguing is conflated with the ecological, and takes a step back from universal inclusion that seems suggested by the general critique of baseline belonging. His stance here is tentative, but sets forward the mode and intent of arrival and use of place as means of judgment of belonging.

I would argue, the scene also serves to inextricably tie and powerfully equate the incursions of the ranchers and the sheep that they have brought. Indeed, one cannot exist without the other. Without the sheep, Rita and the ranchers would have no means of support on the island, as explained by the number of failed previous incursions that are briefly mentioned in the novel. And clearly, without the ranchers to cull the herd and prevent them from grazing out the entire island and to protect the ewes and lambs when at their most vulnerable from the opportunistic ravens, the sheep would stand little chance of survival on the island. And indeed, they are not one of the “problematic” invasives that remain in the contemporary plotline of the novel.

To further support my argument regarding the similitude Boyle creates between invasion and immigration and this way out of baseline belonging that Boyle suggests, I’ll next look at the three main characters of the contemporary plotline, and how their degree of connectedness to the island affects the manner in which Boyle depicts them.
Dave LaJoy, perhaps surprisingly, is the novel’s stand-out villain, despite also being its most fervent activist for animal rights—an attribute that most conservation-minded novelists might raise up. LaJoy is essentially a sociopath, and over the course of the book his moral high ground is constantly shrinking and his point of view is satirized relentlessly. Boyle highlights LaJoy’s hypocrisy and ineptitude until he is eventually destroyed in the novel’s final shipwreck, with no one to mourn his passing. Even the seemingly altruistic aspects of his activism are increasingly satirized. His early actions, an attempt to save the black rats from a death by mass poison, seem somewhat valiant and justified, but his methods and reasoning unravel to the point where he is trapping raccoons and rattlesnakes on the mainland with the intent to further introduce species to the Channel Islands out of little more than vindictiveness. Here, we see that Boyle places importance on both the means and motivation of the incursion. He establishes LaJoy, through these actions and his demise, as thoroughly an outsider and a negative influence on the entire ecosystem of the islands at the novel’s center. There is a clear critique of this character’s lack of connection to the place that is at stake. His interest is entirely abstract, entirely on the scope of Heise’s global scope where all that matters is the principle of preventing global harm. Indeed, Boyle goes out of his way to highlight the tourist-nature of LaJoy’s interaction with the island when he describes LaJoy’s well-stocked, comfortable trips to the island aboard his yacht, The Paladin (i.e. 73-77).

In a second example, Alma Boyd Takesue represents the other end of the spectrum from LaJoy, both in terms of environmentalist perspective and degree of connection to the islands. Takesue is a biologist with a very localized focus on the island ecosystems, and it is simply the health and biodiversity of that ecosystem that provides her environmentalist impetus. She is also the granddaughter of Beverly Boyd, who was washed up on Anacapa at the beginning of the novel, so her degree of connection is derived from a substantial legacy that is further rooted by her frequent time spent on the island conducting research and her investment in the islands’ welfare.

Still, Takesue is far from innocent in the novel’s eyes. She believes deeply in her idea of a baseline ecosystem whose welfare justifies extreme and intrusive measures such as mass poison of the Anacapa rats, systematic hunting of the Santa Cruz pigs, and the risky trapping and removal of golden eagles that had been over-preying upon the endemic island foxes. But, as I have described earlier, the novel problematizes the idea of invasion by conflating it with human immigration and depicting it as a shipwreck or a forced relocation, with the result of problematizing many of Takesue’s baseline influenced exterminations. It is far too easy, it seems, to deem a group or species invaders when using a temporal baseline, and the results have clear ethical consequences, as Takesue begins to realize over the course of the novel and as history has born out in postcolonial spaces.

Somewhere in between the extremes presented by LaJoy and Takesue is LaJoy’s
co-activist and girlfriend Anis, who has a much more substantial connection to the islands than either of the other characters as a result of having migrated to them with Rita, her mother and of making a home on them in her developmental years. Anis, while inexplicably connected to the truly horrible LaJoy (and this is more than just my reading, nearly every reviewer made some mention of his offensiveness as a character), seems to be a bit more thoughtful in her activism (if it is still problematic at times, really no character gets out of the novel unscathed), and, importantly, she refuses to accompany LaJoy on his ill-conceived and ill-fated attempt to sabotage and document the Parks Service’s efforts at systematically eliminating the invasive wild-pig population from Santa Cruz. It is on this trip that LaJoy’s efforts result in the death of a young fellow-activist who is washed away by a flooded river and horribly drowned in a scene that rivals the death of the lambs in its chilling nature (276-278). Grounding her connection to the islands despite being a recent arrival well after any baseline of culture had been drawn, Anis too meets her end in the wreck of the Paladin along with Dave LaJoy, but her death is handled very differently. Her body is the only one recovered from the shipwreck, and in a moment of symbolic importance to Boyle’s treatment of Anis, her mother, Rita, is able to return to the island with her daughter’s ashes. During the return, Rita is left with “the songs. The sun. The island. And she won’t scatter the ashes till dark, till they’re [the more transient researchers and park service employees, including Alma Boyd Takesue] all on the boat and gone away, and the only sounds are the sounds of the night” (368). This moment reaffirms the connection between Rita and Anis and the island that comes from their isolation upon it with the other permanent, but non-human, colonists. In the background of this scattering of ashes, Boyle pointedly includes another shipwrecked species that was cast adrift by the wreck of the Paladin, at least one surviving rattlesnake that LaJoy had intended to turn loose on the island before the wreck (369). The rattlesnake is deemed as belonging in this scene, I believe because it was cast up on the island through no will of its own. A conflation here could be drawn, again using Walcott, to something like the unknowing and unwilling voyage of African slaves to the Caribbean. It is not their endemism to the place that is important in a postcolonial and post invasive world, as suggested by the use of baselines. Instead it is the mode of their arrival and their investment in the ecosystem (or nation or culture)’s future.

This question of who belongs to a place, who can call it home, is raised again and again, and Boyle intentionally resists easy answers, such as that provided by a temporal baseline (or, in the realm of postcolonial studies, often a historical moment such as independence). Indeed, Boyle entirely calls into question the appropriateness of the term invasive species to describe passive victims of shipwreck such as Anacapa’s rats. This has important implications when read along with recent moves in both environmental and post-colonial thought.

IV. Post-nature, Post-wilderness, Post-postcolonial
These three terms provide an important context for my ultimate reading of *When the Killing’s Done*. I have argued throughout that T.C. Boyle is refuting the focus on the idea of a baseline in evaluating belonging. He problematizes any attempts to return a place to its “pristine state” by those means. He himself employs the term baseline in an interview he conducted for *Mother Jones* regarding *When the Killing’s Done*. When the interviewer explains how readers first side with Takesue in her efforts to rid the island’s of invasives, but eventually become unsure of whether this idea of restoration is the right one, Boyle responds:

The environmental term is the “baseline.” When do you bring it back to? What is restoration? What does it matter? A more simple level with what happened on Santa Cruz, however, the restoration was simply to remove animals that are numerous elsewhere in the world, like rats, and pigs, and sheep, and so on, in order for the unique life forms there, that exist nowhere else, to continue to be able to survive. I often parallel this with the California condor. Here’s this gigantic vulture, which is in decline because of us. It used to feed on buffalo carcasses, animal carcasses out in the woods. Well there isn’t anything like that anymore. And we took them all out of nature, and we keep putting them back, and we’re encountering various problems with that. And it’s cost a lot of money, whereas, members of our own species—one-third of the people alive today don’t have enough to eat or are starving to death, and die. But personally, and selfishly, standing here, with food in my mouth, I’m happy that there are condors out there. And I’m happy that there are native dwarf foxes on the island. And I’m sad that there no more mysterious places in the world (Butler).

I quote this response at length because it so closely approaches my understanding and evaluation of the current state of affairs with regards to our environmental and post-colonial identity. Any attempt at definitively delineating natives versus invaders is bound to be overly simple and not in the best interest of these places moving forward. As this novel argues, we are beyond a moment when any true “natural” baseline for belonging can be established, and this makes our concepts of who and what belong and don’t belong to any given place extremely ambiguous and problematic. We value diversity and biodiversity, but we attempt to control and pass judgment on who and what belong in both at risk ecosystems and nations attempting to establish a forward moving post-post-colonial identity—such as the one Derek Walcott espouses, where all the cast-up living things left in these places contribute to their identity and can rightly call them home.

I’ll begin by discussing the environmental/ecocritical precedent for this, because it is likely the more noticeable and documented shift, and it is very useful in supporting Boyle’s point-of-view in this novel. Numerous well-researched works
have called into question our ability to establish any sort of pre-human incursion baseline for the natural world. Rachel Carson’s seminal environmentalist work *Silent Spring* (1962) introduced and provided extensive evidence for the pervasive impact human produced pollution (largely through chemicals) has had on the natural world. Some of the books major findings resulted in important and sweeping overhauls of environmental policy in large portions of the world. The best studied and most successful of these was the banning of DDT, a chemical pollutant that once had a number of species such as the bald eagle and California condor on the brink of extinction.

Subsequently, when the research regarding human-caused climate change and ozone damage/depletion grew too significant to utterly ignore, Bill McKibben in 1989 published his book *The End of Nature*. This work is crucial to my understanding of the obsoleteness of the idea of baseline ecology. Essentially, McKibben argues that because we have fundamentally altered the environment through pollutants and our monkey-wrenching the carbon cycle, the world ecosystem has become an artificial or synthetic thing that due to its alteration, can no longer be referred to as “natural.” I would agree, that based on these conclusions, the idea of a natural baseline is utterly obsolete, and we must look to methods that prize diversity and contribution to better understand belonging.

Building on Carson and McKibben’s findings and our increased understanding of the ease and magnitude of human impact on the natural world, William Cronon, in 1996 published the essay “the Trouble with Wilderness that suggested our sublime connotations attached to that term had no place in modern environmentalism. All of this is one of the major reasons for the value of Heise’s *Google Earth* view, and speaks to her argument in the chapter of her book titled”Toxic Bodies, Corporate Poisons.” In this chapter, she uses close readings of Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* and Richard Powers’ *Gain* to highlight the legacy of *Silent Spring* in fundamentally changing our environmental fears and awareness. Due to the far-reaching consequences of the sort of risk scenarios described in these novels (and in the aforementioned nonfiction works), Heise argues for the importance of transnational thought in regards to environmentalism. In his previous environmental novel *A Friend of the Earth*, Boyle took on a number of these subjects in depicting a novel of a broad scope that spanned 20th century environmental activism and brought those characters forward into a post-environmental apocalypse world where the climate had been irrevocably changed to deadly effect.

While the environmental movement was undergoing the described changes, the field of postcolonial studies, in this paper as earlier represented by the work of Derek Walcott, was looking to move beyond the post-colonial phase, and by proxy the enduring negative legacy of colonization. Walcott’s description in “The Muse of History,” that colonial history need not be forgotten or obliterated from the national or global memory, but should cease to be a burden, captures, for me, the post-post colonial move. He states “This is not the jaded cynicism which sees nothing new under the sun, it is an elation which sees everything as
renewed” (“The Muse of History” 38). It is a move toward inclusion, much as the rejection of ecological baseline is, and while for Walcott and others it has inherent a degree of regional or national identity, it similarly moves away from the idea of a need to return to some former stage or identity. And much like eco-critical thought, any push toward some baseline past must ignore the idea that human and/or historic colonial impact is pervasive in these contemporary fields and that any attempt to justify inclusion or exclusion based upon some established baseline will necessarily whitewash the legacy or history of the prior human impact.

V. Biodiversity and Diversity

It is my argument that T.C. Boyle’s willingness to treat in one breath the problematic nature inherent in immigration and invasion has resulted in a step forward in post-colonial and ecocritical thought, at a time when those fields have been increasingly commingled by theorists and scholars such as Laura Wright, Neal Ahuja, and the previously discussed Ursula K. Heise, who are doing important work at the boundary of these fields where they are establishing the mutual relationship between them, particularly with ideas of home and the resulting connections between place (particularly with regards to nature) and identity.

However, it is important that, finally, I point out some important differences between Boyle’s treatment of biological invasion and human colonization. The main difference lies in ecology’s ability to focus on and champion biodiversity. This speaks directly to the earlier Boyle quote from his interview for Mother Jones. Clearly, even when made problematic, there is a degree of justification for Takesue’s work in When the Killing’s Done, much as it is understandable that Boyle would hope for the preservation of the island pygmy fox or the California condor. Many environmentalists would happily champion the cause of biodiversity, and I think Boyle would agree with that impulse, if he would caution our methods in obtaining it.

There is no direct and absolute parallel for biodiversity in the realm of postcolonial studies. Instead, I would argue that diversity is something worth championing, though again, with a critical eye toward any advocacy of a return to a contrived baseline. This critical eye is represented well in Derek Walcott’s work. As he often laments in his poetry, in the Caribbean much of the endemic people were killed off. Asking for a return of the Caribbean to the Caribs is clearly a fanciful goal. It would be like asking for a return of the pygmy mammoth, unearthed in the Channel Islands fossil record, to that ecosystem. But what can and should be undertaken is an effort to preserve biodiversity and diversity respectively.

When the Killing’s Done ends with the image of a rattlesnake, brand new to Santa Cruz, cast adrift and washed ashore, moving through the island night. The message is clear: Change is pervasive and perpetual—from broad species
evolution to single shipwrecked species, from revolution to an individual’s migration. Any attempt to return to some baseline identity-of-place is little more than the creation of a fleeting and nostalgic fiction. We must move towards a new and more inclusive means of valuing belonging in which investment in and ability to fill a role within diverse and complicated systems are championed, because human immigration and biological invasion will continue—by shipwreck if nothing else.

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Empty Sky:

Cloud Technologies in the Global Landscape

Ava Tomasula y Garcia

Abstract:

‘Cloud’ is the perfect metaphor for remote computing: like all descriptors of nature, we can stand on both sides of it. On one, we talk about nature as wild and unpredictable; on the other, it’s conquered and mapped. We speak as though we have the ability to control the climate, but if the responsibility gets to be too much, ‘Nature’ is suddenly pushed back into the mysterious realm of the non-human. The uncrossable boundary between the built and the natural worlds—conveniently put aside for the construction of a new highway or oil pipeline—suddenly reappears when questions about who and what causes global warming enter the frame. The Cloud can be as empty or full of meaning as we choose; as ‘natural’ or as high-tech as is convenient. It is both a neutral, inescapable feature of the industrialized world—and a ‘service’ that can be denied and manipulated. The tendency to talk about the Cloud as existing without material form turns it into something as pliably empty as our idea of nature. But data has a material life, and material consequences. This essay chases clouds to follow that life and those consequences.

Keywords: Remote computing, media studies, ecocriticism, internet, the cloud

The weather report begins.

The weatherman stands like a magician in front of a green screen, describing rain flows and high winds with circular, big-handed gestures. Animated graphics of clouds roll up over the state map and take their cues from motion paths described by red arrows. All the uncertainty of a forecast—*we’re-looking-at-cloudy-skies-probable-high-of-67*—is offset by a visual magic act calculated to give the impression of controlled orchestration; of confidence.

There is a mixed message in the eye of this storm. On one hand, the weatherman offers a *report* in the blankest sense possible: a description without explanation. Meaning, the weather exists independent of me; I can only guess at what it will do next. But, on the other hand, this distance gets lost in the spectacle of technology surrounding it: we see satellite images of home from space, precisely-mapped depictions of mountain ranges. A barrage of statistics that reduces huge amounts of data to daily precipitation percentages. Labels that center gigantic
weather systems around tiny individuals ("chilly in the morning," "spring-coat weather"). Viewers are given images and words from a God’s-eye view that represent nature as known, graspable, and—as the weatherman’s hand sweeps across a map of the country, seeming to clear dark clouds with one motion—eminently manageable.

Sitting at home watching this, I, too, enjoy the benefits of being on both sides of the weather. We speak as though we have the ability to control the climate, but if the responsibility gets to be too much, the natural world is suddenly pushed back into the mysterious realm of the non-human. Or as Bruno Latour says, we go right on mobilizing nature at every point in the fabrication of our societies, while simultaneously attributing to nature the transcendence of those same societies.7 The uncrossable boundary between the built and the natural worlds—conveniently put aside for the construction of a new highway or oil pipeline—suddenly reappears when questions about who and what causes global warming enter the frame.

On one hand, capital-N Nature is supposed to be too big to get a handle on. It is supposed to exist on a plane so vast and untouchable that it can’t fit within our human, day-to-day scale—it’s a force so big that it becomes inscrutable. But on the other hand, we think of nature as a collection of domesticable parts: controllable, knowable pieces we can isolate and bend. The image of the Hoover Dam is as important as that of Typhoon Haiyan, which was explained away on countless TV talk shows as a ‘natural phenomenon’ instead of the result of man-made climate change. Conquered, subdued and mapped nature must exist in tandem with bottomless, wild, and unpredictable nature.

That is to say that, despite the assurances of our increasingly quantified world, the sky is something that continues to be read, not just measured. The Weather Channel shows more plainly than other scientific displays how much the study of the natural world is a search for narrative order. As Richard Hamblyn writes, “The weather generates language more efficiently than it generates knowledge, for while it is always available and always with us it is equally unclear.”

In 1802, when Luke Howard gave scientific names to the previously shapeless and ungraspable masses called clouds, he was talking a new kind of world order into being, and it caused a sensation.8 Howard lived during the age of science as theater: a time as filled with the thunderstorms of Romanticism as it was by the whirr and click of the Industrial Revolution. His colleagues in rational entertainment gave demonstrations in lecture theaters packed with cheering spectators eager to witness the latest revelation about lightning, or the latest chess-playing machine in a (usually pseudo-) scientific performance full of smoke and drama.

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What we think of now as the cool, ‘hard’ sciences were then inseparable from the spectacle of themselves. Today, ‘science’ usually denotes not passionate speeches about the properties of water delivered to fainting ladies, but instead pristine, supposedly detached and immovable laboratory work. Living in the age of science as application, it is hard for us to imagine just what an uproar was generated by those new cloud names—‘cirrus,’ ‘cumulus,’ ‘nimbus.’ By now they’ve faded into our shared vocabulary about the weather, taking their place in the Weekday Forecast among other inventions that familiarity has gradually transmuted into fact. Yet Howard’s taxonomy isn’t the only intellectual legacy from his epoch that we still carry today. We continue to live and breathe his society’s double-conception of nature as well: as something both romantically uncontrollable and scientifically controllable.

Today, there’s another type of cloud that is losing its ability to surprise. It’s singular: the Cloud, in fact. Now that remote computing and storage capabilities are built into almost every computer platform and app, they’re becoming a normal part of the digital landscape. ‘Cloud’ is the perfect metaphor for networked computing, because, like other descriptors of nature, we can stand on both sides of it. It can be as empty or full of meaning as we choose; as ‘natural’ or as high-tech as is convenient. The word ‘cloud’ is both permeable and impermeable; both air and substance. It is both a neutral, inescapable feature of the industrialized world—and a ‘service’ that can be denied and manipulated.

If a thing’s politics are apparent in its architecture, then what are the politics
of something as diffuse as a cloud? What is it made out of? In mathematics, meteorology and physics, the word describes indeterminate structures that only become apparent from a distance—like electrons bouncing around an atom, or points in a coordinate system. In computing, the cloud describes the linkage of a ‘client’ computer, called the ‘front end,’ to the ‘back end,’ made up of a group of computers or other storage system (like a server), through a network (like the internet). An easy example is any web-based email: Using the Cloud, instead of running an email program that takes up space and computing power on my computer, I log into my account online and access my e-mail from there—all I need now is an internet connection. Neither my email nor the software needed to use it exists on my personal computer: everything is accessed online and held on servers owned by whatever company’s email program I’m using as a ‘service.’ Every time I check my email, my request for access goes through hard, soft, and middle-ware owned by Google, Yahoo, or Comcast. Content and ownership—two ideas that are conventionally centered in the objects themselves—are now exploded outwards in a network that severs the physicality of a thing from what it is.

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9Think David Harvey’s discussion of the streets of post-Haussman Paris as manifesting the politics of modernization, or even some radicals’ insistence at the time that the new boulevards had been made wide so as to make it harder for protesters to erect barricades and easier for troops to maneuver. Or Julian Assange’s description of personal computers as not built to be understood, because you can’t get inside of them to actually know how they work. As he says, most laptops’ bottoms don’t even come off. For more information, see: David Harvey, Paris: Capital of Modernity, (London: Routledge, 2005), especially 212; and also Julian Assange, Jacob Appelbaum, Andy Müller-Maguhn, and Jérémie Zimmermann, Cypherpunks, (New York: OR Books,2012).
It is actually around those two almost reactionary ideas—content and ownership—that much of the critical discussion about the Cloud is based. Who owns the content stored in a Cloud system? The answer to that question, if ever resolved, will depend on how a proliferation of variables are defined: Was the data created locally and then put into the Cloud? Was it created in the Cloud itself? What type of data is it? If you live in one country, give your data to a Cloud provider that is run out of another, who then outsources its operations to a storage provider in yet another country, which laws governing ownership should, or can, be followed?

Google’s Terms of Service state that “when you upload, submit, store, send or receive content to or through our Services, you give Google (and those we work with) a worldwide license to use, host, store, reproduce, modify, create derivative works (such as those resulting from translations, adaptations or other changes we make so that your content works better with our Services), communicate, publish, publicly perform, publicly display and distribute such content.”  

Google has one Terms of Service for all their products, and, at base, they are not different from those of any other Cloud storage company. But the Orwellian phrasing, while allowing the company to make the moves of archives from one server to another which are necessary for large-scale Cloud computing, also gives the company built-in rights to users’ data that are in no way essential to run the Cloud.

