

## **Ecocritics have never been Green**

### **Editors' Note**

Revisionist history accedes to a view of environmentalism during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century as one of clearly demarcated political positions defined against the cultural hegemony of corporatised industrialism. To be glib: common perceptions of environmentalism of this time would describe such positions as activist and extremist.

Today, with the broader currency of 'green' awareness, manifest in schooled behaviour such as the perfectly balanced, guilt-driven and consumer empowered purchasing of carbon credits for trans-hemispherical flights by airplane, or the consumption of organically engineered vegetables presented in a crisp array as if disentangled from the supply chain and ecosystem services that bequeathed them to consumers under the petrochemical industry's bi-product referred to as packaging, there is—we dare to suggest—a conventional, mainstream, palatable environmentalism that actually supports, elects and endorses the despoliation of the planet under the tenet of environmental consciousness. This generalised designation, given the broader public awareness of and concern over the contexts of species depletion, biodiversity loss, climate change and a post-Malthusian population problem coupled to chosen—if somewhat ill-informed—homogenous, uninspiring and often vacuous and sterile lifestyle decisions, *paradoxically* denotes more political urgency as the extent of anthropogenic change and influence mounts. Here—and it is a material, geographically bound situation—the term 'ecopolitics' comes into play as we continue to rearticulate the dynamic ethical boundaries between philosophical positions and political actions.

The humanities might claim that things have changed since the 1960s environmental movement both in the academy and across activist networks on the ground. There is some latency, however, as few intellects seem to agree, or dare to articulate (with any vigour for a new set of globalised publics) the current proposition conveyed by *AJE*'s editors to you right here and right now: the need to make the distinction between environmentalism and ecological thought, which is to clarify that the former is too readily incorporated by toxic, post-industrial, morally bankrupt, speciesist global capitalism, while the latter requires the more pressing and challenging effort to define a planetary ethics of reflection and action.

To claim this twenty-first century standpoint as one potentially indicative of a new cultural paradigm (if only symbolically) is perhaps an overstatement; it is, however, clear to the editors in their review of articles presented in this issue of *AJE* that this mode of ecological thinking is increasingly aligned to and with praxis rather than idealism. Furthermore, this now well-rehearsed and modulated discourse resists polemical outburst, sermonic apocalyptic imaginings and negative incursions on personal and collective freedoms. Whether this is simply a new pragmatism of place consciousness at appropriate scale (to be on the earth in the present ecological crisis), or whether this is an indication of and remark upon the wider human condition—postmodern alienation characterised in

part by the absence of a positive critique of how humans are placed before and in the natural world—is unclear at present. It is also unclear whether pragmatism and reflection are mutually exclusive. However, it is significant that ‘nature’ disappears as a stable and philosophically secure construct, either implicitly or explicitly, in all of the articles presented here. Today’s ecocritics are not so green. It is, however, correct to note that the majority of the papers comprising *AJE 2* are taken from the environmental panels of the 2012 biennial of the Australian and New Zealand American Studies Association (ANZASA) hosted by the University of Queensland during 3-7 July, and are thus informed by reflective and reflexive political readings of New World idealism, the ideology of homeland security and representations of environment, ecology, humans and animals.

Our choice of image for the front cover of *AJE 2* is taken from Ian Tyrell’s paper on the hubris of an individual’s concern for environmental knowledge of the *other* as instanced by Edward Roosevelt’s killing of African fauna to fill the halls of museums back home in late nineteenth century America. Roosevelt, Tyrell explains, kills in the name of a logically dubious ‘conservationist ethics’; in so doing, he answers, with swaggering self-regard, to certain imperialist imperatives that highlight ethical inconsistencies on bold display to this day. Such a masculinist politics of environmental awareness is counteracted in Blair’s study of Native American writer, Leslie Marmon Silko. Silko’s now-classic novel, *Gardens in the Dunes* (2000), would ordinarily be viewed as counterpoint and corrective to the authoritative and heavily media(-)ted figure of the ‘man in the field’ that Tyrell describes—ex-President as intrepid big game hunter. And yet the view dramatised in Silko’s literary depiction of species on the brink of extinction, and of a vulnerable peoples subject to an encroaching white culture, is analysed in terms of the narrative consciousness gendered as feminine that conspicuously does not match Blair’s ecocentric expectations.

Habitat awareness is the central theme in John Ryan’s reading of the botanical poetry of South-West Australia. Subtle and sophisticated argumentation through the disciplinary terrains of geography, cultural studies and botany enables Ryan to promote a post-Romantic Australian landscape sensibility that can be understood as the entanglement of image and sensory plurality that far outstrips, while also gesturing towards, a Wordsworthian lineage. Critical analysis of artistic attunement to biological rhythms and responses to degrees of attachment from physical events brings Ryan’s paper into conversation with Stephen Harris’ transposition of Whitman’s ecological poetics to contemporary art-activism. The musical nomenclature used in this essay denotes a difference of kind, not type, between the nineteenth century American poet and the performance art of Fiona McGregor – water and self in the female artist’s bodily installations are arresting extensions on the tone structure of Whitman’s muscular and evocative subsumption of the human subject within the terrain of water music.

As Harris adumbrates a parallel position to the modernist conflicted desire for and critique of ideological refuges and democratically accessible metaphysics, such as the nineteenth century Transcendentalist idealism, he outlines the new ‘ecopolitics’ wherein bodily self-sufficiency is as fallacious as Cartesian solipsism. The Whitmanian impulse

envisions that both dualistic positions are no longer viable in the present age of war, poverty, and industrialised alienation. It is precisely this energy that propels our readers on to the argument presented in Tom Bristow's sense of a relationship to the external world that is not conditioned by ownership and yet is clearly viewed from the age of the anthropocene. Bristow learns from John Ryan, Stanley Cavell and John Kinsella as a means to seek out an aesthetic that discloses correspondences and analogues between the dwelling project of the American Transcendentalist, Henry David Thoreau, and contemporary ecopoetic praxis in Australia. While indicative of the ecological robustness and potentially useful nature of intertextuality for literary ecocritical accounts of natural and cultural relations, this study also indicates a critique of ecocentrist morality.

The final paper collected here from the ANZASA conference is Bryan Wallis's Mortonesque reading of another North American canonical writer, Wendell Berry. In reading outwards from Berry's aesthetic constructions, Wallis argues that Berry draws our attention to the impossibility of constructing any contained localism without a global purview; moreover, this local-global binary fails in the same way as conceptions of the self positioned inside and/or outside of nature have also failed. To put this in terms more adroitly aligned to the