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Like Google, Facebook makes money from targeted advertising. This is targeting that depends on knowing as much as possible about users, which in itself is a substantial incentive for a company to write Privacy Statements the way they do. Facebook tells its users that, aside from the content users voluntarily give the company, “We also put together data from the information we already have about you, your friends, and others, so we can offer and suggest a variety of services and features. For example, we may make friend suggestions, pick stories for your News Feed, or suggest people to tag in photos. We may put together your current city with GPS and other location information we have about you to, for example, tell you and your friends about people or events nearby, or offer deals to you in which you might be interested. We may also put together data about you to serve you ads or other content that might be more relevant to you.”

While just scratching the surface, recent revelations about Facebook’s secret manipulation of users’ news feeds as an experiment into “massive-scale emotional contagion via social networks” shows what curation ‘to better serve you’ means.

Data collection by corporate entities not only dwarfs the volume of that same information requested yearly by the NSA, but actually further blurs the line between state and commercial bodies. A May 2014 report by the Federal Trade Commission about Big Data highlights the growing shadow industry of data brokers—which, according to Sen. Jay Rockefeller, generated over $150 billion in 2014. Data brokers keep going where Google and Facebook (seemingly) stop. Companies aggregate information sourced from government data (like political donations a person might make, or bankruptcy information), publicly available data obtained from crawling social media sites and blogs (like Facebook timelines and relationship statuses, or LinkedIn profiles), and commercial data (the type of purchase—which could be less sensitive, like a brand of toothpaste, or more sensitive, like type of medication—the dollar amount of the purchase, the date of the purchase, and the type of payment used). Brokers combine data to make inferences about people, and place them into categories, which can range from ‘Dog Owner,’ ‘Cholesterol Focus,’ or ‘Mail Order Responder,’ to ‘Urban Scramble’ (Latinx and African American with low income), ‘Rural Everlasting’ (over 66 with “low educational attainment and low net worths”) or ‘Married Sophisticates’ (thirty-something couples in the “upper middle class...with no children”).

According to the FTC report, one data broker, Rapleaf, has at least one data


point associated with more than 80% of all U.S. email addresses; Corelogic has property-specific data for over 99% of U.S. residential properties; Datalogix, which has a partnership with Facebook, has marketing data for almost every U.S. household; Recorded Future predicts consumer and corporate behavior based on information from over 502,591 open Internet sites; Acxiom has information for about 700 million consumers worldwide, including 3,000 data segments for nearly every U.S. consumer. Data brokers are subject to virtually no consumer protection laws.¹⁴ Unlike in other countries, in the U.S., the arduous process of getting access to what a company knows about you often involves giving up even more ‘data points.’

All the information that is stored ‘up there’ in the Cloud exists down here, on the ground. More specifically, it lives in mega data centers containing hundreds of thousands of servers each. Today, Google has 12 such centers spread across three continents, each boasting areas in the tens of thousands of square feet.¹⁵ This groundedness means that Google has interests in host countries like Taiwan, Chile, and Ireland, and six U.S. states—interests like those of any other company that conducts business within any state’s borders, be it in oil, bananas, or data.

While the locations of the centers are public, not much is apparent about what the insides look like. It is known, however, that the storage infrastructure of the centers is composed of standard shipping containers, stacked two high in rows, each container carrying 1,160 servers. This has been public knowledge since 2009, when Google revealed their server design—or as Ben Jai, the designer himself, called it, “our Manhattan project.”¹⁶

And this is exactly what the word ‘Cloud’ attempts to obscure: the physical dimension of what is going on here. In referencing yet another type of cloud (a mushroom-shaped one), Jai recalled a different instance in which language was used as a wedge between lived reality and representation: during the construction of the atomic bomb. Use of the codenames “Little Boy” and “Fat Man” was more than a security measure during the Manhattan Project. As Giorgio Agamben writes, if terminology is the properly poetic moment of thought, then no terminological choice can ever be neutral.¹⁷ The bomb’s domesticated names were screens that allowed the few dozen men that knew about them before Hiroshima and Nagasaki—and the rest of the world, afterwards—to think about


and carry out their work on a different register that that implied by the bombs’ ‘proper’ military and scientific designations.\(^{18}\)

Science and culture are more than co-produced: they are falsely-partitioned parts of the same whole. The same goes for language and thought. The problem is that partition is too often the first step of concealment: After all, what does it mean to make a Little Boy, instead of a uranium gun-type fission bomb? What does it mean to use a Cloud Service, instead of plugging into a remotely-accessed, corporately-controlled aggregate data management system? The Cloud exists, always somewhere above me, as neutral as the air I breathe.

But climate change has long been forcing us to see what has always been an inconvenient truth: no air—no nature, no word—has ever been neutral. Nor can they be isolated from their surroundings. The political structure of and surrounding the Cloud is as real as the mined metals that make up my computer. The conversation surrounding Big Data too often excludes Big Data’s physical aspect—and this is the case, even though the whole thing pivots on material devices. Or as Katherine Hayles has written, today there is a real tendency towards a “conceptualization that sees information and materiality as distinct entities,” allowing for “the construction of a hierarchy in which information is given the dominant position and materiality runs a distant second.”\(^{19}\) Meaning, Big Data sees itself as dimensionless, despite the name: even though a network can cover the whole globe, it remains a kind of skin on top of it, not part of it.

In fact, discussion is too often limited to words like information, data, and content. It’s like talking about the Internet without mentioning the millions of fiber-optic cables that compose it, where they are, and who made them. This means that the iPhones, tablets, GPS systems, and laptops that house our information have become so integral to our lives—so much a part of contemporary ‘nature’ for the very small percentage of the world’s population that has access to them—that they’ve become background to the larger, invisible drama of content. Yet even clouds are made of molecules. The material world is still the scale at which so much abuse takes place.

‘Data’ is one of the empty words central to the Cloud. It could mean a report for work, an email to mom, or a baby picture. Or, even emptier still, it could refer to metadata—data about data—which can actually be more informative

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\(^{18}\)Carol Cohn has written extensively about the paternal and other male-gendered vocabulary scientists and statesmen used to talk about the bombs that destroyed thousands upon thousands of lives and continue to destroy to this day. Examples include General Leslie Grove’s cable to Henry Stimson at Potsdam after the first successful atomic bomb test: “Doctor has just returned most enthusiastic and confident that the little boy is as husky as his big brother;” or Stimson’s note to Churchill: “Babies satisfactorily born.” Perhaps more obviously put are William L. Laurence’s descriptions of the Trinity test as “the first cry of a new-born world,” and the assemblage of Fat Man the day before it was dropped as like watching the bomb “being fashioned into a living thing.” For more information, see Carol Cohn, “Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals,” in Exposing Nuclear Phalacies, ed. Diana E. H. Russell (New York: Pergamon Press, 1989), 18.

\(^{19}\)Katherine Hayles, How We Became Posthuman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 12.
than content itself.\textsuperscript{20} The tendency to talk about the Cloud as existing without material form turns it into something as pliably empty as our idea of nature. Just as we treat climate legislation as a separate concern from, say, immigration law, we compartmentalize our concerns about how data is obtained, and what is done with it. We treat human rights abuses at Foxconn factories as a different conversation than the one about who has ownership of a .doc file uploaded to Apple’s iCloud. They’re part of the same whole, as surely as the back and front ends of a Cloud system are linked.

The unspecific “Cloud” obscures, for example, that the devices it lives in are dependent very specifically on miners in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. A June 2014 report by the Enough Project (an anti-genocide group originally out of the Center for American Progress) on conditions for miners in the DRC testifies to continuing—although lessened—neocolonial practices that entail child labor, child soldiers, and endless days of underground digging by laborers. Miners are exploited by both the electronics companies who use them in their ‘3T’ (tantalum, tin, tungsten) and gold supply chains, among them Apple, Dell, Motorola, and Hewlett-Packard; and warlords responsible for the rapes and killings that continue in the country’s long, continuing conflict.

Both parties use the mines as a source of business. The Enough Project report is about the effect of the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act, passed in 2010, on the sourcing of so-called ‘conflict minerals.’ While the report is fairly optimistic about the resultant demilitarization of the 3T’s, it is not about gold. Gold, which, besides its heavy use in the jewelry industry, functions as a conductor in computers and smartphones, which means that its extraction continues to fund armed groups in DRC, not to mention societal and environmental degradation.\textsuperscript{21}

And then, further up the assembly line: In February 2014, Apple conducted its eighth annual Supplier Responsibility Progress Report. In it, the company says it “confirmed in January 2014 that all active, identified tantalum smelters in our supply chain were verified as conflict-free by third-party auditors.” As if answering years-long calls on unbelievably low wages, cage-like living conditions, crippling workloads, excessive overtime, forced pregnancy tests, use of student labor disguised as ‘work experience placements,’ humiliating punishments, and employee suicides, the Progress Report states that each worker “has the right to safe and ethical working conditions. So we audit deep into our supply chain and hold our suppliers accountable to some of the industry’s strictest standards. In fact, we care as much about how our products are made as we do about how


they’re designed.”

Yet an audit, according to Sean Ansett, the chief sustainability officer for Fairphone, is “just a snapshot of what’s going on a particular day or series of days at the factory, rather than the whole movie.” Hong Kong-based Students and Scholars Against Corporate Misbehavior (SACOM) and other groups have been conducting their own ‘audits’ for years, and are less optimistic than Apple. Just one example from the press release SACOM released to counter Apple’s most recent Progress Report: “Apple praises its success in driving its suppliers to reach an average of 95 per cent compliance of their 60-hour workweek. The concept of ‘average’ is vague. The exception of ‘unusual or emergency circumstances’ is indeed a loophole of the policy, denying that the root cause of the problem is Apple’s zero inventory policy. In addition, Apple is still ignoring the weekly work hour limit of 48 hours maximum as required by Chinese Labor Law. From our investigation in 2013, we discovered at least one Apple supplier required workers to sign overtime work application on the first day of the employment training, as a way to produce ‘legitimate’ evidence to fulfill Apple’s audit requirement.”

But production goes on. The decision to outsource the manufacture of electronics to countries without enforceable labor laws has meant giant profits for Apple in the past two decades. For Apple and others, workers at the companies “that want to do business with us” are part of a new, ‘flexible,’ global workforce whose speed allows for quick turnaround times for new products. Outsourcing means that production happens closer not only to these ‘flexible’ ‘partners,’ but also to the people, materials and ecosystems that the gadgets are literally made out of, as in the DRC. Globalization has made a world in which state surveillance of citizens’ online activity in China is the other half of corporate surveillance of consumers’ online activity in the industrialized West.

Data has a material life, and material consequences. It is not an end product sui generis, and cannot be orphaned from the vast and complex network of mining operations, lawyers, assembly lines, lobbyists, human rights abuses, advertisers, exploitative labor, shopping bags, industrial waste, political manipulation, and environmental damage that give it its form. As the very existence of countless data brokers makes apparent, ‘content’ isn’t so empty that it can’t be bought and sold.

Emptying-out isn’t a process unique to the Cloud, though. This is irrefutably the age of cyber capitalism, and digitized abstraction is the order of the day.

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Cyberspace allows capital flows to cross and disregard borders in new ways. Capital itself has changed shape: land capital no longer reigns, as it did during Luke Howard’s time, and even industrial capital has less of a grip on markets today as weightless, invisible financial capital. As such, the World Wide Web can be seen as both a symptom and the pivot point of contemporary globalization. Money—a pretty empty concept to begin with—is further abstracted into stocks bought and sold in less than a second. I can buy anything online and never take my eyes off a screen, much less see a dollar bill. Or, more abstract still, derivatives and other complex financial products that many economists would be hard-pressed to fully explain can be bought, sold, and traded in a not-so-transparent yet cloud-like haze of futures, options, forwards, hedging, credit default swaps, speculation, and collars—just like they were in the financial crisis of 2008, and continue to be today. As Dan Schiller wrote one year before the new millennium we live in now, despite Internet Age assurances of greater transparency and community, “digital capitalism has strengthened, rather than banished, the age-old scourges of the market system: inequality and domination.”

The Cloud, then, contains within it incarnations of contemporary capitalism, too. Capitalism is also supposed to be both natural and innovative; both the manifestation of an intuitive drive towards self-betterment, and the vehicle of the cutting edge of techno-civilization. We talk about free markets as ‘free’ and self-generative when it is convenient for them to be such, and treat them as fragile constructions that must be actively maintained and protected when it comes time to determine trade regulations. A *Powers of 10*-esque image of a photo from my first day of college stored somewhere in a vast Google server farm in Douglas County, GA, could be replaced by a picture of one of the gigantic shipping containers Google houses their servers in, this time on a ship in a Hong Kong port. Ninety percent of all the world’s goods travel by sea in those very same massive containers, each averaging 20 x 8 ft. They help make a world in which, as Rose George writes, “shipping is so cheap that it makes more financial sense for Scottish cod to be sent ten thousand miles to China to be filleted, then sent back to Scottish shops and restaurants, than to pay Scottish filleters.”

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Crew members of the Empire State Building-sized ships that transport the goods that fill our lives aren’t told what it is they’re carrying; just if it needs to be refrigerated or not. I know about the amount of data that I’ve ‘shared’ in the last day, but I don’t really know what that data was. Never before has emptiness weighed so much.

Bibliography


ecoLove in an Age of Already

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Abstract:
Following “Arthur Kroker’s ‘Beautifully Tangled Knot’ of Contingency, Complexity, and Hybridity” (Kudzu 4.2), ecoLove seeks to update what I previously called Kroker’s “drifting worldknot” by pursuing Kroker’s extension of drift theory into Exits to the Posthuman Future (2014). In this pursuit – and in keeping with the contingency, complexity, and hybridity that drives drift theory – something unexpectedly complex and contingent emerged in hybrid conversation with Kroker: Timothy Morton’s The Ecological Thought (2010). Kroker’s chosen exit – interconnectedness and its implications for sustainability – is precisely Morton’s point of departure, and it is worth contemplating that for Kroker and Morton, ecological interconnectedness is directly linked with political forms and their ethics. For Kroker, it is Obama’s “guardian liberalism”; for Morton, it is a return to democratic possibility. Using Morton’s own logic and typographical cues to theoretical engagement, I bring this ecological interconnectedness into our Age of Already through the neologistic concept of ecoLove as a way to restore Love as a thing apart, a background against which ecology can happen and be thought, and – in light of the catastrophes that have already occurred – for our posthuman future to have a chance of making sense.

Keywords: Interconnection, sustainability, modes of resistance, love

“In the immeasurableness of the world, innovation and the eternal are expressed by love.” –Antonio Negri, Time for Revolution

...He wanted to believe / In the hands of love / His head it felt heavy / as he cut across the land / A dog started crying / like a broken-hearted man / at the howling wind, at the howling wind / He went deeper into black... –U2, “Exit”

Theorizing love is not for the faint of heart. Contemporary critical theory struggles to gain traction in its attempts to articulate coherent ethico-political pro-
grams of love as modes of resistance, and love has yet to convincingly emerge as suitably capable of coping with contemporary biopolitical and neoliberal power arrangements, even as prominent thinkers want this to happen. Consider Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s vague sketches of love in *Empire* as a “project of rebellion” from which “no effective blueprint will ever arise” and for which “they do not have any models to offer,” or Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips’ intimations of virtuality and anonymity as the conditions in which love and intimacy might flourish, so long as one doesn’t “speak of it as if it were an affective and moral failure” in *Intimacies*. Sounding a lot more like neoliberal conveniences than sustainable forms of resistance (or resistant forms of sustainability), these attributes are not exactly ringing theoretical endorsements for the praxis of love. What is love, why does it matter, and what can it do at a point in time when we are accelerating, drifting, and crashing through *Exits to the Posthuman Future* and facing *The Ecological Thought*? What will it do to rethink love at a time when we “awaken to the ecological catastrophe that has already occurred” and when we witness global politics already operating in “the fully realized digital universe”? This is a time of “already,” an age when some enigmatic thing that Kroker calls “guardian liberalism” has already “triumphed as the ideological capstone of hegemonic power,” when we are “already in the midst of that day when power fully abjected itself,” and when “the meaning of sustainability” has already “been reversed.”

Speaking of sustainability, Morton describes “an already existing totality for which we are directly responsible.” In this responsibility lies my own neologistic will to ecoLove. The lower-case e and capital L in ecoLove are typographical adjustments made for similar reasons that Morton insists upon capitalizing the N in Nature (and for similar reasons that we’ll see him using when he crosses out “animism”: “animism”): precisely to “denature” it, or to “highlight its ‘unnatural’ qualities, namely (but not limited to), hierarchy, authority,

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27 As opposed to things like style, transgression, anarchy, and everyday life, all of which have been documented across the humanities and social sciences as active forms of resistance to hegemonic power structures (*C.f.* Dick Hebdige, Christina Foust, and Michele de Certeau. There is also Ranciere’s *Dissensus*, which, though it cannot be called an “active form,” nevertheless presents a coherent philosophical alternative that love has yet to approach).


29 *Empire*, 206.

30 *Empire*, 411.


33 *Exits*, 155.

34 *Exits*, 186.

35 *Thought*, 130.

Following suit, a typographically-offset ecoLove sets it historically in an age of already, highlighting its unloving qualities such as softness, brightness, comfort, safety, unawareness, and bliss. ecoLove is better than Love without a prefix because ecological ethics cannot be divorced from an upgraded concept of love that could coherently resist guardian liberalism. The upshot is that ecoLove emerges as a viable and inherently conscientious expression of a traversal posthuman consciousness darkening the horizon of biopolitics. Pivoting on fulcrums of consciousness, affect, nonhuman intelligence, ethics, and spirituality – and leveraging radical connectivity in a bid for sustainability – Kroker and Morton show us how ecoLove works.

“The future that has now curved back on itself”

Consciousness, affect, nonhuman intelligence, ethics, spirituality, interconnection, sustainability – for Kroker, technology and its relationship with humanity, at a particular moment of already, precedes this theoretically-aggressive and transdisciplinary list. This moment is “when technology slams into the human condition,” resulting not in a “hopeful sign of another world” but in “a strange psychological landscape mediated by excess boredom and hyper-anxiety.” Kroker accounts for the human-technology relationship as psychological terraformation that establishes coordinates for “the biological terrain of wetware,” a terrain upon which is staged “the delirious spectacle of virtuality.” Using the familiar coordinates of the human as a base camp from which to explore the highest peaks of technology’s drive to nonhuman intelligence, Kroker does not deny posthuman sensibilities (to rif on Benny Liew’s “postmodern sensibilities”), or betray anthropocentric sympathies, as “any periphery can quickly become the center,” but he does explain these potential decenterings as gently as possible.

Kroker’s methodology is tripartite: accelerate, drift, and crash. Acceleration is fast. It covers the blurring of wetware and dryware by close-reading the synchronization of your heart to your smartphone, and it surveys the last vestiges of essentialism by giving neuro-diversity a fair shake. Drift is multiple. After Body Drift: Butler, Hayles, Haraway come the drifts of code, history, archive, screen, and media (one chapter each). Crash (getting two chapters) is spectacularly violent and is viewed somewhat indulgently and in slow motion as human subjectivity finds itself embodied in a “drone flesh” that “is prepared to be its own condition of possibility.” In turn, drone flesh allows voyeurs to experience a “trans-subjective” ecstasy that occurs when Barack Obama unveils

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38 Thought, 3.
39 Exits, 19.
40 Exits, 21.
41 Exits, 13.
42 Exits, 67.
43 Exits, 185.
44 Exits, 119.
a cogent defense for “guardian liberalism.” “Foucault’s ironic fate” is then ineluctably linked to Marshall McLuhan’s “ethical dissent” – the two things that are simultaneously vindicated and undermined by Obama’s rhetoric.

Things do get bleak, as McLuhan prophesied. Kroker’s epilogue makes clear that what is emerging in this age of already are technologies of disappearance and abandonment. Yet, having already seen “the slow suicide of technological apocalypse” unfold, Kroker’s text is neither apocalyptic nor utopian. His ending remains open-ended and unresolved: “Seemingly everything, today, is environment to the will to technology, not only the natural environment but human nature as well with all that entails for the future of human subjectivity.”

Morton-esque implications of radical connectivity notwithstanding, Kroker’s optimism ultimately finds purchase in “figural aesthetics” and it is here that ecoLove is within striking distance, especially in terms of “ethical probity” and as a “navigator of uncertainty.” Kroker’s figural aesthetics are sketches of a fearless intimacy with the environment and all that entails for the future of human subjectivity. They are accelerated crashes; Kroker spends most of his time concerned with the processes that bring these “navigators of uncertainty” crashing through various exits, and these processes are drift: code drift, for example, describes a paralysis by mobility, the beginnings of how humans are actually the prosthetics of technology, and not the other way around – how “media” are actually “amputations of the senses, not ‘extensions,’” as McLuhan had it. This is not a refutation of McLuhan so much as the beginning of a digital dialectic in which “the more mobile the speed of communication, the more immobile the system of human reflexes.” We are now “tethered to mobility” in a way that renders us the small object on the big sphere of technology; we might be an arm or a leg to the body of a totalizing “digital cosmology.” We are now, already, analog planets orbiting the digital sun. We are no longer the center of the universe or even of our own solar system.

If this is the case – if there is a reversal in the relationship between what extends from what – then media drift presents a suitable microcosm of the digital dialectic: “that point when the sudden activation of even the most minimal element of reversibility contained in all systems of communication brings about the collapse of the normative order of communication into its opposite – the transversal universe of affect which, moving across the electric skin of the mediascape, literally extremizes all information into a contagious and collective nervous breakthrough.” Already: we are not only technology’s extended limb, but also its subaltern; not a planet but a colony.

“Ablation” is the word most frequently used by Kroker to describe this inside-out dynamic; he likes it because of its bio-digital resonance. Riffing on cardiac

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45 Exits, 185.
46 Exits, 198.
47 Exits, 188.
48 Exits, 54.
49 Exits, 53.
50 Exits, 99. Emphasis in original.
language, Kroker discerns a liminal zone somewhere between humanity and technology that blurs the distinction between separation and connectivity, and it is within this blurred terrain of wetware and dryware that the digital dialectic fully traverses; a deep groove further entrenches the logic of the digital dialectic, accelerating media drift. An ablated heart: at once fully organic, analog, and digital, it penetrates the inside of the organ and reverses course. And, “since all hearts move to their own rhythm with their own electronic signature, what could be a better way of securing identity than the beat-beat of an often unruly heart?”

More technically, that which is ablated is biologically silenced. This is an important tie-in for discussing Exits alongside Thought: neuro-diversity is the outlier, “the final prohibition that must be brought into the realm of ethical intelligibility.”

Essentialism has been successfully contested on many fronts, but the digitization of consciousness presents a problem to combating essentialism on the neurological front: what happens when you can code neuro-normativity – when autism, for example, can be identified within, and therefore potentially eradicated from, the human genome? Here ablation becomes much more than a rich bio-digital metaphor; it becomes the “literally extremized contagion of information” that translates the “digital echo” of bodily realities into “misprinted organs.”

Now – already – with guardian liberalism, politics are ablated. Kroker demonstrates the many reversals of Obama’s rhetoric of a “just war,” his defense of peace in front of a West Point audience, his defense of war in accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, and his move toward “reaper drones and remote ethics” as a way of combating absolute evil. Obama’s ablated heart might well be on his sleeve, silenced and silencing by way of a “sacrificial violence,” and Kroker, in a brilliant interlocution of Foucault, points out that “this time, our historical time, is yet a time of emergence, suspended between power speaking in the name of death and life,” and that “Foucault’s theorization of power was always fully alert to the possibility that that which was excluded by power – denigrated, prohibited, disavowed – would come to constitute the very basis of that power.”

If this is the case, then capitalism, having interpenetrated and spoken on behalf of all life and death on the planet (and beyond), has already spun quite the web – and “absorbed” sustainability “into its overall logic”: “the meaning of sustainability has already been reversed. Today, sustainability is increasingly the name given to that which is necessary for extending the self-preservation of a predatory system of value extraction that leaves in its wake the abandoned, the remainder, the habitually unrecognized.”

51 Exits, 7-8.
52 Exits, 41.
53 Exits, 8-9. Original emphasis reversed and ablated.
54 Exits, 123-124.
55 Exits, 156.
56 Exits, 159.
57 Exits, 186.
Is there an exit for sustainability from this overall logic? Or will this overall capitalist logic prove to be the ultimate “glitch that reveals the darkness within”?\textsuperscript{58} Or, is it that we must go “deeper into black,” to quote U2, to touch the “hands of love”? Kroker describes “broken codes”\textsuperscript{59} that must be confronted head-on in order to think Morton’s ecological thought. Kroker would like to know whether we can “really speak of a sustainable future in the context of a present historical circumstance that is definitely not sustainable in terms of clashes of religions, atavistic politics, and economic immiseration,” or whether it is “precisely the fact that the present is not sustainable in its current form that should provide a global spring of human hope?”\textsuperscript{60} In the end, Kroker accelerates, drifts, and crashes through an exit of the posthuman future known as Timothy Morton and \textit{The Ecological Thought} insofar as he, Kroker, intimates that “everything today is interconnected, intermediated, intergenerational, in effect, a ‘global village’ with all its utopian potential yet dystopian realities.”\textsuperscript{61} However, whereas Kroker treads lightly by speaking of human hope and utopian potential, and by lamenting futures laced with glitches and darkness, Morton brings the tough love by becoming intimate with darkness, and by showing humanity to be only one of many things that can harbor hope and utopian potential.

\textbf{Animism}

Kroker’s chosen exit – interconnectedness and its implications for sustainability – is precisely Morton’s point of departure, and it is worth contemplating that for Kroker and Morton, ecological interconnectedness is directly linked with political forms and their ethics. For Kroker, it is Obama’s guardian liberalism; for Morton, it is a return to democratic possibility: “Ecology shows us that all beings are connected. …Ultimately, this includes thinking about democracy. What would a truly democratic encounter between truly equal beings look like, what would it be – can we even imagine it?”\textsuperscript{62} Such a passage expresses Morton’s attempt “to stay as long as possible in an open, questioning mode,”\textsuperscript{63} and it adumbrates the update for which he is gunning, since he clearly has imagined “a truly democratic encounter” and conceives of it as verging on a sort of spirituality more akin to meditation than to religion, more prone to an ethical stance toward coexistence than toward a belief system privileging some beings at the expense of others. In this regard, “a truly democratic encounter” eschews any and all zero-sum, self-interest ideologies, even while recognizing that “encounters” of any kind carry potentially damaging effects. The main thing for Morton is to resist the current environmentalist thinking – damaging in its own right\textsuperscript{64} – that the damage from such encounters is damage to something called

\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Exits}, 197.
\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Exits}, 197.
\textsuperscript{60} \textit{Exits}, 187-188.
\textsuperscript{61} \textit{Exits}, 188.
\textsuperscript{62} \textit{Thought}, 7.
\textsuperscript{63} \textit{Thought}, 8.
\textsuperscript{64} Cf. \textit{Thought}, “The Scope of the Damage,” 4-8.
Nature, or the Environment, or even the World, when damage can always be identified as an intimate piece of what he calls “the mesh.”

Understanding Morton’s mesh is to follow his premise of interconnection among everything to an unsettling degree. There is no doubt that Morton relishes in disturbing readers who “badly need to read this book,”\footnote{\textit{Thought}, 13.} and ultimately the mesh performs this disturbance by recalibrating our notions of scale. Set in a chapter called “Thinking Big,” the goal is to get one’s head around interconnection on a cosmic level, to realize that the more we extend the interconnection of all things beyond any normative frame or container, the less that ecology can be considered earthbound, that the “things” within ecology can be considered “separate.” The more we understand the extent of the mesh, “we’re slightly surer of one thing. Yes, everything is interconnected. And it sucks.”\footnote{\textit{Thought}, 33.}

Bracketing the Darwinian foundations of the mesh between a section called “Tibetans in Space” and a comparison between the mesh and Indra’s net (from Buddhist scripture), the biological and evolutionary aspects involving such things as symbiosis and Dawkin’s hypothesis of the extended phenotype are ensconced in a borderline mystical language that flirts with spirituality, and which helps Morton to imagine his truly democratic encounter. While some readers might be tempted to describe Morton’s methodology as primarily Darwinian, chalking \textit{The Ecological Thought} up to an entirely Darwinian project would leave many questions unanswered – questions not only about the ecological thought, but questions about \textit{The Ecological Thought}. Why does Morton include readings of Renaissance poetry (Milton, Coleridge, Shelley) along with film (\textit{Wall \\cdot E}, \textit{Twelve Monkeys}, \textit{Blade Runner}, \textit{Solaris}) and music (Pink Floyd, David Byrne, AMM) among many other instances of art and literature as part of his argument and analysis? Why are there such careful and tentative references to spirituality and ancient beliefs? Morton calls for a “radicalism that is almost religious in its passionate intensity” but in the next breath warns that “a religious vocabulary is risky” as “it might set up ecology as another kind of superbeing outside the mesh, outside the obvious impermanence and evanescence of reality.”\footnote{\textit{Thought}, 104.} These are not minor parts of \textit{The Ecological Thought} even if Darwin subsumes much of the interdisciplinary evidence marshaled on behalf of interconnection.

There is a reason for including that “religion cries aloud in a green voice,”\footnote{\textit{Thought}, 1.} which is that, in a humanities-based exercise that makes transdisciplinary overtures toward the hard sciences, the spiritual is the next thing in thing theory, as love might well be the next thing in contemporary critical theory. Morton does not overtly argue this, but his form and contents demand an interpretation. I suggest that Morton intimates that immaterial -isms are also parts of the mesh as much as, or more than, they are ways of apprehending it. Morton claims that it was capitalism, for instance, that gave us a world (“There was no world
before capitalism\textsuperscript{69}, but that the running of the capitalist course is also what takes our world away (“Global warming is the symptom that global capitalism can’t handle”\textsuperscript{70}), so it cannot be considered apart from the mesh any more than wind turbines\textsuperscript{71} or hyperobjects,\textsuperscript{72} and capitalism in this sense may actually be largely responsible for revealing the mesh – which is to say, for catalyzing the ecological thought. Indeed, the ecological thought itself has tangible material impact, its own affective incursion into the mesh: “Like a virus, the ecological thought infects other systems of thinking and alters them from within, gradually disabling the incompatible ones. The infection has only just begun.”\textsuperscript{73}

In this way, Morton’s bracketing of biological and evolutionary analysis with “Tibetans in Space” and an ablated animism, which he insists is neither “another belief system”\textsuperscript{74} nor “mystification,”\textsuperscript{75} allows him to demonstrate that multiple and disparate perspectives converge compatibly on ecological thinking, and that his proposed ethics will have the broadest possible appeal in a very literal sense precisely because they exclude no being, no perspective. After all, “seeing yourself from another point of view is the beginning of ethics and politics.”\textsuperscript{76} This goes for seeing others, as well, and encounters with other beings that Morton describes as “strange strangers.” If the premise of the mesh is interconnectedness, the premise of the strange stranger is that “the more you know about something, the stranger it grows;”\textsuperscript{77} if other perspectives are the beginnings of ethics and politics, then strange strangers are the beginnings of infinity and intimacy, and, since “infinity implies intimacy,” then “the ecological thought concerns itself with personhood,”\textsuperscript{78} and everything within the mesh that might encounter anything else within the mesh is by definition made up of “negative difference, which means it doesn’t contain positive, really existing (independent, solid) things.”\textsuperscript{79} The difficulty in imagining an encounter with negative difference notwithstanding, Morton’s insight really is strangely strange, since identifying another being replete with another mind opens oneself to peering into an infinite abyss, tantamount to understanding your own putative consciousness as meaningless – true intimacy should therefore be truly terrifying. But such intimacy, in addition to being terrifying, also provides the vision of a truly democratic encounter: “Democracy is based on reciprocity – mutual recognition. But since, at bottom, there is no way of knowing for sure – since the strange stranger confronts me with a terrifying darkness – the encounter at its zero level is a pure, absolute openness and is thus assymetrical, not equal… So before we get to mutual recognition, we must have radical open-
What Morton imagines is not a truly democratic encounter so much as its precondition. This is the appeal of animism: Morton’s way of thinking that fulfills the precondition without bringing the risks associated with religious language into play. Animism “treats beings as people, without a concept of Nature.”

With this concept in place, two things remain. First, the Future must be given the Nature treatment: capital F, because a concept of “the future” isn’t helping ecology: “The future is one of those things like Nature, set up as a thing ‘over yonder’: something else that the ecological thought dissolves.” Moreover, capitalism, in curving back on itself to remove the world along with the future, restarts history: “We have not reached the end of history, as Francis Fukuyama would have it, but only the beginning. We have barely become conscious that we have been terraforming the Earth all along. Now we have the chance to face up to this fact and to our coexistence with all beings.” This is remarkably resonant with Kroker’s observation that “the future” “has curved back on itself” and that “in its most realistic sense, futurism is finished as an intellectual project because we are now living out the future of technology that was so long prophesied and feared by so many thinkers.”

The next thing that remains is to take Kroker and Morton at their words. For Kroker, this is to seriously entertain the offer to gaze into “increasingly algorithmic minds with the intention of capturing the dominant mood of these posthuman times – drift culture – in a form of thought that dwells in complicated intersections and borderlands” – again, Kroker sounds remarkably like Morton, especially in light of how he arrives at this “form of thought” and the fact that it includes contemplating an essentially unknowable mind as a democratic way forward. And as for Morton, his precondition of radical openness must be extended to account for his truly democratic encounter, which is the same as theorizing love.

**Update to an Encomium**

“... love is fusion in the sun’s core. Love is a blurring of pronouns. Love is subject and object. The difference between its presence and its absence is the difference between life and death.” —David Mitchell, *The Bone Clocks*

Love is patient; love is kind; ecoLove does not boast, nor does it text and drive or stand carelessly in doorways. ecoLove rejects an ignorant bliss in favor of thinking thoughtfully about its own sewage, where it goes, and what it impacts. ecoLove is depression, when depression means understanding its own damaging

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80 *Thought*, 80-81.
81 *Thought*, 110.
82 *Thought*, 199.
83 *Thought*, 133.
84 *Exits*, 193.
85 *Exits*, 195.
role in the mesh. ecoLove is loneliness, when loneliness is “a sign of deep connection.”

ecoLove, thoughtfully, never smokes around children or removes its mufflers from its engines. ecoLove always greets strangers as strange friends, and, therefore, friends as friendly strangers. It would never occur to ecoLove to think of itself as a better candidate for something – anything – than any other thing.

ecoLove is frighteningly intimate. Intimacy implies infinity, to reverse Morton. ecoLove is imaginable in the sense that Morton routinely reminds us that “very large finitude is harder to deal with than abstract, ideal infinity.”

The trick with infinity is to imagine it without abstraction and ideals, simply as presence; intimacy and the uncanny ensue. I offer ecoLove as a way of following Morton’s Nature and animism, but there is another layer under the ecologizing and deloving of love, which is that an ecologized, deloved love restores Love in an unironic way: whereas for Morton, ecology must ironically do away with Nature, for me, it must bring back Love as a thing apart, a background against which ecology can happen and be thought. Whereas for Kroker, faith traditions are atavistic injunctions to sacrificial violence, for me, Love provides a new pretext for politics, if by new pretext we mean an updated circuitry to plug into, and by politics we no longer mean systematic dealings with fear and mistrust and instead we mean the systematic dealings with frightening intimacy as a basis for ecologically and lovingly recognizing rights and rations, also known as resource allocation.

At this point, a very real tension pervades my attempt to converse with Kroker and particularly Morton: I am not so subtly verging on that kind of religious language that “might set up ecology as another kind of superbeing outside the mesh, outside the obvious impermanence and evanescence of reality,” and it is true that Love as a thing apart transgresses the entanglement per se. Is there an outside? Morton says no. Does his answer betray a tendency to let science bleed into scientism? Does an expanding universe not imply a finite universe with an outer edge, and what is the single most obvious word that is conjured by any attempts to think past this boundary? The mesh is a very powerful concept, and I believe that Morton points a very forward direction with it, but it cannot be said to be infinite unless one is prepared to call an expanding universe “infinite.” Even allowing for the all universes within the universe, it is generally agreed that the universe is expanding outward, into a void. Why invoke religious language only to combat religious language? “One Buddhist system says that our Universe, along with one billion universes like it, floats within a single pollen grain inside another on a lotus flower growing out of a begging bowl in the hands of a Buddha called Immense Ocean Vairochana.”

As this clearly implies an infinite universe, then Morton would have us accept

86 Thought, 16.
87 Thought, 40.
89 Thought, 26-27.
the idea of a contained infinity.

Rather than accede to a contained infinity, I would rather take Morton outwardly past himself, which brings with it the double benefit of peering into the infinity of his mind, compassionately, to do so. By this I mean that for all of his rhetoric about taking “the ecological thought” all the way, I see that there is still room to go. At the level of interconnection, the mesh does the trick, but at the level of totality, it amounts to a contained infinity. Here is what Morton has to say about totality: “‘Totality’ doesn’t mean something closed, single, and independent, nor does it mean something predetermined and fixed; it has no goal.”

Very true, insofar as the mesh goes. And the mesh goes a long way. But unless it curves back on itself and disappears down the rabbit-hole of consciousness, or reflects itself ad infinitum through another, similarly eerie mind, it will eventually hit a void.

Remarkably, Morton agrees with this, too, as we have already established that these return curvatures are shortcuts to the void more than they are escapes from it. It is crucial to recall that “the more we know about strange strangers, the more we sense the void.” Here’s where we agree: the void gives us pause. The void is scary. We sense it with intimacy, and we intuit that it therefore demands serious thought – not action, but contemplation – because as connected and entangled as we might be with and in the mesh, there is an even bigger, stronger, dark, more forward connection, and that is a connection with the void. Regarding an ethical contemplation of the magnitude of this connection with the void, Morton and I again agree, again become more intimate and probably more terrified of each other. Where he sees infinite contingency, I see Love personified, but the outcome is remarkably the same for each of us: actions must be thoughtful. Morton recounts the flack he took when Katrina devastated New Orleans: before rushing to an action that he wasn’t sure of, he thought about it: “Don’t just do something – sit there. But in the meantime, sitting there will upgrade your version of doing and of sitting.”

ecoLove sits there, upgrading. ecoLove thinks big, thinks dark, and thinks forward; it also thinks with figural aesthetics and turns them always toward personhood, always toward advocacy, always toward an abjected power that develops its own inner logic, its own mind into which we must fearlessly peer. ecoLove performs radical openness by treating this very –ism with the respect of a person and neutralizing it from within. Call it a dark love, a poisoned love, a homeopathic love that genuinely wants to know the mind of the Other, even when that mind harbors “the intelligence of evil” (to borrow from Baudrillard), and even when that knowledge is suicide. ecoLove loves, dances, and struggles, knowing that sustainable forms

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90 Thought, 40.
91 Thought, 80.
92 Thought, 125.
93 In Democracies to Come: Rhetorical Action, Neoliberalism, and Communities of Resistance (New York: Lexington Books, 2008), Rachel Reidner and Kevin Mahoney write that “love, dance, and struggle are about modes of life that are sustainable, that are about relations among equals, and that are intertwined with affective difference” (100).
of resistance and resistant forms of sustainability are “networked affect” (to indulge Hillis, Paasonen, and Petit), and that environments coevolve with their inhabitants (to build on Hayles’ recent work in technogenesis, ). ecoLove does not passively wait for a future because it actively is the Future, so ecoLove cannot cop out, deferring its respect for persons and personhood for a rainy day. ecoLove cannot wait for the right moment to evolve itself with its entanglements because ecoLove is that upgraded, updated moment.

ecoLove participates only begrudgingly, preferring the thoughtfulness that an outside affords, but knowing that even if an outside exists, that the mesh is the inside, and that changes come from within precisely because, for those enmeshed, there is no shelter from the drones. So ecoLove reprograms the drones. This is real: \textit{ecoLove reprograms the drones and remote ethics, from within, by looking out.} It does this by taking the time to understand and to know, intimately, the drones and the ethics of already that program them – its loving presence, as David Mitchell tells us, is precisely the difference between life and death. Thinking otherwise is not wrong, but it instantly vitiates ecology and Love; thinking otherwise instantly ablates any transversal consciousness such that when we try to know it, it backfires on us, amputating us and tethering us to light-speed, fiber-optic mobility. Thinking otherwise, in this age of already, reverses and silences an ecological understanding of the praxis of love. The great thing about ecoLove is that it can be set up as a thing apart, as a frame or background, within which or against which we can ethically operate – an actual thing in an age of no things. It can be made tangible at the bargain price of being just out of reach, not just as something “over yonder” but also “off in the future,” as something to strive toward. In this way, “a Love in the future” is much more desirable than “a love in the Future,” especially knowing that, just as we know that the past can work on futures, futures also have a tendency to go to work on their pasts, that they curve back on themselves, and that, in the same way that “the ecological thought sneaks up on you from the future, a picture of what will have had to be there, already, for ‘ecology without nature’ to make sense,”\textsuperscript{94} so too should ecoLove sneak up on this age of already, a picture of what catastrophes have already occurred, for the future to have a chance of making sense, too.

\textbf{Bibliography}


\textsuperscript{94} \textit{Thought}, 3.

In recent years, humanities classes around the country have been incorporating – or trying to incorporate – environmental issues into their syllabi and their class discussions. To those never presented with the idea that the humanities and the study of the environment can intersect, this idea often seems laughable. However, those of us who have been involved with the design and teaching of courses connecting the study of the humanities to the natural environment know that is a very relevant, timely, and pardon the pun, natural integration of subject matter. The natural world has been a subject of art, in some manner, since art first appeared, and studying the ways in which the natural world has been represented over time and throughout the world, both visually and linguistically, enables students to understand how our own relationship to the natural world has been constructed and mediated by the arts. Teaching students to see the ways in which the natural world has been culturally constructed in the past enables them to see how rhetoric concerning the environment is employed today.

In his landmark text, Last Child in the Woods, Richard Louv coined the phrase “nature deficit disorder” to describe the effects on children of the separation between themselves and the natural world. His second book, 2011’s The Nature Principle, extends this disorder to adults. He articulates several “precepts,” which he states are “based on the transformative powers of nature” and “can reshape our lives now and in the future.”

A few of these precepts relate directly to the topic of our present issue of Kudzu. One, in particular, stands out: “In the new purposeful place, natural history will be as important as human history to regional and personal identity.” “Natural history” is perhaps not the correct term here; what it seems Louv is reaching towards in this precept is a kind of bioregional knowledge, one that encompasses something larger than the Victorian-sounding discipline of “natural history.”

David Orr, in his seminal 1994 text, On Education, Environment, and the Human Prospect, asks a substantial question in his opening chapter: “What Is Education For?” Orr decries the focus of much modern education, and argues that “the goal of education should be to connect intelligence with an
emphasis on whole systems and the long range with cleverness, which involves being smart about details.” What Orr is discussing here is what I briefly touched upon above; the fact that, today, most people would see a class combining the humanities and the sciences in any way as funny, not seeing how the two could possibly ever relate to one another.

When we are children, our classrooms are often filled with activities that do not call into the question the relationship between different disciplines. Whether it is an activity that urges communities to recycle, a nature-walk undertaken with a scavenger hunt in hand, or a mathematics exercise taught by counting rings on tree stumps, elementary education provides countless ways in which the disciplines can intersect. In summer 2014, I had the opportunity to participate in a weeklong workshop for educators at Teton Science School, a center for outdoor and place-based education in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. I was the only college professor in attendance; everyone else was a K-12 teacher, with the majority of participants working with elementary-age students. While many of the activities were, indeed, geared towards students of a much younger age, there were several activities that could be adapted to the college classroom and especially adapted to a college composition classroom. For example, our seminars taught us about an activity simply titled “Where Are You From?,” which asked students to creatively represent their hometowns and be conscious of language used that is specific to that region of the country/state/bioregional area. We took a walk in the foothills of the Tetons and, while being presented with some basic geological information, were asked to construct a story about the origin of a particular rock we came across. This assignment allows for the integration of environmental knowledge with composition, and also enabled students to choose which discipline in which they would like to write (their rock could have been presented as a historical text, a geological one, or a fictional one). It is lamentable that Teton Science Schools is directed almost exclusively towards K-12 educators, as any college professor in any field could benefit greatly from the pure exposure to an educational approach that allows different subjects to interact. Perhaps what I suggest here is that in order to expand environmental educational opportunities at the third level, we all return to kindergarten and try to remember a time before history, biology, and English were all housed in different buildings.

It is unquestionably difficult to merge disciplines in the college classroom, wherein knowledge has been strictly divided into discipline-specific discourses. However, the humanities classroom has a unique opportunity to allow these differing disciplines to speak to one another. Marilyn Cooper, in the forward to Sidney Dobrin and Christian Weisser’s Ecocomposition, expresses a fear about practices that “reduce…ecocomposition to a matter of teaching nature writing.” In this special issue of Kudzu, I am pleased to introduce the
work of two scholars who teach environmental literature and ecocriticism in
the college classroom without reducing the subject matter to “teaching nature
writing.” Both present descriptions and analyses of their courses, providing
readers of this special issue with concrete examples of how to design a course in
environmental literature, and what the difficulties might be in the execution of
such a course. The first essay in this issue is by Jana Giles, Associate Professor
of English at the University of Louisiana at Monroe. At the 2014 MLA in
Chicago, I had the pleasure of attending Jana’s talk on this same subject,
and her talk inspired me to subsequently organize my own roundtable on the
teaching of the environmental humanities for 2014’s SAMLA in Atlanta. Thus,
I am very pleased to have Jana’s contribution in this issue of Kudzu.

Dr. Giles’s essay, “Integrating Ecocriticism into a New Graduate English Course
in a Southern Public Regional University,” is an account of how she developed
her M.A. course and why, how the course went throughout the semester, how
the students responded to the course material, and is filled with her own re-
fections upon the course. It is a fascinating insight into the pedagogy of an
accomplished scholar and educator, and a wonderful resource for anyone inter-
ested in or currently engaged with the development of environmentally-themed
literature courses.

The course, titled “Literature, Environment, Ecocriticism” was (as far as Giles
knows) the first ecocriticism course to be taught at ULM. Having developed
and taught several environmentally-themed courses during my two years as an
Assistant Professor at the University of Southern Mississippi, I know firsthand
about the lack of precedent when introducing such course material in the Deep
South. This is not to say that the interest is not there, but institutionally and
culturally, the importance of the environmental humanities is not necessarily
obvious, as it would be at, say, Evergreen College, or Williams College, or the
University of Oregon. Giles begins her essay by setting the stage; she discusses
Louisiana’s economy and politics, its demographics, and how these elements
have helped contribute to a culture that is woefully illiterate in terms of the
environment. Though Giles stresses the innate intelligence and work ethic in her
students, she does not beat around the bush when it comes to the preparation
of many of her students, especially in terms of environmental issues. She begins
the semester with a short writing assignment urging students to write about
their own relationship to nature, and also shared her own experiences. Giles
acknowledges her own privilege in this situation, and makes such discussions of
class and privilege integral to the classroom discussions of the environment.

“Literature, Environment, Ecocriticism” is, as Giles states, influenced signifi-
cantly by the syllabi bank on the ASLE website, and thus, not too “out there”
in terms of its chosen texts. She assigns Wordsworth, Clare, Edward Abbey,
Amitav Ghosh, J.M. Coetzee and others alongside critical readings by such sem-
inal ecocritics as Carolyn Merchant and Lawrence Buell. What is remarkable
about her class, and about this paper, is not necessarily the syllabus – it is Giles’
astute ability to reflect upon her own teaching and her students, and theorize
the “why” and the “how” of the results of her pedagogy. With regard to the teaching of the final text, Mike Tidwell’s Bayou Farewell: The Rich Life and Tragic Death of Louisiana’s Cajun Coast, she laments: “Especially when we got to Bayou Farewell the primary reaction was defeatist. I had rather idealistically imagined that the students would be galvanized into outrage and perhaps even political engagement by Tidwell’s text. Instead, they felt overwhelmed by the enormity of the problem […]” 100

Giles includes specifics of assignments and detailed footnotes outlining her reasoning for choosing (or not choosing) particular texts or approaches, both of which are terribly useful resources for other educators. This essay is remarkable not only because of Giles’ clear, informative writing, but also because of the input from several of the students who were in that first “Literature, Environment, Ecocriticism” course. The words of Kirby Brasher, Adam Breitenbach, Alycia Hodges, and Valerie Upshaw bring this essay to life, and show readers, firsthand, how students respond to a course in environmental literature. A particularly standout insight is by Kirby Brasher, who connects Wordsworth’s infantilization of his sister and subsequent alignment of her with nature in “Tintern Abbey” to the way in which American culture often connects the South to the natural world and, thus, equates “the South with being child-like and immature.” 101

Another wonderful aspect to Giles’s essay is her inclusion of student comments about how her class impacted their lives on a larger scale; from one student’s anecdote about her efforts to promote recycling to another student’s experience teaching environmental education in the Peace Corps in Nicaragua, Giles shows readers just what effects a class in environmental literature can have on its students.

This essay is not strictly a “how-to” of Giles’s M.A. class, however; it is also a clever comment on the difficulties of actually operating in a interdisciplinary fashion in many universities, an insightful exploration of how the location of an educational institution impacts the way in which material must be taught, and a complex inquiry into the role of activism in the classroom. I am thrilled to be able to present her work to the readers of this volume of Kudzu.

The second essay I have the honor of introducing is written by Seth Reno, who teaches composition at Auburn University at Montgomery. “Teaching Ecocriticism and Green Writing with Weebly Website Creator” is Reno’s discussion of his pedagogical approaches to the teaching of composition, a course he typically themes as “Nature and the Environment.” Composition courses are, other than those specifically geared towards nature (such as Giles’s), are perhaps the easiest courses in English Departments to center around the theme of nature (as opposed to, say, a required class on Shakespeare, or a required class on British Literature 1900 to Present; these classes often require the coverage of specific canonical texts and themes that, while able to be discussed in terms of the environment, might not always be able to be if the students are to come away

100 (See Giles).
101 (See Reno).
from those classes with particular knowledge). Theming a composition course in terms of the environment is smart for several reasons; it provides students with a broad range of possible subject matters, it presents students with “real-world” issues, it enables students to undertake variety of assignments, it is applicable to students in all disciplines, and it is a subject with which every individual, in some manner, has personal experience.

Reno begins his essay with a quote by the ecocritical hero Aldo Leopold, asking “[h]ow can we initiate the ‘internal change in our intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections, and convictions’ […] in order to become more ethical actors on a more sustainable planet?” 102 Connecting this question, and others, to the work of Richard Louv and advocate of place-based education (or “PBE”), David Sobel, Reno then introduces his signature project for his composition courses, a project which might, on the surface, be antithetical to Louv’s articulation of the “nature-deficit disorder”: a webpage project. Reno acknowledges the possible issues here; using technology, even to learn about the natural environment, may ultimately have the adverse effect because it further alienates and commodifies that environment. However, Reno continues, no required composition course could possibly meet both the ideals of all environmental educators and still fit within the constraints of the university, and so, he chooses to assign a project wherein his students create a webpage using the “Weebly” website creator.

Throughout this essay, Reno elaborates on the specifics of his “Weebly” website project. This project, as Reno explains, invites easy engagement on the part of the students strictly because it involves technology, and the manner in which he has structured the assignment allows for a substantial amount of freedom, creativity, and development of individual voices and styles. The website project requires the creation of five separate pages, each page requiring an essay/media presentation on the following topics: ecocriticism, food studies, animal studies, nature writing, and research (the latter being a space wherein “students develop a project focused on one of the course units.” 103 “Ideally,” Reno continues, “the website project achieves the kind of internal changes called for by Leopold.” 104 However, Reno acknowledges that the execution of the course naturally differs from the idealism behind the creation of such a syllabus, and he, like Giles, reflects on the difficulties of the course, providing valuable pedagogical insight for other educators.

Reno draws heavily upon the idea of PBE (place-based education), a pedagogical approach that uses the local to teach larger concepts. His composition course takes three field trips throughout the semester, ranging from a short trip to the university quad to Montgomery Zoo, and Reno urges his students to incorporate their experiences and observations from these field trips into their essays for the Weebly website. These field trips are not into any great wilderness or National Park; they are to local places that might often be overlooked, and are,

102(See Reno).
103(See Reno).
104(See Reno).
as Reno concludes, “effective forms of place-based education in an urban area.” It is easy to see the natural environment when visiting, say, Yosemite or Yellowstone, but it takes a keener eye and a more attentive observer to see the same environment along the side of the road or in the spaces between buildings at a university. These experiences of urban nature is indicative of a larger shift in ecocriticism, one that moves away from the idealized vision of “wilderness” to one that focuses on the way in which the natural world is present everywhere and in every life.

The courses developed by both Giles and Reno, while different in course level and focus, share many important similarities. Both courses strive to show students that they already have a relationship with nature, and that exploring this relationship through the humanities is important to their own day-to-day lives. Nature and place are closely interconnected, and a consciousness of the natural world and the way in which it is represented linguistically is crucial to how we find our “place” in the world. Both courses also seek to impart a sense of stewardship through their focus on the local; for Giles, it is through the teaching of Mike Tidwell’s Bayou Farewell, and for Reno, it is an exploration of the local environment around Auburn University at Montgomery. Both Reno and Giles seek to instill knowledge about the environment in their students that extends far beyond the classroom, and both encourage their students, as Reno writes, “to see their work as part of broader social discourses.”

\footnote{See Reno.}
\footnote{See Reno.}
Abstract:
This essay argues for the benefits of assigning a website project in college writing courses focused on ecocriticism and environmental issues. While many scholars have urged teachers to move away from digital media and technology in favor of hands-on, place-based education, this essay demonstrates how a digital assignment can enhance students’ engagement with contemporary environmental discourses and the material world in which they live. If we want our students to develop a love of nature and an understanding of the interconnectedness and interdependence of all things on the planet, we must do so in ways that get them to think outside of the classroom, to see their work as part of broader social discourses, and to develop the kinds of interdisciplinary approaches demanded by ecocriticism. The website project discussed in this essay does all of these things. The first part of the essay outlines the pedagogical and philosophical rationale for the digital project. The second part provides a detailed overview of the assignment prompt and a discussion of specific students’ websites, which were created for a first-year writing course at Auburn University Montgomery.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Composition, Pedagogy, Weebly, Digital

It is inconceivable to me that an ethical relation to land can exist without love, respect, and admiration for land, and a high regard for its value. —Aldo Leopold, “The Land Ethic” (1949).

In his autobiographical epic The Prelude (1805), William Wordsworth makes a bold claim: “Love of Nature Lead[s] to Love of Mankind.” This thesis, expounded at length throughout the poem, forms the basis of Wordsworth’s particular brand of ecological thinking. When we love and care for the natural world and all its forms of life, argues Wordsworth, we necessarily develop a love of humanity: we are all inhabitants of the same world. For Wordsworth, “love of nature” was a love of all things in the world, both human and non-human. This “ecophilia,” to use Aaron Moe’s term, is the key to thinking ecologically—that

is, a recognition of the interconnectedness and interdependence of all things in the world.  

Ecological thinking demands that we act in an ethical manner to preserve and sustain this diverse web of being. Scholars often see Wordsworth’s vision of an interconnected, sustainable planet as the beginning of environmentalism and ecological thinking, and, for Wordsworth and for us, education plays a vital role in developing that ecological vision.

How can we instill this love of nature, this kind of ecological thinking, in our college students today? How can we initiate the “internal change in our intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections, and convictions,” of which Aldo Leopold wrote decades ago (209), in order to become more ethical actors on a more sustainable planet? How can we bridge the seeming gap between our new digital world and the natural world from which many of our students seem increasingly disconnected? These questions lie at the heart of recent discussions in ecocriticism and environmental education. For example, renowned environmental writers Richard Louv and David Sobel have offered ways to move students “beyond ecophobia” and to combat “nature-deficit disorder,” often by proposing radical changes to institutional structures and educational curriculum. Our increasing reliance on digital media and technologies, they argue, facilitates the “nature-deficit disorder” in children and adults. As Sobel argues, instructors often use “electronic media” to connect students “with endangered animals and ecosystems around the globe.” While motivated by good intentions, these changes ultimately “disconnect” students “from the world outside their doors.” Instead, children should first “cultivate” a love and “understanding of [local] organisms [they] can study close at hand” (Last Childs in the Woods 3). Similarly, David Orr and Greg Garrard have argued for the importance of place-based education in the teaching of ecocriticism and sustainability studies, often in the context of “wilderness” experiences.


110 See Richard Louv, Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder (Algonquin Books, 2008); and David Sobel, Beyond Ecophobia: Reclaiming the Heart in Nature Education (Orion Society, 1999); and Place-Based Education: Connecting Classrooms & Communities (Orion Society, 2004).

These are valuable suggestions, but difficult to implement at the university level. We are often restricted by financial considerations, core requirements, appropriate course offerings, student interest, and the separation inherent in “disciplines.” In addition, many college instructors typically teach ecocriticism and sustainability studies within English or History or Philosophy courses, so the primary focus is on literature, theory, and writing rather than activism, ecology, and hands-on experience. As a professor of English at Auburn University at Montgomery, I teach ecocriticism in courses such as first-year composition, critical theory, and specialized seminars in “Green Romanticism.” In other words, there is no designated course for ecocriticism. But this is not necessarily a detriment. Ecocriticism can provide students with a useful framework for thinking about a variety of topics and issues, and, when we utilize digital technology, students can engage with social, political, and personal elements of nature and the environment in a sustained and sophisticated manner.

In this brief essay I’d like to offer one way we can use digital technology to connect students to the natural world. My first-year composition courses at AUM take as their course theme “Nature and the Environment” (see Appendix A). In those classes, my students construct a website using the free Weebly website creator (http://weebly.com). Weebly provides the “frame” of the website, so students do not need to know any computer programming: building a website on Weebly consists of selecting a site “theme” and uploading/organizing images, videos, and text.

The course hub I created for this class: http://english1020nature.weebly.com.

The website project contains five separate pages. Each of those five pages represents a discrete assignment that must include a 300-500-word essay and various forms of visual media. Moreover, each page corresponds to a thematic unit of
the course: (1) ecocriticism; (2) food studies; (3) animal studies; (4) nature writing; and (5) research, where students develop a project focused on one of the course units (“Nature and Culture,” “Food and Culture,” and “Humans and Animals”). Each of these digital essays requires students to think critically about the environment, respond to assigned readings, engage personally with issues of sustainability, and perform extensive research on a particular ecological topic. Ideally, the website project achieves the kind of internal changes called for by Leopold. In practice, of course, these changes differ drastically, from a student who decided to become a journalist after writing a research paper on the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, to a student who told me, after reading Leopold’s “The Land Ethic,” that he would no longer throw trash on the highway because he had never before thought about where that trash ended up or how it might affect the local environment.

It may seem strange to advocate for a digital project in teaching students about ecocriticism and sustainability, but it has several benefits. First, digital writing is more accessible to freshman students, who are increasingly more accustomed to writing online than writing research papers and other paper-based academic assignments. Students are thus more willing to engage immediately with the assignment, and the digital environment holds their interest throughout the term.112 Second, the digital environment works in tandem with place-based activities and trips. In my class, we take three trips that correspond to two of the webpage assignments: (1) a modest trip to our university’s quad during the first week of class, where students reflect on their everyday interactions with the natural world; (2) a full-day trip to the Montgomery Zoo during our unit on animal studies; and (3) a full-day trip to a local park, where students gather material and inspiration for their own creative nature writing. Students then translate these placed-based activities to the digital sphere of their website, where they further share, reflect on, and engage with their experiences in local environments. These are surely not “wilderness” experiences, but they are effective forms of place-based education in an urban area. Third, the website project is at its core a writing project: students write about these topics on a daily basis, so they research and write a great deal. The website project takes this thinking and writing to the digital, public sphere, thereby enhancing students’ engagement with contemporary discourses.

Here is the assignment prompt for the website project:

WEBSITE PROJECT

For this assignment, you will create and maintain a website throughout the semester that will be linked to our class website at http://english1020nature.weebly.com. You are free to customize your website in any way you see fit—be as creative as you’d like. The website will have five specific assignments/pages,

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112It is important to note that the website project does not replace traditional paper-based assignments: in addition to the website project, students write a two-page analytical review of a scholarly essay; a four-page comparative analysis paper; a formal research proposal and bibliography; and a six- to eight-page research paper.
and it will be an ongoing assignment—you’ll have a page due about every three weeks (see the daily schedule for specific due dates).

One major goal of the site is to allow you to work on writing for a public audience, as opposed to the academic audience of your other major papers. I’ve already created a sample website with my versions of each of the assignments so you can get a sense of what you can do. You can also look at previous students’ websites, which are linked on the course hub (link above). Each page directly relates to the course readings and units, and we’ll discuss the specifics of each web page in class. Each page should contain approximately 300-500 words of your own writing as well as images and/or design elements. The following are general prompts for each page:

(1) Introductory Post

For this page, you will introduce yourself to the class by revising and re-framing the essay we’ll write in class during week one: “What is ‘nature’ to me?” In addition to anything you’d like us to know, I want you to write about your ideas, experiences, and feelings about nature. I don’t want you to cut-and-paste your essay into the website but rather to use that essay as a springboard for this first post. Use the readings by Thoreau and Soper as examples of how you might approach this first essay.

(2) Food Page

You have two options for this page. Option #1 is a restaurant review. For this option I want you to write a professional restaurant review modeled after a review you might read on a professional blog or magazine. As we’ll discuss in class, these kinds of reviews tend to focus more on the experience of eating at the restaurant rather than on critiquing the food in an elitist manner. Option #2 is a recipe history. For this option, I want to select a family recipe, a famous local/regional dish, or a favorite recipe and trace its history: Where and why did the recipe originate? How did it take is current form? How is the dish served? At the end of your essay, write out the recipe (and, if you’re a cook, I encourage you to bring the dish on our food tasting day).

(3) Animal Analysis

For this page, you will select one animal and perform some research: where does it live? what does it eat? what are its unique characteristics? what’s cool about it? and, importantly, how is it used, represented, and thought about in our culture? I want you to think of this page as a kind of cultural case study of an animal.

(4) Nature Page

This page will be based on our class trip to the Montgomery Zoo. This page can take the form of a traditional essay, a creative work (fiction, non-fiction, or poetry), a digital media project (i.e., collection of photographs, documentary, website, or PowerPoint), or anything else that fits the genre of “nature writing.”
This is your chance to do some creative writing of your own, if you so choose, or to develop a study of zoos like the essay by John Berger.

(5) Research Page

The goal of this final page is to consider how you can present your research project to a public audience. You will use this page for a three-to-five-minute research presentation during the last week of class. This is the challenge: how can you present your eight-page research paper to the rest of the class in only five minutes? No one else knows the specifics of your research, so you'll need to present your project in a clear and accessible manner.

You have two general options for the research page/presentation. Option #1 is to write a 300-500 word essay and read that essay verbatim (it takes about five minutes to read 500 words). This is the more formal approach. Option #2 is a bit more informal: you can design your page with images, charts, statistics, key words, a PowerPoint, or anything else, and you can use these elements to discuss your project (that is, without reading an essay verbatim). For either option, you will need to practice your presentation in advance to make sure you don’t go over the five-minute time limit—give the presentation to your family, friends, roommates, or anyone else. This is your chance to share all of the knowledge you’ve produced throughout the semester.

As the initial description states, one goal of this project is that students will learn the differences between public and academic forms of writing—in essence, how to write for different audiences. This is an especially important point for teaching ecocriticism and sustainability: I don’t want my students to think of their work as belonging solely to the private, artificial sphere of the classroom but rather as part of the ongoing, public discourses that shape our world. Students' websites are searchable and fully available online, and students are made aware of this fact. As contributors to the conversation, students spend more time thinking carefully about their ideas, arguments, and writings. In fact, I find evidence to suggest that they often spend more time polishing their websites than their traditional paper-based essays.

While one might erroneously assume that digital media would disconnect students from their local environment, most of my students write about local topics and issues. For example, one student, Eva Valentine, developed a research project on Alabama’s biodiversity and the reasons behind the state’s increasing extinction rates (http://evalentine.weebly.com/research.html). Drawing from her training in biology, Eva identified several endangered species and outlined practical ways the state could address this problem.
Another student, Joanne Spotswood, wrote a recipe history on gumbo, a dish specific to southern Louisiana and, as it turns out, her hometown of Mobile, Alabama (http://blythebird.weebly.com/food-page.html). During our food-tasting day in class, Joanne explained the differences between Cajun and Creole gumbos, and she brought in her own version of the dish (which I have since made several times—the recipe is on her website).

In fact, this food-tasting day—during which several students and myself brought in dishes to share and discuss—is another form of place-based education (taste-based education?). In conjunction with our unit on food studies, this tasting-day
provides a space to reflect on sustainable food and farming practices. For example, I brought in two dishes: chicken tikka masala and pop tarts. First, we compared the ingredients: I used almost all local and organic products in the tikka dish, while the pop tarts are primarily made with chemicals and genetically modified forms of corn and soybean. The pop tarts, of course, are much cheaper, due in large part to the structure of U.S. farm subsidies, which encourage mass production of corn. We linked these facts back to our previous discussions of assigned readings and films: Massimo Montanari’s *Food is Culture*, Eric Schlosser’s *Fast Food Nation*, Rachel Laudan’s “Culinary Modernism: Why We Should Love New, Fast, Processed Food,” and the documentary *Food, Inc.* Students thus reflected on the complex interplay of sustainability, class, convenience, government policy, and ethics, which make up the American food system. After the discussion, we ate the food, and, for the most part, students preferred the “real” tikka to the “artificial” pop tarts.

In addition to place- and taste-based activities, the website project allows students to write creatively and to develop writerly voices expressive of their personalities. In one of my favorite websites from the past year, a student named Casey McCluskie continually surprised me with his humorous essays on all things Alabama (http://caseymccluskie.weebly.com). On his site, entitled “Who I Am,” Casey introduces himself as a “native to the state that holds the world record of the world’s biggest alligator,” and, in successive pages on making his own deer jerky and hunting “gobblers,” explains how he is “a southern boy who loves to be outside...except on Saturdays when Alabama is on the TV and on Sundays when them sweet cars are going round them tracks.” By adopting this tongue-in-cheek tone on his site, Casey crafts a writerly identity that both celebrates and satirizes southern stereotypes. In addition to Casey, several other students take up creative writing in their website projects, writing poetry (http://deirvindavis.weebly.com/nature-page.html), personal narratives (http://frosca.weebly.com/introductory-post.html), and photo essays (http://frosca.weebly.com/nature-page.html). Through the creative nature of the project, students can express and shape their identities, feelings, and emotions in ways that they cannot in more formal writing.

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113 Tikka masala is, of course, far from local Southern cuisine. My own “Food Page” details how I first ate Indian food on a study abroad trip to England, and how that experience opened my eyes to the intimate connection between food and culture (http://english1020nature.weebly.com/food-page.html).
Ultimately, my students have learned much from this website project, and I think digital-based assignments have the potential to connect our students with the natural world in surprising ways. If we want our students to develop a love of nature and an understanding of the interconnectedness and interdependence of all things on the planet, we must do so in ways that get them to think outside of the classroom, to see their work as part of broader social discourses, and to develop the kinds of interdisciplinary approaches demanded by ecocriticism. The website project does all of these things, and I hope it’s something my students will continue to think about and look back on long after they’ve graduated.

Appendix A: Reading List

You can find the full syllabus on the course hub: http://english1020nature.weebly.com.

1. Henry David Thoreau, selections from Walden, or Life in the Woods
2. Kate Soper, “The Discourses of Nature”
3. Aldo Leopold, “The Land Ethic”
5. An Inconvenient Truth
6. Laura Johnson, “(Environmental) Rhetorics of Tempered Apocalypticism in An Inconvenient Truth”
7. Anthony Bourdain, “Food is Good”
8. Massimo Montanari, selections from *Food is Culture*

9. Eric Schlosser, Introduction to *Fast Food Nation*


11. *Food, Inc.*

12. Erica Fudge, Introduction to *Animal*

13. Stephen Colbert, “Animals”


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Dog-paddling Against the Tide:

Integrating Ecocriticism into a New Graduate English Course in a Southern Public Regional University

Jana M. Giles with Kirby Brasher, Adam Breitenbach, Alycia Hodges, and Valerie Upshaw

Abstract:
This paper recounts the experience of teaching an English MA graduate course in environmental humanities for the first time at a public regional university in northeastern Louisiana. The region is one of the poorest in the United States, there is little environmental activism in the local community, and the students had little formal education in environmental issues or in literary theory in general prior to the course. At the same time, Louisiana is experiencing severe coastal erosion which constitutes a national disaster. Texts used for the course included *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* (2011), by Timothy Clark; British Romantic poetry; *Walden* (1854) by Henry David Thoreau; *The Monkey-Wrench Gang* (1975) by Edward Abbey; *Ceremony* (1977) by Leslie Marmon Silko; *Disgrace* (2000) by J.M. Coetzee; *The Hungry Tide* (2006) by Amitav Ghosh; and *Bayou Farewell* (2004) by Mike Tidwell. While the students appreciated the literary texts and theory, their response to the possibility of activism regarding our current environmental crises was muted and pessimistic. However, after the completion of the course, several students went on to implement change both locally and internationally, or reported that their attitude towards nature had been substantially modified. The paper concludes by considering the challenges to graduate education in literary studies regarding the problem of environmental activism, and recommends that prospective educators consider designing curricula which incite agency and engagement to mitigate the sense of helplessness that can arise from such course material.

**Key Words:** Graduate education, Literary theory, Ecocentrism, Environmental activism

In the fall of 2012, I taught a master’s-level graduate English special topics course entitled “Literature, Environment, Ecocriticism” at the University of Louisiana at Monroe (ULM). To the best of my knowledge, this was the first time such a course had been offered at our university. Responding to my invitation to contribute to this paper on the pedagogy of the course, one of the former
students, Kirby Brasher, confirms: “This was the first (and last) time I have had any formal education with an environmental focus.” Alycia Hodges concurs:

Your class is the only class in Ecocriticism that I have ever taken. Although I have taken classes that discussed environmental ethics, I was only exposed to a surface view of environmental issues. In these classes, the lessons seemed to outline x, y, and z problems as a result of human interaction with the environment without inciting self-reflection or the urgency to make specific connections to or changes in my life, or offering accessible solutions. Your class was different because it focused on environmental issues and reading texts through an ecocritical lens rather than just being a unit in a class.\textsuperscript{114}

The fact that courses on the environmental humanities have been largely neglected at my university is not a surprise. In addition to budget cuts\textsuperscript{115} and other institutional restraints that often prevent a regional university from offering a wider variety of courses, our particular conditions also mitigate against this. The city of Monroe, and its neighbor, West Monroe, which together comprise the greater urban area of Ouachita Parish in northeastern Louisiana, is about seventy-eight miles from the Mississippi River and fifty miles from the Arkansas border, and serves as a commercial hub for the surrounding region, which suffers from economic underdevelopment.\textsuperscript{116} The oil industry and its lobby have determined the political agenda in the state for decades, creating barriers to environmental action surrounding the health of the gulf and Louisiana in general.\textsuperscript{117}

\textsuperscript{114}Brasher; Hodges.
\textsuperscript{115}Following the national recession that began in 2009 and under the leadership of Governor Bobby Jindal, Louisiana state public higher education allocations dropped 43%, leading to increased cuts to course offerings and variety. See Mitchell, et al.; and Wong.
\textsuperscript{116}“Louisiana Employment and Wages: 2013.”
In our 5th congressional district of Louisiana, the high school graduation rate is 77% and the four-year public college graduation rate is 20.2%; at my institution, the University of Louisiana at Monroe, the four-year graduation rate is 18.7%. Politically, the region is conservative; about 67% Republican, and highly religious, with affiliation dominated by Evangelical Protestant, Black Protestant, and Catholic; northern Louisiana is dominated largely by the former in contrast to Catholic southern Louisiana. Although there are political movements among the conservative Protestant community to become more engaged with environmental issues, as Jane Rainey and others explain, the path from opinion to engagement is not a simple one. While data demonstrate that many Protestants consider themselves “pro-environment,”

it is unclear to what degree these views translate into activism at the grassroots level. Since polls show that self-identified evangel-

118According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the high school graduation rate for the state of Louisiana was 71% in 2010-11, in contrast to the national average of 79% (“Regulatory Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate, All Students: 2010-11”). The 5th Congressional District of Louisiana includes Morehouse, W Carroll, E Carroll, Madison, Tensas, Franklin, Richland, Ouachita, Lincoln, Jackson, Winn, La Salle, Catahoula, Concordia, Caldwell, Grant, Rapides, Avoyelles, St. Landry, W Feliciana, E Feliciana, St. Helena, Washington and Tangipahoa parishes (“Printable Maps: Congressional Districts: 113th Congress”). Total population is 754,131, of which 61.6% are white, 35.6% black, and 2.8% other. The median household income is $34,243. For all people, the poverty rate is 24.8%, but for those under 18 years, it is 34.4% (“My Congressional District: 113th Congress”). For the slightly smaller twelve-parish region of Northeast Louisiana (Caldwell, E Carroll, Franklin, Jackson, Lincoln, Madison, Morehouse, Ouachita, Richland, Tensas, Union, and W Carroll), the high school graduate rate for 2012-13 was 73.6% (“District and State Graduation Rates (2005-2006 to 2012-2013”). Bachelor’s degree attainment is 12.5% (Eisenstadt).

119Data set includes 2010-13. “Louisiana Public Colleges (4-year).”

120In 2012, the US House of Representatives races recorded 67.02% voting Republican and 21.06% Democratic, and 11.92% minority parties. “Statistics of the Presidential and Congressional Election of November 6, 2012.”

121“Religious Composition of Louisiana.”
icals remain somewhat less supportive of environmental concerns than mainline congregations, evangelical leadership on environmental topics must not only advocate in the public arena but must be conscious of ways to bring the rank-and-file on board. Since evangelical Protestantism includes and is significantly influenced by those conservative Christians who make up the Christian right on the political spectrum, the challenge for evangelical environmental activists is heightened by the fact that the main group of dissenters among religious leaders come from this group. Pat Robertson said, “I think the concept of linking Jesus to an anti-SUV campaign borders on blasphemy, and I regard it as a joke.” Besides associating it with the secular liberal political agenda, some—Jerry Falwell, for one—find pagan overtones in this new interest in ecology.¹²²

Although there are some community members concerned about the environment in our parish,¹²³ they are a minority, and in general the region lacks awareness or activism. For example, Monroe lacks city-funded curb-side recycling,¹²⁴ nor are most citizens aware that they can or should recycle locally. When I taught a unit on recycling as a problem/solution paper in freshman composition over several semesters, most students were unaware that local recycling facilities exist where they could take their waste products. While many universities have had recycling or sustainability programs for many years, such as that begun in 1991 at the University of Oregon,¹²⁵ in 2012 ULM had no campus-wide recycling program, so it was not setting an example for students or the local community either.¹²⁶ Given these multiple challenges to a heightened environmental awareness in the region, it comes as no surprise that the students in our class had no formal education in environmental issues.

About the ecological context of the region, a complete picture is impossible for such a short paper, so I will offer only a few salient examples. As the primary artery of the largest drainage system in North America and the fourth largest drainage system in the world, the Mississippi River drains 41% of the continental United States. Its watershed reaches west into Montana and New

¹²³ For example, one organized group is Friends of Black Bayou which supports the local Black Bayou Lake National Wildlife Refuge. “Friends of Black Bayou;” “Black Bayou National Wildlife Refuge.”
¹²⁴ Private curbside recycling has recently become available for $20 per month, but few people utilize it.
¹²⁵ University of Oregon Campus Zero Waste Program;” see also “11 College Recycling Programs That Put All Others To Shame.”
¹²⁶ In the spring of 2015, ULM began a small-scale recycling program, but there are only a few bins for paper recycling hidden outdoors next to garbage dumpsters. No university-wide campaign, other than a brief email, occurred, thus there is little awareness or education being offered about why recycling is important. Without a more concerted push on the part of the university administration, staff, and students to educate the community about the importance of environmental issues, the message sent is that recycling is not that important, and the project is likely to fail.
Mexico, north into Minnesota, and east into Pennsylvania. The Port of South Louisiana is the largest tonnage port district in the western hemisphere.\textsuperscript{127} The heart of US agribusiness, the Midwest, dumps much of its runoff into the river, which, combined with sewage, produces high levels of nitrogen and phosphorus in the water. These conditions have created the largest “dead zone” in North America in the Gulf of Mexico, an area in the ocean which has been depleted of oxygen and therefore cannot support marine life.\textsuperscript{128} In 2012 the gulf dead zone was about 6700 square miles, larger than the state of Connecticut.\textsuperscript{129} The Louisiana coast is also eroding, which contributed to the effects of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Louisiana contains approximately 40% of US wetlands, but is experiencing 90% of continental coastal wetlands loss at a rate of 25 to 35 square miles per year. The primary cause has been the levee system built in the early twentieth century which does not allow the Mississippi to replenish the wetlands with silt and freshwater from upstream, further exacerbated by oil and gas drilling.\textsuperscript{130} Not only is this a crisis for the economy of Louisiana, but some believe it is the greatest natural disaster currently occurring in the United States.\textsuperscript{131} These few facts are sufficiently alarming to suggest that universities across the state, and nationwide, should be integrating courses on the environment into their curricula on a regular basis. Instead, what I found was that most students in our region, a five-hour drive from New Orleans, had little knowledge of this crisis or of environmental issues more generally, even if many of them are avid hunters and outdoorspeople—though not so much the English majors. I therefore designed this course with these conditions in mind: a relatively uninformed, poorly educated population with little knowledge of environmental issues and an economic and political context conducive to maintaining a certain amount of either ignorance or misinformation, with grave consequences for us all.

The course was a one-off, special topics course offered as an elective. I competed with other department faculty by submitting a proposal. Because the course offerings are limited, I assumed that most students would take it to fulfill a requirement rather than because of any strong interest in the subject. Since this was a graduate level course, my primary goal, in addition to exposing them to an exemplary range of fairly canonical literary works, was to offer a range of theoretical approaches to give the students a comprehensive introduction to ecocritical studies, including the following topics:

- Ideas of “nature” and the “natural”
- The role of literature in forming our ideas about nature
- Nature in relation to categories such as gender, race, or class

\textsuperscript{127}“Mississippi River Facts.”
\textsuperscript{128}Bruckner.
\textsuperscript{129}“Northern Gulf of Mexico Hypoxic Zone.”
\textsuperscript{130}“Coastal Erosion: Facts and Figures.” See also Tidwell.
\textsuperscript{131}“The Crisis: Coastal Land Loss is a Loss for All.”
• How cultural values and belief systems (ideology) may determine our relation to nature
• Environmental sustainability, extinction and catastrophe
• Development, globalization, capitalism and the environment
• The sense of place and local ecologies
• Animal consciousness
• Environmental ethics

I selected *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* (2011), by Timothy Clark, as the primary theoretical textbook for its brevity, clarity, useful definitions, and ease of approach. While readers which compile primary interventions, such as *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, edited by Laurence Coupe, or *The Ecocriticism Reader*, edited by Cheryl Glofelty, would have been my first choice, my experience at ULM had shown me that these might present too much of a reading load. I have the greatest respect for the native intelligence and hard work of many of my students. But the fact remains that, through no fault of their own, many of them arrive at our doors underprepared, which takes many years to overcome. Thus, while I considered having the course address theory alone, as might be customary at some universities, particularly at the PhD level, I decided that, given our particular program, and the lack of exposure to a broad range of literary texts of the student population, a course which integrated literary and theoretical works would be best. Indeed, at one point I had to reduce the reading because some students complained to my department head that the load was too demanding.

For the literary texts, I selected from British, American, and World Literature because I wanted the students to make connections across the globe and mitigate the parochialism that already plagues them. The primary texts included British Romantic poetry by William Wordsworth and John Clare, journals by Dorothy Wordsworth, *Walden* (1854) by Henry David Thoreau, *The Monkey-Wrench Gang* (1975) by Edward Abbey, *Ceremony* (1977) by Leslie Marmon Silko, *Disgrace* (2000) by J.M. Coetzee, *The Hungry Tide* (2006) by Amitav Ghosh, and *Bayou Farewell* (2004) by Mike Tidwell. I selected these for a variety of reasons: they offered provocative explorations of our relationship to nature; they were, in several cases, seminal works of ecocentric literature; and finally because I thought they would be accessible and interesting to my students.\(^\text{132}\)

I emphasized literary texts, rather than the non-fiction traditionally associated

\(^{132}\)While deciding which texts to include, I reviewed a graduate course I had taken myself, and also the syllabi posted at the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE). While a great many options were on offer there, my selections came down to evaluating how much I could ask the students to read (length and complexity of work), how much preparation I would have to undertake (I teach a 4/4 load, and often a four preparation load), and how fundamental I thought the readings were to the field of study, given that this was likely the only course the students would ever take on the topic. Thus, for instance, while Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* was tempting, I was hesitant to include speculative fiction in this first teaching attempt, preferring to emphasize the realist tradition. For sample ASLE syllabi, see “Sample Syllabi.”
with ecocriticism, for several reasons. As mentioned, our students simply needed more exposure to literature, due to the limited variety of our course offerings, including preparation for their MA comprehensive exams. Second, I was familiar with the readings and confident that they would generate the kinds of conversations I wanted to stimulate. Third, I considered that the selected texts raised key issues in ecocritical studies as well, or sometimes better than, many non-fictional readings; Buell, for instance, in Chapter Three of *The Environmental Imagination* argues that literary texts which dislocate ordinary or “realist” perception and place demands on the imagination in fact bring us closer to the “object-world.” This is not to say that historical or technical accounts are irrelevant, only that for this particular class they would have been less effective. Third, given that our students had little exposure to theory of any kind, I suspected that teaching a strictly theoretical and non-fictional course would pose another level of difficulty that would distract substantially from the topic. Fourth, non-fictional ecocritical texts, I worried, tended to appeal more to those who were already interested in the topic, a predisposition I could not count on, and thus the students might resist such an intense focus over a semester. Fifth, ecocentrism—as Clark discusses—has been accused of being the province of the middle-class elite and side-stepping problems of how social justice and environmental issues might come together in common cause. Given that many of our students are from an underprivileged background, and since this was my first time teaching the course, I felt that I was not yet well-informed enough to know which non-fictional readings would address this issue most effectively; I thought that the fictional texts I chose brought this issue to the table quite pointedly.

Clark’s text was supplemented with other theoretical excerpts which I provided, as described below. Students signed up, on a rotating basis, to give a fifteen-minute oral presentation on the theoretical reading for the day, accompanied by a 750 word summary; thus each student gave two presentations during the semester. Two exams and a research paper on one of the literary texts were also required. The students posted their summaries to our Moodle page, and were invited to post any other notes to share. All notes were accessible throughout the duration of the course for other students to use for exam review and resources for writing their papers. This strategy has worked well for me in courses where the content is challenging: students are less intimidated because they have review materials; they learn how to improve their work by seeing that of their peers; and it requires active learning rather than relying on the professor to provide the answers.

Because this was the first time I had taught such a course, I wasn’t sure what the students already knew. For the first day of class, I assigned the Introduction and Chapter 1 from Clark, and a short writing assignment. Clark introduced several key ideas that offered the students some springboards: anthropocentrism versus biocentrism, reform environmentalism versus radical, and the history of incompatible meanings of the word “nature” or “natural.” I asked the students before class to respond to the following questions in a 1-2 page informal written response:
This assignment proved to be a very effective way to start the semester. I began by sharing some of my own personal experiences with nature, which really helped the students open up about their own. One of the interesting revelations was that, despite being a bookish scholar, I had had much more exposure to outdoor activities than my students. I spent my childhood in rural New Mexico, where camping and hiking were regular family activities, and in Puerto Rico, where we lived a short five-mile drive from several pristine and underpopulated beaches. Besides weekly swimming and snorkeling excursions, my father would organize exploratory walks and bike rides around the island with groups of friends; when I was twelve, I participated in a walk across the breadth of Puerto Rico, through the Cordillera Central from Arecibo to Ponce. I’m proud to this day to say I beat my father and walked a total of thirty-three miles out of fifty-two. Both my parents, who were Peace Corps volunteers in rural Colombia, are retired educators, and my father especially was concerned to inculcate in me a sense of environmental responsibility from an early age, such as collecting aluminum cans and turning off all lights when one left a room. Ours was a low consumption household.

By contrast, most of my students either were from an urban environment, or else had lifestyles that eschewed much outdoor activity. Several of them commented on parental influence as a controlling factor in their relationship to nature. Others pointed out the emphasis on Louisiana as “Sportsman’s Paradise,” in which the environment is regarded as existing for human consumption and entertainment. What stood out was that most of them felt that while during childhood nature was very present and important to them, as they moved into adulthood that relationship had been mainly left behind. In hindsight, Hodges observes,

I don’t find it surprising that we were close to nature when we were younger. As little children, we are fascinated by the unknown and

133 Unfortunately, this assignment was handwritten, and I returned the work to the students, so I cannot offer any direct citations.
134 “Gals Lead Finishers in Marathon Walk.”
we apply our experiences and reactions as a general principle to everything. As we grow older, we are conditioned to the teachings of our surroundings, which are more times than not human-centered. The fact that we opened up with a discussion about our relationship to nature was essential in my identification as a part of the problem and my transition to becoming a part of the solution. Because I had not been educated on environmental issues, I felt that I was not connected to the problem, but more of a bystander witnessing an environmental emergency. After gaining knowledge on these issues, I became conscious of my habits like wasting a lot of paper, water, plastic, and energy. I was also motivated to change because I not only want the best for my children but I want them to be the best version of themselves, which includes being able to connect with, and be responsible for, the world around them, not just the human life.\footnote{Breitenbach, email interview.}

Adam Breitenbach added the following observation:

Nearly three years have passed since my first interaction with Dr. Jana Giles as a first-semester English graduate student in her Ecocriticism course, and I would strongly assert that the experience has had a lasting impact on my overall understanding of humankind’s relationship with natural world. Reading through my introductory assignment in the course and recollecting our initial discussions, I realize that many of my statements reflected a tremendously self-centered view of nature, more obviously as I discuss the aim of environmental preservation as an act of self-preservation, and more subtly as I mention the pleasure I get from a nice walk in the park. It wasn’t until I read the great diversity of texts that Dr. Giles selected that I was faced with this realization, and my perception changed.\footnote{Hodges.}

As these comments reveal, asking students to begin the semester reflecting on their personal experience helps them frame their subsequent readings explicitly in relation to their own lives. While as teachers we may assume that readers will naturally make personal connections to a literary text, these often remain unconscious or inarticulate without the explicit invitation to reflect deliberately on them. Our first meeting turned out to be very emotional class, and created a strong bond for our small group.\footnote{Another early assignment was to watch, outside of class, Al Gore’s documentary An Inconvenient Truth (dir. Guggenheim, 2006). We did not spend enough time discussing the film because I wrongly predicted that the students would find it persuasive. Rather than delay the schedule with an extended discussion of the film, I elected to move on in the syllabus and think about how I would do it differently in a future version of the course.}
Clark’s *Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* begins with the Romantics, so I adopted his approach and initiated our literary readings with selections from William and Dorothy Wordsworth and John Clare. I supplemented Clark with chapters from Carolyn Merchant’s *The Death of Nature* and Raymond Williams’s “The Green Language” on Wordsworth and Clare from *The Country and the City*. Merchant’s ecofeminist text examines how the ideology subtending the Scientific Revolution sanctioned a mechanistic world view which encouraged the exploitation of nature, unbounded commercial expansion, and the subjugation of women, who had traditionally been associated with the state of nature. In addition to setting the context for the Enclosure Movement, which energized the British Romantic interest in nature, her book’s concern with the historical association between women and nature was useful for considering the contrast between the creation and reception of William’s poetry versus Dorothy’s journals. We discussed, for example, how in “Tintern Abbey” William infantilizes his sister as remaining in the relationship to nature which he left behind as a boy, no matter how nostalgic he feels about that childhood self. He thus equates her with the material, earthly world while the mature Wordsworth has moved on to the transcendental sublime which uses nature as a means to access man’s telos as an end in himself. Wordsworth similarly romanticizes the poor as closer to nature.

Brasher reflects on how Wordsworth’s attitude resonates with popular cultural perceptions of the American South today:

> Wordsworth equates nature with childhood, suggesting naivety and ignorance, which is still an idea in effect today. While nature is considered admirable and even venerable during childhood, adulthood rejects the idea that nature is an entity in itself and not something to be consumed. It is interesting that the rest of the country, and even the world, connects the South with nature, spurred by popular television shows such as *Duck Dynasty* and *Swamp People*. These shows play on the favored (and stereotypical) idea that Southerners are “backwoods rednecks” who find sport in the woods and water while wielding guns and other weaponry. We are seen as one with nature, but the result is that this intimate relationship with nature indicates backwardness and stunted growth as seen by the ignorant antics and commentary displayed. This equation of the South with nature in popular media suggests that nature is an anthropocentric resource to be exploited by ignorance and backwardness, rather than a biocentric one which sees it as a being to be revered and protected.

Brasher’s connection between British Romantic poetry and contemporary reality television demonstrates how literature and culture of the past shares continuities with the present, and how these different media nevertheless serve the

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138 Harrison.
139 Brasher.
same function of transmitting cultural values to their audiences. Wordsworth was famous from the 1820s, and was named Poet Laureate in 1843, arguably reaching at least a proportionally large audience in comparison to the two television shows. Although fewer people may read Wordsworth today outside of classrooms, nevertheless his influence is perhaps immeasurable at this point, and arguably can be discerned through the continuation of Western values like those revealed, or fabricated, in *Duck Dynasty* or *Swamp People*. It’s these sorts of insights like Brasher’s which should be mobilized to defend the relevance of teaching literature and the humanities. Regardless of the media, cultural values are carried across places and times and therefore should be examined diachronically as well as synchronically.

To Wordsworth’s Romanticism as Kantian idealism we contrasted John Clare’s more biocentric approach. Clare’s work presents the “dispossession of labor by capital” caused by the Enclosure Movement, and a poetic “green language” of nature that would express the feelings of all things, not only of humanity. Timothy Clark, however, points to the difficulties Clare and his advocates, such as Jonathan Bate, raise regarding the question whether literature can and should be regarded as a vehicle for political action: “The most challenging question for the eco-romantic reading of Clare could be: how far is the celebration of the poetic as a kind of green psychic therapy the wishful illusion of an industrial consumerist society rather than a site of effective opposition to it?” Because this problem arose in a very pointed manner at the end of this course, I will return to this question when I discuss the student responses to the course overall.

We moved on to American Romanticism and Transcendentalism and excerpts from *Walden*, supplemented by Leo Marx’s “The Machine in the Garden,” and selections from Lawrence Buell’s *The Environmental Imagination*. Marx explores how American literature from 1840-60 was significantly impacted by rapid industrialization. During and after this time period, American writers increasingly began to depict “the machine as a shocking intruder upon a fantasy of idyllic satisfaction.” Buell’s text was less accessible to the students, though his notion of an environmentally oriented text as one in which the nonhuman environment requires us to recognize that human interest is not the only legitimate interest is an important one. However, the students had trouble coming to grips with Thoreau’s self-relinquishment and desire for intimacy with nature on its terms. Our discussion tended to focus on the economic, rather than naturalistic aspects of his text, troubled as they were by his hectoring tone on the value of retreating to nature when his own temporary escape was a symptom of his privilege. Valerie Upshaw recalls that *Walden* sparked an interesting discussion about the availability of nature to the wealthy versus the working class. Thoreau was able to experience

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140 Williams 138.
141 Clark 23.
142 Marx.
nature as he did because he could afford to; however, the working class, then and now for the most part, were concentrated in the city far removed from nature and did not have the means to experience it as Thoreau did.\textsuperscript{144}

Given, however, that the goal was to take on a broad set of issues regarding our relationship to nature, including class, the conversation was productive.

We turned to Abbey's \textit{The Monkey-Wrench Gang}. One particularly strong research paper, by Adam Breitenbach, investigated the extent to which Abbey was critical of saboteur environmentalism, arguing that the author should not be conflated with his characters. Breitenbach wrote, “Though the four characters do have an undeniable love for their natural world, they [present] numerous contradictions to the embodiment of a person wholly concerned with the environment. For example, the group drains harmful oil onto the land, destroys heavy equipment in the waters, and starts numerous fires which could lead to larger scale destruction.”\textsuperscript{145} While I was impressed with Breitenbach’s research and argumentation, I was also surprised at the class’s general hostility towards the outlaw saboteurs. \textit{The Monkey-Wrench Gang}, as Buell explains, and Breitenbach mentions in his paper, helped energize the early radical phase of the EarthFirst! Movement. According to Buell, while Abbey wrote the preface to founder Dave Foreman’s how-to manual for EarthFirst!,\textsuperscript{146} \textit{Ecodefense} (1985), and appeared at the organization’s rallies, the novel was his most influential contribution, making it “one of a very few texts in U.S. literary history to have exerted a demonstrable ‘real-world’ environmental impact, whatever one thinks about that impact, or about the relevance of an impact yardstick to judgments of artistic merit.”\textsuperscript{147} Since the late 1970s, however, it has become clear that left-green efforts to distinguish between carefully targeted sabotage and terrorism proper and to turn the ecoterrorist label against state and corporate violence against environment failed miserably before 9/11; and furthermore that this happened despite repeated insistence on the left that Eco militants sought to target property and not people, and consensus on both sides—including even Senator Inhofe—that no human death had yet resulted from such activity, at least in the United States.\textsuperscript{148}

I read the students’ resistance to the saboteur characters as due to an admirable respect for law and order, but also the result of the general shift away from counterculture political movements and youth activism since the 1970s. Students

\textsuperscript{144}Upshaw.
\textsuperscript{145}Breitenbach, “\textit{The Monkey-Wrench Gang} and Environmental Radicalism.”
\textsuperscript{146}EarthFirst! is a radical environmental advocacy group begun in 1979 which takes direct action in contrast to what they regard as the selling-out of mainstream environmental groups. See “EarthFirst!”
\textsuperscript{147}Buell, “What Is Called Ecoterrorism” 154.
from this region are not, compared to some parts of the country, comfortable with the idea of political protest. They were also nonplussed by the rampant machismo of the main characters, one of whom is a Vietnam veteran. Here also I could discern—and tried to explain without justifying—a wide generational chasm between I, who have been exposed to many post-Civil Rights, post-Vietnam, post-Watergate novels and films from the 1970s featuring counterculture macho heroes, and my students, who have had little exposure to them. The fact that I am not an Americanist by training may partly explain why I did not anticipate their response. Abbey’s novel was a challenge to them on many cultural levels. In retrospect, I wish I had pushed them harder on the implied question Abbey raises of how best to motivate an apathetic populace on the importance of environmental issues, and what forms of intervention might be most effective. Breitenbach reflects on the influence reading Abbey had on him:

Edward Abbey became one of my favorite authors, and I often find myself thinking in awe of his autobiographical _Desert Solitaire_ for its powerful, humble, and certainly non-traditional approach to nature-writing. Reading his memoirs made me realize the fundamental flaw with my perception of nature— that, like Wordsworth and Thoreau, my appreciation for it came from the satisfaction and sustenance I gleaned from it. On the other hand, Abbey’s admirable relationship with nature stemmed neither from self-satisfaction nor preservation, but from a deep-seated sense of symbiotic respect.¹⁴⁹

I originally chose _The Monkey-Wrench Gang_ rather than _Desert Solitaire_ because I wanted to focus on fiction, and to confront the students with the question of direct action in service of protecting the planet. Including both texts by Abbey might better provide a more complete vision of his nature writing, and incite productive conversations about how to approach environmental solutions in times of crisis.

Having examined white male writers, we turned to feminist Native American with Leslie Marmon Silko’s _Ceremony_ (1977). Like _The Monkey-Wrench Gang_, it takes place in the American desert West, offering an ecological counterpoint to Louisiana’s lush riverine habitats. Silko’s novel parallels the need for healing of a Laguna Pueblo Indian veteran of World War Two with the need for healing the land which has been mined for uranium, and the Native community as a whole, which has succumbed to self-destruction in the face of centuries of oppression.

Here was the added challenge of familiarizing the students with the different values of Native culture which are not represented in Clark, although he has chapters dedicated to “The Inherent Violence of Western Thought” and “Language Beyond the Human.” I chose the chapter entitled “The Problem of Creation” from _God Is Red_ by Vine Deloria, Jr., which explains that while Christianity views creation as an event, Native culture regards it as an ecosystem present

¹⁴⁹ Breitenbach, email interview.
in a particular place. While Native peoples do not conceive of their deities anthropomorphically, Christianity does, leading to the corollary that when man falls from grace, the rest of nature also falls out of grace with God. As a result, Christianity has conceived of the natural world as the abject other, and the transcendent afterlife, cleansed of material impurities, as the true goal for the saved. As I expected, given our location in the Bible Belt, this chapter proved to be one of the most provocative, yet highly productive. The students were admirably willing to engage Deloria’s challenging ideas, and rethink their own beliefs without necessarily abandoning them. For instance, Hodges writes:

If you had asked me before or even during the class if I had planned to get others involved in recycling or environmental issues, my answer would have been “What’s the point?” However, my education and awareness, especially my participation in this course, has caused me to see that my relationship with nature needs work, especially as a Christian. For me, Genesis is not an excuse to rape or abuse nature, but to respect nature as God’s creation just like human beings.\(^\text{150}\)

In retrospect I wish I had dedicated two class periods to discussing these ideas before going on to the novel.

Because Silko’s novel also involves medicine men, and a woman, Ts’eh, who guide the protagonist, Tayo, through his healing ceremony, as well as ideas of witchcraft, I included Merchant’s chapter on the association of nature as disorder with witches and nature as nurturing with virgins. This material proved mesmerizing, especially because most students are not familiar with the historical and ideological contexts behind the European witch hunts of the early modern period. In combination, these texts offered multiple entryways to think about the power of storytelling, that is, discourse in its many forms, to heal and to destroy. We also considered again the association of the feminine with the life-giving but abject, and the masculine with intellectual achievement but also its concomitant destructive tendencies. These polarities are expressed in *Ceremony* by the contrast between the power of the mountain, embodied by Ts’eh, and the power of the European-American atomic bomb, first tested at the Trinity Site merely thirty years before the novel’s publication. Brasher writes,

This novel was easily my favorite because it was the first time I was confronted with the idea of nature being a part of identity and the effect war has on that identity. During war, Native American soldiers especially are fundamentally distanced from their mutual relationship with the land and their belief that they are connected with the earth. War inherently strips away this bond with the earth by calling for mass annihilation of the earth and of people. While the American Indian soldiers do, at least temporarily, become a

\(^{150}\)Hodges.
part of the collective body of the military and do feel as if they are established in white society, they are doing so at the expense of the very crux of their identity. Tayo is conflicted by his actions during the war; if everyone and everything are interconnected, then his hand in the destruction of the land and its people has a direct and destructive effect on his sense of self.\footnote{Brasher.}

_Ceremony_ was by far the most popular literary text we read, and the most successful in provoking student empathy for both the earth and its people, and generating curiosity about non-Western relationships to nature.

After these American texts, we turned to contemporary world literature. With J.M. Coetzee’s post-apartheid South African novel, _Disgrace_, we explored how the protagonist, David Lurie, instrumentalized the “other”: black Africans, women, and animals. Coetzee challenges the transcendental assumptions underlying key Romantic ideas, promoted by Lurie as a Wordsworth scholar, and the presumed dominance of the white patriarchal economic order. _Disgrace_ additionally required the students to think differently about animal selfhood, ending with a very controversial scene in which Lurie allows a dog who loves him to be put down. Although for lack of time I did not include Coetzee’s well-known “The Lives of Animals,” an essay in the guise of fiction on the subject of animal rights from his novel _Elizabeth Costello_, such a pairing would have been beneficial.\footnote{See Giles, “Of Gods and Dogs.”}

Amitav Ghosh’s _The Hungry Tide_ similarly considers animals and the environment, but brings into play the natural disaster of the cyclones in the vast Sundarban mangrove forest in the Bay of Bengal, which historically have killed hundreds of thousands of people. On the one hand, the Sundarbans are the last refuge of the Bengal tiger, an endangered species which preys on the local human inhabitants. The forest is also home to the rare Irrawaddy or Orcaella dolphin, considered a vulnerable species. On the other hand, the novel tells the tale of the Morichjhapi Incident of 1979, in which Bangladeshi refugees from the 1964 East Pakistan genocide who were resettled in India made their way back to the Sundarbans. The government of West Bengal besieged them and then forcibly removed them, killing anywhere from two people to one thousand.\footnote{Bhattacharya.} The novel presents, but does not resolve, the competing needs of the animal and human residents, and emphasizes our mutual vulnerability before the power of nature.\footnote{See Giles, “Can the Sublime Be Postcolonial?”}

This novel also resonated with the students, especially Upshaw who wrote her research paper on it. However, given their little knowledge of the Indian subcontinent, they experienced a much steeper learning curve in terms of settling
into the reading. This was not the case with *Disgrace*, a much shorter novel which focalizes the narration on the very personal experiences of a white, male, bourgeois protagonist; indeed, David Lurie’s problem, in a nutshell, is that he is too detached from South Africa as a local ecology and culture.

The theme of the river delta offered a natural transition to our final text, the non-fiction *Bayou Farewell*, which exposes the Louisiana wetlands crisis. With this reading, I had hoped to turn our discussion towards local concerns of immediate pressing interest, particularly in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, which had occurred only seven years before and was still fresh in people’s minds. Tidwell’s is a powerful exploration of Cajun country, where he discovers that while Louisiana contains 25% of America’s coastal wetlands, comprising approximately three million acres, they are disappearing at the rate of an area the size of Manhattan every ten months. Yet few Americans are aware of this impending disaster, including many in Louisiana.\textsuperscript{155}

Generally speaking, I thought the class was successful, although it depends on what outcome one wants. The students definitely were engaged with the literary works and made significant strides towards understanding the many gender, race, class, religious, and other ideologies attached to our relationship to the environment. I was also very proud when three of them—Breitenbach, Upshaw, and Stephanie Baer, were chosen to present at ULM’s annual Student Research Symposium, and also a graduate student joint conference with neighboring Louisiana Tech; Breitenbach took first place on both occasions.\textsuperscript{156}

On the other hand, my activist agenda (for I confess to loving the planet and not wanting to move to a space station), only somewhat unspoken, was not fulfilled to my personal satisfaction at the time. Especially when we got to *Bayou Farewell* the primary reaction was defeatist. I had rather idealistically imagined that the students would be galvanized into outrage and perhaps even political engagement by Tidwell’s text. Instead, they felt overwhelmed by the enormity of the problem, and revealed the deep cynicism among the state residents about the Louisiana political process, perhaps unsurprising given its political history. About this they were surprisingly frank. Breitenbach explains retrospectively:

> I was fortunate enough to have read Mike Tidwell’s *Bayou Farewell* as an incoming freshman undergraduate student seven years prior to this course. The book, a summer reader for all incoming freshman to be discussed in a required orientation class, was only two years old at the time, and we had only just starting discussing it during my first week when Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans. Even before this tragic occurrence, the book revealed a grim prognosis for Louisiana’s coastal wetlands. I remember the temperament of that freshman class being similar to that of our Ecocriticism class

\textsuperscript{155}Tidwell 6.

\textsuperscript{156}“Winners of ULM’s 13th Annual Student Research Symposium announced;” “15th Annual Louisiana Tech University and University of Louisiana at Monroe Graduate Conference.”
many years later – defeat. This was in part, as Dr. Giles says, due to the chronic cynicism borne from generations of our state’s political corruption and inoperativeness. Also, Tidwell’s depiction of the severity of the problem, coupling scientific facts and statistics with the deep emotional toll on the area’s people, came across as far more disheartening rather than inspiring.\textsuperscript{157}

Clearly, the scale of the erosion of the Louisiana coastline seems so unstoppable that the only possible reaction appears to be helplessness. I admit to feeling this way myself many days. Yet, while we did not actively investigate possible solutions, time having run short, some are being explored,\textsuperscript{158} and anyone interested would be capable of learning more if they chose.

Indeed, the question of how one becomes an agent of change or believes in one’s agency runs deeper than any single course can reveal. Hodges discusses how questions of activism are deeply imbricated with a sense of personal power or powerlessness:

At the time of the course, I do agree–as a personal testimony–that there was a sense of hopelessness. However, my sense of hopelessness did not solely concern economics, politics, or environmental issues. In my opinion, my sense of hopelessness concerning environmental activism was less about external issues and more about a sense of voicelessness that seemed to result from my socio-economic status and racial identity. Looking back, I see that this feeling originated during my undergraduate studies when I realized that I was underprepared for not only college, but life. This was a strong distinction from my high school years where I was overly prepared when compared to my classmates. For the first time, I realized that with all of the experiences and opportunities that I had had as a result of my mother’s hard work, I was still underexposed to culture and academia. As a result, I was intellectually insecure when comparing myself to other students. I did not connect this feeling to my socioeconomic status and racial identity until my senior year at an honors reception where a white businessman insinuated to me that even though I was an honor student who earned two bachelor’s degrees within five years of graduating high school, the fact that I am black, a woman, and a single mother was an extreme disadvantage to my success. Therefore, the feeling of unpreparedness and underexposure combined with the idea that I was disadvantaged because of my socioeconomic status, gender, and race not only overwhelmed me, but made me feel powerless to change anything, even my life. The fact that there were only a handful of blacks in my graduate program reinforced this idea.

\textsuperscript{157}Breitenbach, email interview.
\textsuperscript{158}“Louisiana Coastal Wetlands: A Resource At Risk.”
I often think that these feelings are also linked to the fact that American society conditions us to be better than others rather than the best version of ourselves. Because of this, we develop insecurities because we chart our progress by looking at others instead of reviewing the personal progress that we have made. It was not until I was able to identify and articulate the source of voicelessness in my life, realize that I had something to offer that no one else could, and connect to those around me to whom I felt intellectually inferior as well as give and receive encouragement from them that there came a change. My academic advisor, Dr. Jana Giles, made a huge difference in my life because she worked with me, gave me verbal affirmation, and pushed me to reach my full potential. I think that to counteract voicelessness, which shuts us down, we should open up and expose ourselves to new, productive experiences, people, and cultures. Although finding my voice was a dark, frustrating process, connecting with those who are different from me, whether racially, financially, or physically, allowed me to have confidence in my intelligence and skills because I realized that we could help each other. Because I had missed out on so much, I could not have overcome this alone. I definitely needed more step-by-step guidance than the other graduate students in certain aspects. At this point in my life, I am able to think independently and effectively articulate my thoughts to others. Any time we perceive ourselves as voiceless we will fail to have any sense of activism regardless of the circumstances, even if we are knowledgeable concerning the matter. For this reason, the question for me at that time was not can I contribute or promote change for my community and peers, but what’s the point in trying.  

Breitenbach points to the need for a large-scale environmental education:

Considering this course as a study of the budding Ecocriticism movement, it, at least in my opinion, was tremendously successful. However, with regard to this course being an outlet for inspiring students to take action, I’d say it was somewhat less successful. I strongly agree with Dr. Giles in that a more thorough understanding of our region’s unique ecosystem and the man-to-nature relationship as a whole is crucial to the sustainability of our environment, both on a local and global scale. But, for this message to truly resonate, we must expand its outreach far beyond a small group of twentysomething English graduate students whose post-degree ambitions may be less flexible than a younger audience. While incorporating Bayou Farewell as a Freshman reader was an excellent start (though, to my knowledge, a title of similar topic hasn’t been used since), I believe that an eco-centered class driven by activist motivation should be
taught early in a student’s collegiate career, and should survey ways in which students can incorporate environmental preservation into their desired fields, whether they be science, technology, humanities, etc. Perhaps doing this would inspire a larger audience of more diverse academic minds.

I couldn’t agree more with Breitenbach’s observation that environmental issues should be taught often and early, and from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. Yet it remains a challenge for me to understand the students’ sense of political apathy regarding environmental issues, which only mirrors the larger American population. I cannot blame them for absorbing the models that most adults in our country offer them. At the same time, I have mixed reactions to their proposed possible solutions to addressing environmental issues in higher education.

A constant frustration I experience, regardless of the course topic, is the difficulty in encouraging students to adopt a more active approach towards their own learning. This includes not only wishing they would explore the readings more carefully, but also applying their research skills to learning independently about news of the day and the world around them. The university can only facilitate adult learners to become the problem-solvers our world needs; it cannot provide all the answers to all problems. At the same time, universities need to do more to provide students with the skills, but more importantly the outlook, of lifelong learning and self-empowerment through intellectual growth. Across the United States today there is great pressure at all levels of education to provide a complete set of life skills that are often not taught at home or in the larger culture. Yet teachers will never be able to fulfill all the needs of all students, nor will educational institutions be able to provide all forms of financial or psychological support. In contrast to these pressures, there is an opposite movement to turn higher education into vocational-technical training which eschews the need for those “soft skills” that the humanities have allegedly traditionally taught. American education is, at the moment, in a state of incoherence (I prefer that term to “disruption”).

Reading over the students’ comments several years later, it is clear that what would have moved them to feel more empowered would have been more hands-on or practical projects. Upshaw generously suggests:

Though handing students information, be it practical or theoretical, both of which I believe are valuable to this discussion, will save precious class time, assigning students a focused research assignment where they can discover this information for themselves will allow them to “own” the information and hopefully galvanize them into a more proactive approach to the problem because they won’t see it as one huge problem presented all at once but rather several small problems to be encountered and overcome one-by-one just as they
found them in their research. I would also suggest a class project. If not something hands-on such as starting a recycling drive on campus (like we tried to do with Sigma Tau Delta), then something more ideas-based like talking with our student representatives and getting them involved. Even if we weren’t able to accomplish something in that one semester, we could have possibly started the conversation on the campus as a whole.  

On the one hand, I see the value in such an approach, which I took when I taught the recycling paper in freshman composition. Integrating contemplation and action would undoubtedly have provided a valve for relieving the pressure built up by a semester of readings which depicted the problem but no practical solutions.

On the other hand, student calls for more concrete tasks raise the question of what approach one should take regarding graduate education in a literature department. I return to Clark’s question regarding John Clare: “how far is the celebration of the poetic as a kind of green psychic therapy the wishful illusion of an industrial consumerist society rather than a site of effective opposition to it?” Clark 23. This question lies at the heart of a current debate in higher education, the utility and relevance of the humanities in general, and literature in particular. I certainly think that literature is flexible enough, powerful enough, and culturally meaningful enough to offer opposition to systemic oppression on its own, without having to embellish it with hands-on projects, even if that is not immediately evident to students during the semester. The influence of The Monkey-Wrench Gang on a generation of environmental activists of all stripes is a case in point, and the students missed the irony that, of all the texts we read, Abbey’s offers the most direct call-to-action and specific strategies which could easily be modified, yet was also the one they resisted the most. One idea to facilitate deeper consideration of this problem would be to ask students to come up with an alternative list of interventions that would be less drastic, yet as or more effective, than the saboteurs’ actions. Those could range from actions that individuals would take (recycling, driving hybrid cars, reducing their consumption levels, participating in petitions, etc.) to policy-making decisions (the list is long here). Yet I suspect that, in the end, the problem would have boiled down to the same: the challenges are tough and require more sacrifice than currently some are able and others are willing to make. Abbey’s book offered extreme actions because small gestures and lip-service just didn’t seem to be enough.

Another way I have found to mitigate the difficulty students have in connecting literature to the “real world,” and which I would implement in future iterations of this course, is to ask students to reflect on why they are studying literature,

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160 Upshaw.
161 Clark 23.
162 See, for instance, Baker, Billotte, Preston, and Reisz.
what real-world impact it could or should have, and to write their own “apology for poetry.” Having used this approach in other courses, I have found it to be an excellent exercise in metacognition which forces students to own their field of study and consider how to justify it in the face of cultural disparagement. Rather than immediately capitulate to student demand for other forms of classroom media besides literature, offering assignments like this ask them to think more deeply about why, even if, we should study literature at all, and to consider Buell’s question about the relevance of impact as a measurement of artistic merit, and indeed the much-debated question of whether literature is obligated to provide solutions to any problem.

Regarding graduate study in particular, I would pose the following questions: Should graduate students, unlike freshmen, not be responsible for overcoming their feelings of defeat on their own, without the need for step-by-step guidance from an authority figure? Is not the purpose of graduate education and, in theory, undergraduate education to encourage students to become independent thinkers and problem-solvers? Should one of the roles of the faculty member be to gauge, through assessment devices like seminar participation and research papers, the ability of each student to think critically on his or her own beyond the obvious, in preparation for later judgments that might be required, such as letters of recommendation for further graduate study or employment? My answer to these is “yes.” With or without my class, therefore, it seems that higher education often fails to inculcate a sense of agency in some of those who pass through our halls.\footnote{The reasons for this are probably many; for lack of space I decline to analyze them here.}

My approach to the course design was heavily influenced by my own graduate experience, in which literary primary texts and theoretical secondary texts took the stage. In fact, most faculty do not receive any formal training or on-the-job mentoring in how to teach graduate classes.\footnote{Knoblauch.} We therefore fall back on our personal experience, researching what other faculty do, or sheer invention. Practical approaches were certainly not part of my graduate coursework in literary studies, even if we might talk about some of those, just as we did in our class. Indeed, the higher one goes in graduate studies in English, the more theoretical the approach tends to be. There are good reasons for this: theory offers a critique of the ideological assumptions underpinning our practical actions. By so doing, it allows for a sharper understanding of how the individual is shaped by, and shapes, larger systemic forces. Thus, for example, reading Merchant, one can see that attitudes towards women and nature before and during the Scientific Revolution and the capitalist revolution which accompanied it comprised a kind of feedback loop; Merchant reveals that our individual actions are not independent, but part of a network of power dynamics. Or, one can see in Deloria and Silko how Native ecologies were eclipsed by the imposition of a Christian worldview which abetted the scientific instrumentalism of nature. These approaches are on a scale quite different from grassroots projects such...
as organizing campus recycling because they ask the student to understand the ideological dynamics that have brought us to where we are today—a world in which climate change threatens to eclipse humanity once and for all in the near future.\textsuperscript{165} Of course, both approaches are needed for effective change. My point is that graduate education ought to be focused on higher-order challenges, like ideological critique, since that is a much more difficult level of analysis that usually requires faculty intervention, unlike figuring out where to recycle in one’s town. Even freshmen ought to be able to figure that out, but it is easier for me to accept and understand why they don’t, given the deeply troubling state of public education, and the news media, in the United States.

Furthermore, the role of universities is not necessarily to implement activism, even if individual faculty members may be involved in activism\textsuperscript{166} and academic learning should offer information about a wide range of issues, including possible activism. There are many non-governmental organizations, and government organizations, that exist for anyone to participate in, or even start on their own, including some which collaborate with universities. The purpose of the class was to spur deeper thought in the students, and encourage them to consider what further action might be appropriate for them to take on their own in the future. Faculty are human, too, and often feel a sense of despair when their efforts to foster a greater sense of agency fall on deaf ears. I cannot be personally responsible for each adult student’s willingness or unwillingness to take further action regarding a situation that they, at least philosophically, believe should change.

To the extent that two of the invited respondents indicated that they did go on to implement change, on the international and local level, I regard the class as a success regarding concrete action. Although Hodges felt powerless at the time of the class, she was subsequently motivated to incorporate what she had learned into change at the local level in her home town of Tallulah, Louisiana:

> Because of this class, I teach my children to recycle. Instead of throwing uneaten scraps of food away, we put them outside for the birds. I have also gotten my church to recycle our Sunday service program and plan to extend this practice when I am financially stable. Additionally, as a school teacher, I plan to incorporate recycling in my classroom. However, in Tallulah we have no recycling program. In order to recycle, we have to take initiative with the understanding that we do not have the communal support to change the way that we care for the environment. In addition, if one does decide to make a change by recycling or “going green,” it not only takes more effort, but costs money because it is the individual’s responsibility to transport the materials to the recycling plant or to make the necessary changes to their lifestyles. As a result, the cost-benefit analysis

\textsuperscript{165}Jamail; Zielinski.

\textsuperscript{166}Many faculty, however, do find themselves moving from contemplation to action. See, for instance, Schimke.
for an individual in this type of community registers that there are more costs than benefits to caring for the environment because it takes extra time, effort, and money. That said, the few who may be educated in understanding environmental issues and solutions may feel that the small amount of good that they can do for the environment independently is drastically outweighed by the cost and inconvenience.\footnote{Hodges. These points raise the problem of how environmental activism and social justice interrelate. Tallulah is a city of 7,335 located in one of the poorest areas of the nation along the Mississippi River, Madison Parish, LA. The town is 77% African American and 21.5% white. Median household income is $25,300, and the poverty rate is 40.9%. “Tallulah (city), Louisiana.”}

Upshaw also found that her feelings of hopelessness changed over time into a more activist approach in which she took the giant step of joining the Peace Corps:

Though I must admit that I did leave Dr. Giles’ Ecocriticism class feeling overwhelmed by the problems faced by Louisiana and the world in general in respect to nature and the environment, her class did grant me a new understanding and a renewed interest in the world around me. I began to pay more attention to my surroundings and to research on my own various ways to be more proactive in respect to my impact on the environment. A year later I decided to apply for the Peace Corps and was eventually invited to serve as an Environmental Education Volunteer in Nicaragua. Though I was originally hoping for a spot in the TEFL program, I accepted my invitation because I believed I would have a chance to be involved in grassroots movements that could change the way people viewed nature. I owe this choice at least in part to Dr. Giles’ class, and the way she made me rethink my relationship to nature and what I personally could do about the problems facing our environment today.

Nicaragua right now faces many ecological challenges. Deforestation in Nicaragua has caused the country’s forest cover to drop to 40%, and not even the 71 nature reserves are safe from illegal logging.\footnote{Rogers. Citation provided by Valerie Upshaw.} The Nicaragua Interoceanic Grand Canal, a 173 mile project that will cut across Lake Cocibolca and other nature reserves and biospheres, including a beach where sea turtles come to nest, will have an unimaginable impact on the environment and the people of Nicaragua.\footnote{Kraul. Citation provided by Valerie Upshaw.} These are just some of the ecological challenges in the country. As an Environmental Education Volunteer, I spoke to the people in my town daily about issues like deforestation and recycling, even once appearing on a radio station to speak about
the impact of deforestation and the importance of replanting trees. I participated in community projects to grow and transplant trees into barren areas that had been cleared. At the town’s elementary school I taught science, and my student and I created a tree nursery and a vegetable garden to supplement the school’s lunches. And even though I was not supposed to take sides on political matters in my host country, I did talk to my new friends about what they thought of the new canal.

Upon returning to the United States, I have realized that there are few people who know where Nicaragua is, much less who know that there is a canal about to traverse the country. I have kept myself abreast of events there – the canal’s progress, the protests, the ecological surveys – and I have tried my best to inform others as well. I realize now how Dr. Giles must have felt during our Ecocriticism class, but perhaps the spark will take hold in one person and ignite a change. Hopefully one person will want to see for themselves, as I did, and some small change can be affected.  

While Upshaw provides the strongest case for how graduate education in literature, however textual, can lead to action in the “world,” Hodges and Brasher testify to the fact that deeper thinking about ideological and systemic issues also had a positive effect. Hodges writes:

> Because this class made me aware of my human-centered mindset, I determined that I didn’t want my children to grow up unaware of the importance of nature. While I may not participate in any protests or boycotts to promote environmental awareness, I can be the rock that starts the ripples in my community. I will make others aware that we are intricately tied to nature and encourage them to make better choices for our environment. I will begin to change the culture and the conversation in my community concerning environmental issues by being the example for my church, my children, and my students. Without this course to make me aware of these issues, I would still be blind to the effects that we have on nature. As a result, I believe that the more upfront and forward that we become about environmental issues, the more people will become aware. It is my awareness of the situation that has served as my call to action.  

Brasher writes,

> It is fruitless to educate a society about problems and then leave them feeling helpless regarding a solution. While all of the texts

\[170\]Upshaw. My emphasis. It should be added that Upshaw already had some experience in environmental education before she took my course.

\[171\]Hodges.
were enlightening, none of the literature offered a viable plan of action that seemed plausible for low-income and mostly ignored North Louisianans. However, perhaps the most obvious and effective plan would be to educate the masses and reform our perspective of nature. While we are certainly involved with nature in the form of hunting, fishing, hiking, boating, and other recreational activities, we have an inadequate biocentric view of nature. Better environmental education could illustrate the idea of nature being a separate and complete entity in itself, which would propel action to change our relation with the land.\footnote{Brasher.}

While I don’t agree with Brasher that educating people about problems without offering explicit solutions is fruitless, I do understand her perspective. And indeed, as a result of the class, she proposes what the others also regard as the long-term solution: a greater national commitment to environmental education from early childhood onward.

Reflecting on the student feedback, several possible approaches for a future iteration of this course come to mind. One would be to keep the course’s basic principles and structure, but modify the number, length, or choice of readings. Introducing a non-fiction text at the inception of the course that provided an overview of environmental and political conditions to introduce the students to the major issues could set the terms of the debate, although it could take away from the literary focus and direct attention to current policy issues.\footnote{For instance, the recent book by Robert Paarlberg, \textit{The United States of Excess: Gluttony and the Dark Side of American Exceptionalism}, offers trenchant commentary on why the US fails to enact strong policy measures against both climate change and obesity due to its abundant natural resources, political institutions, and particular cultural attitudes.}

By making more room in the curriculum to flesh out those conversations about defeatism, I could have also come up with counter-narratives or assignments to mitigate that feeling on the fly. Whatever their frustrations at the time, since these students do testify to the effectiveness of the course over the long term,\footnote{The student participants here constitute about half the total number of students who took the course, and thus cannot be said to be fully representative. I invited their participation because I have maintained relationships with them after the end of the course.} I feel good about what we accomplished.

To reduce the “despair” factor more quickly, another possible solution would be to teach the course as an interdisciplinary one, in which a range of factors like politics, science, literature, and literary theory could be approached. Certainly by engaging literature in light of environmental issues, the course was already interdisciplinary, as any English course which does more than formalist analysis must be.\footnote{A fact lost on many administrators, librarians, and even faculty, who do not understand that any literature course is fundamentally interdisciplinary when it engages culture, history, economics, science, anthropology, psychology, religion, sociology, philosophy, feminism, critical race studies, and so on. Any course that does more than teach rhetoric and formalist analysis (e.g., prosody) will be, effectively, interdisciplinary to some degree.}

\footnote{Unfortunately, while many universities do encourage explicitly
interdisciplinary courses, others may wish yet are unable to remove obstacles to implementation. For a single professor such as myself to teach such a course would require an enormous amount of class preparation, in my case on top of an already bursting workload, with the added danger that I might make the errors of a non-expert when it comes to selecting materials. To team-teach a course requires that either the faculties’ disciplines sacrifice courses from the regular rotation, or else add electives to the curriculum. The former is undesirable because it diminishes student exposure to disciplinary material when often they need more rather than less. The latter is often impossible given the budget cuts many universities have sustained. Furthermore, electives are just that, as this course itself was, and would not answer the call to engage the population at a consistent and broad level.

A final challenge at public regional universities like my own is that many students are radically underprepared for college, as is substantiated by the educational achievement statistics I cited earlier. While I only have praise for the native intelligence and dedication of most of the students in this particular class, I am all too aware that by and large the level of student preparation is severely lacking, particularly in comparison with their cohort at selective liberal arts colleges or Ivy League universities. What might be considered basic undergraduate training in, say, Platonic idealism, at an elite university which requires philosophy courses may be unavailable at a school like my own where philosophy has been completely eliminated from the curriculum. Thus, when designing the course, I had to take into account the fact that I could not assume much fore-knowledge at all about environment, ideology, or literature beyond whatever exposure they might have had from the popular media and their limited educational preparation.

Regardless of one’s course design, the fact remains that the global environmental challenges we face in the age of the Anthropocene are staggering. Perhaps it is indeed too late to solve them, though we won’t know unless we try. If we are to face these challenges, we have to accept that despair is a natural, predictable response, though it does not have to be the only response. Perhaps what we need more than anything is to develop resilience, agency, and determination, and reminders that, over the course of history, there have been many occasions when small groups of people overcame enormous odds. Teaching has always been one approach to attempting to overcome those odds. At its best, the classroom can

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176The recent term used for the impact of human activity on the planet is the “Anthropocene,” so called to account for the time period when humans began to act as a nonhuman geological force on the planet (Crutzen and Stoermer; see also Chakrabarty 2). It has been characterized as a contemporary version of the sublime, in which we feel overwhelmed by the incalculable cost of global resources (Stoekl 44). Now that the illusion of infinite resources characteristic of the expansion of industrialism, capitalism, and empire has passed, “Why would the human be superior to any other species, given that all species are subject to the same environmental and energetic constraints” (Stoekl 53). I discuss these issues in more depth in my article on The Hungry Tide (“Can the Sublime Be Postcolonial?”), which was in progress as I taught this course. Introducing the concept of the Anthropocene would be another important, and timely, addition to a revised version of the course, although I suspect doing so would not redress the despair factor.
be an invigorating, challenging, affirming, and life-changing space for student and teacher alike. Some pedagogical strategies, however, foster this better than others. I hope that my account can offer useful starting-points and areas of difficulty for those thinking about teaching their own environmental humanities courses. The approach I took, offering the students a broad introduction to environmental issues in literary study, coupled with a survey of seminal British, American, and World literary works, could easily be modified in a variety of ways suitable to a particular place, time, and student population.

Above all, I would encourage prospective teachers to choose texts and assignments and incite discussions that model and encourage agency and engagement over and above complete “coverage” of particular information sets. While it is important to introduce key concepts as a guideline, if these do not strike a chord in the student’s mind then their introduction is less effective. Although my students felt despair at the time of the course, their later reflections and actions reveal a lesson worth repeating: learning does not end with the semester. Sometimes the effects of a class can be realized only after we have had time and space to process our new knowledge in the privacy of our thoughts and on our own schedule. By generating investment in the subject, we are more likely to encourage our students to seek more information on their own accord after they have left our class and, I believe, come closer to meeting the goal of education. And so, I will end by thanking my former students for enthusiastically entering into this ongoing conversation with me. They continue to inspire me, and alleviate the forces of despair.

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In his book *Literature, Geography, and the Postmodern Poetics of Place*, Eric Prieto seeks, as he puts it, “to work toward a stereoscopic melding of theoretical and literary accounts of place” (188). He attempts this in order to articulate a theory of place that encompasses the portrayals and descriptions of place that exist in both philosophical and creative works. For Prieto, place is defined as “any geographical site (of any size, scale, or type) that is meaningful to someone, for whatever reason” (13). His is a broad definition, to be sure, but one that makes clear he is talking about more than simply some physical location. Indeed, he differentiates between place and space, the latter of which seems to comprise simply a geographical area. Place, by contrast, is a geographical area plus some element of personal attachment. The examples of place he uses throughout his book, particularly the *banlieues* outside France’s major cities and the Creole *quartiers* of Patrick Chamoiseau’s *Texaco*, highlight place as an area plus some sort of meaning attached it it, whether corporate or individual.

The works he uses to highlight the different aspects of place vary from Chamoiseau’s novel to Jeff Malpas’s *Place and Experience* to Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnamable*. Beckett seems at first glance a strange choice for a discussion of place, given that his later works are generally marked by a minimal setting. Prieto, though, insists that the minimalist treatment of setting in Beckett’s works privileges place over mere space, as the situs of the characters’ activity sometimes only exists with respect to the meaning the characters attach to it. Similarly, Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopias, spaces with actual, physical existence but also the ability to transcend geography in favor of functionality, points toward the sort of meaning-laden physical area that is the hallmark of Prieto’s understanding of place.

Prieto’s work is most ambitious in its attempt to reconcile philosophical notions of place with the concept of place as it appears in literary works. These sections are where the book sets forth its most ambitious arguments, and these are indeed the parts where the book is most in peril of losing its reader. After all, a book with such a lofty goal as to articulate a complete philosophy of place in fewer than 300 pages would be expected to require some heavy lifting on the part of the reader. The book summarizes the literary works discussed in it sufficient for a reader to understand Prieto’s argument without actually having read the works themselves. Prieto does, however, assume his reader is well-versed in 20th century philosophical and theoretical concepts. To follow Prieto’s argument, a reader would need to have more than a passing understanding of Marxist philosophy, Derridian poststructuralism, and Cartesian anxiety. For
such a reader, though, the book provides a new reading of these concepts and links them in ways that allow for new insights into the nature of physical spaces and the meanings people attach to them.

This book is useful to postmodern studies, particularly as it draws a connection between postmodern philosophy and literary works. For those who may fear that nothing remains of place after poststructuralism, Prieto’s work provides a measure of hope and reassurance that place is indeed alive and well throughout postmodern thought. Even in those works that at first glance seem to prefer space over the more sentimental aspects of place, such as Maurice Blanchot’s essay “The Conquest of Space” and Henri Lefebvre’s La Production de l’espace, discussions of space come very close to discussions of space plus meaning, which, according to Prieto’s definition, would amount to discussions of place. Prieto’s book is most valuable insofar as it examines similar ways of thinking about place in a variety of seemingly disparate works. In bringing together these many works of different literary genres, physical settings, and philosophical priorities, Prieto accomplishes what he set out to do, putting forth, even in fewer than 300 pages, a comprehensive theory of place.

About the Author

Eric Prieto is an associate professor of French and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Santa Barbara. The author of Listening In: Music, Mind, and the Modernist Narrative, he has published widely on literary representations of place and on the relations between music and literature.

[Bio from publisher’s website]

About the Reviewer

Michelle Villanueva is a reader for Kudzu House Quarterly and a candidate for the MFA in Creative Writing – Poetry at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in CALYX Journal, WORK Literary Magazine, The Milo Review and dozens of other print and online publications.
In casual conversation and low-engagement thought, we all tend to think of place as simply a somewhere. The truth, of course, is much richer. Place is origin, haven, point-of-view, springboard, sustenance—the site of many complex energies that flow in and out of us in more ways than we can know. Jeff Malpas’ book, a collection of essays with German philosopher Martin Heidegger’s
thought at their hub, considers some of the philosophical approaches to and implications of place’s role in being.

Malpas holds that Heidegger took space as one of his foundational ideas, and that he used topological terms and images throughout his writings. Malpas’ own place in the essays here is between two mirrors: he uses Heidegger to illuminate the idea of topology in a philosophical sense (rather than the geometrical sense that has broken into popular culture—all those candy-colored diagrams of toruses), while simultaneously using topology to let some light into the always dense thicket of Heidegger’s thought and writings.

In Malpas’ view, place at its most basic establishes relations of inside and outside:

To be located is to be within, to be somehow enclosed, but in a way that at the same time opens us, that makes possible (2).

This impacted, noun-lean language—“that makes possible”—is necessary, to avoid letting the discussion slip back into the static concept of place beyond which Malpas is trying to help us move. Because these essays are topological explorations, Malpas asks that readers be willing to participate in their peregrinations, their journey through the subject, and this includes the dense and abstract language that is the place of precise thinking.

Malpas shows us how, if we recognize the primacy of place in our experiences, our involvement in the world, then we can see how it shapes philosophy. Place, as understood in these essays, is not a simple position, somewhere we stand or be. Rather, it is a dynamic system made up of “an essential mutuality of relation at every level,” and is “both unitary and multiple” (4). Place is that out of which thinking itself emerges, its origin, “that out of which something comes to appearance. [To begin] is to begin in and from out of place.” (14). Philosophy, for its part, “has its origin in any and every place” (15), and considers the place from which its questions arise as “a place that is also the place of our own being” (21). That is to say, philosophy, wonder and being can be considered as one.

This is not a new idea, and has been stated in a multitude of ways. And as Malpas proceeds through his essays the multiple definitions and explications of this idea via Heidegger’s thought can come to resemble the shingles of the nude in Duchamp’s famous painting—overlapping, expanding, shaping. We read, for example, “a place is precisely that which opens up to allow room for what belongs within it,” and in the same paragraph, “The return to place is this the turning toward that which allows for, that which gives room, but also that which withdraws” (19). This intellectual parallax helps us better grasp the points Malpas wants to make.

Heidegger and the Thinking of Place isn’t an ecological text in the simple sense, but Malpas’ reminders to us that philosophical inquiry and being can be considered synonyms means that many of the ideas can justifiably be read in relation to wider ecological concerns. Reading an abstract (topological and ontological) statement such as this—
Circularity, mutuality and multiplicity of elements, rejection of any form of reductionism—these are the key features in any thinking, any form of questioning, that addresses and is attentive to its own placidness (21).

—as being about one’s involvement with the physical environment (which, of course, doesn’t negate its relation to the idea of Being itself) can help us consider on-going pragmatic questions from new angles.

Considering philosophies of space and origin in relation to Heidegger adds a historical tension: Heidegger was a Nazi sympathizer, and can in places be read as having very similar ideas about people (*“das Volk”*) and their deep ties to their homeland. Race and land and destiny were Nazi touchstones, and Heidegger wrote extensively about these, as well. The essay here that most directly addresses these questions is *“Geography, Biology and Politics”* (137–157). Here Malpas reminds us how a love for and deep identification with one’s environment, one’s place, can be tied to a politically conservative, even Fascist philosophy, something to which most of us in this time and place give very little thought. He surveys some of the major historical currents and thinkers—including Friedrich Ratzel, who emphasized the role of the physical environment in shaping a culture, and Jakob von Uexküll, who believed that the biology of those living in an environment shaped their perceptions, a stance Malpas believes fed into anti-Semitism. This survey and discussion serves, in the end, to remind us of how interdependent not just physical man and his environment have always been, but, even more so, that our view of our relationship to our environment can shape political and even racial beliefs.

Malpas goes deeply into Heidegger’s thought to try to show that Heidegger was never so simplminded as to totally embrace National Socialism’s most extreme views in this area. But Malpas is more concerned with (and convincing when) looking into Heidegger’s post WWII philosophical evolution. Malpas identifies an important shift in the later works: whereas in early Heidegger there is a belief in an underlying structure that unifies, he later comes to believe that the underlying truth of our Being in the world—and the world itself—is “a single structure that is unified in and through the mutual belonging together of its components” (27). This is a shift that has definite parallels with modern ecological theory.

Malpas details several unexpected implications Heidegger felt this new view produced:

*The later Heidegger’s apparently weary insistence on the limits in our ability to change the course of the world . . . follows directly from a recognition of the essentially placed character of human being, and the limitation and fragility that follows inevitably from it*” (69).

This implies, among other things, that social and political organization can come about only through “recognition” of what is, rather than through “purposive” action. These examples handily illustrate both the subtleties in Malpas’ arguments and the difficulties we have in trying to both redefine ourselves relative to
our being in the world and in succeeding in our deliberate attempts at effecting changes to right the wrongs we see being done around us. But if we credit the idea that the nature of our thinking and our very being consist of the ways we find of mutually belonging together with the rest of being, then working through the ideas here would be a useful step in attaining that difficult goal.

About the Author
Jeff Malpas is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Tasmania. He is the author of Heidegger’s Topology: Being, Place, World (MIT Press, 2007).

About the Reviewer
W. C. Bamberger is an author, editor and translator. Recent essays have appeared in Palaver (University of North Carolina), The Quint (University College of the North) and Verse (University of Richmond). His translation of two novellas by Paul Scheerbart is forthcoming in the fall of 2015. His most recent novel, A Light Like Ida Lupino, was published in December of 2014. He is currently working on a study of Samuel R. Delany’s American Shore, and an eco-themed novel to be titled Just Another Mirror of Heaven. He lives in Michigan.

Reviews
“A brilliant job….This book constitutes another impressive achievement by Jeff Malpas in reconsidering the importance and sense of place, not only Heidegger’s work, but also more broadly in philosophy itself.”—Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews

Endorsements
“Jeff Malpas’s Heidegger and the Thinking of Place is a powerful companion volume of essays to his earlier Heidegger’s Topology, but can also stand alone as an introduction to the crucial theme of place in Heidegger’s work. Especially powerful is the triptych of essays in the third part on nostalgia, death, and truth, which move from the thinking of place to thinking through place. Malpas’s ongoing dialogue with Heidegger goes to the heart of both thinker’s concerns, and demonstrates Malpas’s ability both to discuss complicated questions clearly and to show the complications in what previously appeared clear.”—Stuart Elden, Professor of Political Geography, Durham University

“Heidegger and The Thinking of Place not only confirms Jeff Malpas as a central interpreter of Heidegger, it reinforces his position as one of the most significant philosophers writing on the concept of place today. Henceforth it will be impossible to work on either ‘topos’ or ‘place’ without talking Malpas’s writings as the point of departure. Malpas works between and across traditions. If philosophy
is to have a future that lifts it beyond the confines of commentary on the one hand or political posturing on the other then it is work by a philosopher such as Jeff Malpas that will show the way.”—**Andrew Benjamin**, Professor of Critical Theory and Philosophical Aesthetics, Director Research Unit in European Philosophy, Monash University

“Almost single-handedly, Jeff Malpas has created a new philosophical topic, that of ‘place’. *Heidegger and the Thinking of Place* far exceeds the bounds of Heidegger exegesis. It is a major work by the most original philosopher working in Australasia today.”—**Julian Young**, Kenan Professor of Humanities, Wake Forest University

*Reviews, Endorsements, and Author Bio from Publisher’s Website.*
Randy Laist’s recent edited essay collection, *Plants and Literature: Essays in Critical Plant Studies*, showcases twelve authors’ insights into the ways that plants impact, inform, and complexify human existence. In these essays, the authors break down often assumed hierarchies within the natural world and explore the agency of vegetal life in literature from the early nineteenth century to the present. Plants often blend into the scenery of a story, and their influence is often overlooked, but these authors bring plants into the critical conversation and challenge readers to empathize with and recognize the presence of these green lifeforms in literature and in our interaction with them in the world. This
group of essays spans two-hundred years of literature, art, drama, film, and other mediums to explore how we understand and interact with the natural world. Randy Laist begins the collection with an introduction, where he states that “plants play a vital role in the experience of being human,” and the authors in this collection explore that interaction in new and exciting ways.

Betsy Winakur Tontiplaphol begins the collection with an essay exploring expressions of Jane Austen’s vegetarian sensibility in her novel, Mansfield Park, followed by Lynne Feeley’s fascinating reading of antebellum journals written by farmers. Feeley reveals how resistance from crops threatened the authority of these Southern planters. Graham Culbertson explores how patterns of wheat growth in the Midwest not only impact the stock market in Chicago but also control the desires of the protagonist in Franks Norris’s The Pit. Ria Banerjee examines how vegetal life resists ordering functions, such as art and education, in works from Virginia Wolfe and Djuna Barnes. Rhona Trauvitch compares Margaret Atwood’s Oryx and Crake with the book of Genesis, drawing parallels on how humans are at odds with their surrounding natural world in both of these creation stories. Stephanie Lim brings a new medium into consideration in her essay, where she discusses killer plant narratives in films from the latter half of the twentieth century. Lim’s examination of these entertainment texts illustrates human fascination with the trope man versus nature. Aubrey Streit Krug ends the collection with an essay considering how agricultural rhetoric treats plant life and its eradication. Krug’s essay draws from a variety of popular culture sources to support her interesting argument. Essays by Akemi Yoshida, Stacey Artman, Ubaraj Katawal, Charolette Pylonser, and Hindi Krinsky are also included in the collection.

Laist’s collection of essays explores the interactions between humans and plant life and blurs some of the lines between those two forms of existence. Readers are left questioning their conceptions of vegetal agency and the impact which plants have in our lives and circumstances. Although the essays cover a wide range of texts, the focus on plant life and its influence in literary narratives and in inhabited spaces is poignant for any readers whose interests verge biology, environmentalism, literature, new media, rhetoric, philosophy, or the natural world. Laist’s collection invites readers to think more critically about plant life and its impact, both in literature and in our daily interaction with the natural world.

About the Author

Randy Laist is Associate Professor of English at Goodwin College. He is the author of Technology and Postmodern Subjectivity in Don DeLillo’s Novels and the editor of Looking for Lost: Critical Essays on the Enigmatic Series. He has also published dozens of articles on literature, film, and pedagogy.

About the Reviewer
Jane is our resident ecofeminist and strict grammatician (someone around here has to be). She’s always on call, reminding us of the right place for a direct object and when we’re describing women as such. She received her BA in English and history from the University of Montevallo and is currently pursuing her M.Ed. in English Language Arts at Auburn University. She enjoys adventures of the outdoor variety, growing food and cooking it, and spending time with her loyal feline, Romeo.

Figure 3: Cover image from Book

Reviewed by Elizabeth Bernstein
The Blue, the Gray, and the Green: Toward an Environmental History of the Civil War, edited by Brian Allen Drake, is the fourth volume in The University of Georgia Press Uncivil Wars series. According to Drake, the essays in this anthology “[b]y both their breadth and their specificity [. . .] show us that the environment weirds the war” (12). This collection weirds the war by expanding “environment” beyond the battlefronts’ natural, built, and arranged landscapes to include nineteenth century visual and literary landscapes, the bodies of animals and vegetation, as well as the geographies of human bodies and minds. Focusing on interactions between and among these many territories destabilizes the narratives Americans have come to accept about the war; old stories are unsustainable in the face of new readings of Civil War-era environments.

Kenneth W. Noe’s essay, “Fateful Lightning: The Significance of Weather and Climate to Civil War History,” insists that the drought that plagued the South over three consecutive summers played a significant role in undermining the Confederacy from within, while the preferred “rich man’s war, poor man’s fight” narrative […] silently and incorrectly presumes stable growing weather, good crops, planter greed, and governmental incompetence” (21). Timothy Silver’s case study of the Black Mountain Boys’ home territory supports Noe’s insistence that Civil War stories must factor in local environments when retelling the Civil War story. In “Yancey County Goes to War: A Case Study of People and Nature on Home Front and Battlefield, 1861-1865,” Silver examines how unusual extreme weather, the “unruly element in our story,” further altered chaotic wartime environments in Appalachian North Carolina and contributed to food scarcity and disease among animals and soldiers, influencing the sorry outcome of Union general George Brinton McClellan’s Peninsula Campaign (62). Examining three battles whose outcomes were determined by the way sound was transmitted through specific environments, Lisa M. Brady applies Carl von Clausewitz’s idea of “friction” to suggest that “[n]ature’s mutable and potentially unpredictable character approximates the role of the individual” on the battlefield, where real war is inevitably more difficult than war on paper (149). Environmental history asks us to engage with the war and its participants in ways that are more sophisticated than Blue/Gray; we must consider non-human nature—weather, animals, microorganisms—as agents, victims, and combatants, too.

Kathryn Shively Meier considers disease as agent during the Civil War, focusing on the ways soldiers practiced self-care by “straggling,” leaving their units temporarily without permission for periods from a few hours to a few weeks to rest or seek clean water, food, or medicinal herbs despite the risk of punishment or humiliation, returning to their ranks physically and mentally healthier. “‘The Man Who Has Nothing to Lose’: Environmental Impacts on Civil War Straggling in 1862 Virginia” asserts that, contrary to the belief of commanding officers, who saw stragglers as cowards, soldiers could straggle while still being loyal and committed to the Confederate cause. Meier’s re-reading of straggling improves the image of misunderstood Confederate soldiers and speaks of truth to power: “Given the uncertain state of scientific knowledge, the men’s expe-
ential, observation-based method of interpreting and managing disease environments may have well been superior to their leaders' understandings" (88). In this anthology, adding the environment to the discussion of the Civil War requires us to reconsider our assumptions about what happened to the male bodies and minds that battled in and with nature; doing so forces us to re-survey our limited territory of expected male behavior.

These expectations sometimes determined the careers of individuals, as Megan Kate Nelson’s article, “The Difficulties and Seductions of the Desert: Landscapes of War in 1861 New Mexico” shows. Nelson re-examines the story of disgraced Maj. Isaac Lynde, who commanded the evacuation of Union forces at Fort Fillmore in New Mexico and led them on a deadly march that resulted in surrender to the Confederates at San Augustin Springs and Lynde’s dismissal from the army. Nelson argues against the prevailing opinion that Lynde was a coward whose actions resulted in his troops’ humiliation by describing how built military landscapes in New Mexico combined with topography, hydrology and climate to create a situation in which retreating soldiers died of heatstroke and thirst. Contemporary reports by Lynde’s subordinate officers reflect their damning views of what the officers interpreted as Lynde’s possibly treasonous behavior, including “his tolerance of women and children at Fillmore (who slowed the pace of the march)” away from the fort (35). Over one hundred women and children evacuated along with the Union soldiers, but no data exists about them; evidently, they were liabilities to be written out of this tale. Nelson concludes, “[W]ar may be waged in the name of politics and ideology, but it is fought by bodies moving through space” (48). Environmental history reads the traces left on the landscape, picking up on stories previously—sometimes purposely—untold.

After the war, reminders of its devastation remained visible on the bodies of the human population and the natural environment, as well as in the American psyche, as Aaron Sachs writes in “Stumps in the Wilderness,” an essay examining nineteenth century literary and visual art references to the American landscape, which were numerous and varied before the war. Sachs focuses on the May 1864 Battle of the Wilderness in Virginia as a cultural turning point that “made Americans consider the collision of humanity, technology, and nature” that limited the meaning of “wilderness” to a bloody, stinking, scorched wasteland (100, 97). Very shortly after the Battle of the Wilderness, Congress established Yosemite Valley, California, as part of the wilderness preservation movement, so, in Sachs’s words, America could “re-create itself through recreation in the wilderness,” a “re-creation” that would not be possible for veterans suffering from what we now call PTSD (103). The Civil War disrupted and polluted the Victorian pastoral with death on an industrial scale that forced Americans looking at depictions of nature post-war to face “that almost all the killing of the war years had been utterly unnatural,” a reckoning with Progress that Sachs suspects brought an end to the tradition of American landscape painting (108). Along with landscape painters, antebellum writers had sometimes idealized the physical world, and the Southern highlands were imbued with especially positive
connotations that lasted long after the war, according to John C. Inscoe. “‘The Strength of the Hills’: Representations of Appalachian Wilderness as Civil War Refuge” is a literary study of works depicting “the wartime moral geography of the Appalachian South,” where wilderness was equated with sanctuary by some but where others “played on that contradiction between natural beauty and human atrocity” (115, 124). An environmental approach to the Civil War gives us a way to read our country’s post-traumatic environmental stress brought on by the collision of humanity, technology, and nature that resulted in unnatural killing of bodies moving through space.

The agribusiness environment was another Civil War battleground, where many Piedmont farmers continued to plant bright leaf tobacco in spite of Confederate need for increased food production. Because of poor hill soils, Confederate taxes-in-kind on some agricultural products, and confiscations, tobacco was more profitable than grain, and the dominion of tobacco endured beyond both the war and Reconstruction, according to Drew A. Swanson, who re-reads the South’s Civil War agricultural story in “War Is Hell, So Have a Chew: The Persistence of Agroenvironmental Ideas in the Civil War Piedmont.” Bright tobacco—and its social, economic, and cultural environments—proved resistant to obvious factors of disruption, succeeded where cotton failed, and became even more profitable after the war, when cultivation spread and consumer markets expanded. The dark side of bright tobacco’s resiliency emerges post-war in the same environments that benefitted during the conflict, as “[p]rofitable tobacco meant that white landowners were less likely to sell land to freedpeople than in many parts of the cash-strapped postwar South, and landowners often asserted their control over freedpeople’s labor through violent means.” Additionally, ecological changes resulting from pre-war “best use” practices and misunderstandings of area soils exhausted fertility; restoring soil fertility meant using commercial fertilizers, dependence on which contributed to debt peonage (181). The financial burden of chemical fertilizers, a new kind of bondage, is further explored by Timothy Johnson in “Reconstructing the Soil: Emancipation and the Roots of Chemical-Dependent Agriculture in America.” The antebellum plantation system and extensive agriculture had driven westward expansion by the South; earlier in this volume, Nelson explains the practical and symbolic nature of the Southwest territories “as landscapes of mobility and a crossroads of empire,” a vision articulated in Confederate general Henry H. Sibley’s plan to capture the far West (36). Such a grand undertaking would require reckoning with the desert, which Jefferson Davis had begun to do in March 1855, when “he convinced Congress to appropriate $30,000 for the purchase of camels in the Middle East and North Africa, and their transportation to the United States” (49, note). Weirding the war, indeed.

Emancipation meant the end of the western Confederate dream, but Johnson asserts that Southern debt peonage caused by the ecological shift from extensive cultivation to chemical-intensive agriculture maintained a familiar race and class hierarchy with the help of the brilliant marketing rhetoric of David Dickson, whose plantation was lost but whose entrepreneurial spirit was not. Johnson
says that, after the war, “Dickson believed he could sell fertilizer as an antidote
for both the social unrest and the underproductive soils of Georgia’s cotton
land” and wrote about ways fertilizer could hasten the South’s economic re-
cover (198). Dickson took advantage of white landowners’ displacement by
touting his fertilizer as superior to freedmen because it had no human needs but
could nevertheless behave as an overseer, allowing white landowners “to work
freedmen when they would bring you into debt without it,” maintaining the old
cotton-based racial order even as erosion and continuous cropping continued to
damage soils (199, 205). While the postwar social environment lagged in the
Victorian agricultural past, the agribusiness environment sped forward with in-
dustrialization and urbanization, capitalizing on “the diminishment of native
soil fertility in other agricultural regions, the replacement of manure producing
draft animals with tractors, and the maturation of a fertilizer industry capable
of harnessing minerals and fossil fuels” to create chemical fertilizers for sale in
the U.S. and abroad (205). Petrochemical dependence, climate change, race
relations, technological progress—the questions we pose now about these issues
were battle cries of the Civil War era.

Environment is time as well as place, and environmental approaches to the Civil
War narrative serve as an excellent portal into the story of modern America. In
Paul S. Sutter’s “Epilogue,” a conversation with the essays in this book, he
calls the Civil War “a critical moment in the history of American environmen-
tal thought and politics,” which “gave birth to the environmental management
state” (231, 234). Sutter’s timeline of post-Civil War homesteading legislation
demonstrates that we can learn from our environmental mistakes, a hopeful end-
ing to a book of new stories that encourage us to move away from unsustainable
ways of thinking about a war waged over environments far wider than North
and South.
Elizabeth Bernstein directs the Athletic Association Writing Center at The University of Georgia in Athens, where she has been teaching composition since 2001.

Nathan Frank writes creative literary theory as an independent scholar from his home in Colorado. His work has appeared in *Kudzu Quarterly, Biblical Interpretation, Reconstruction*, and *The Rocky Mountain Review*. He has a chapter forthcoming in an edited volume on consciousness in contemporary metafiction.

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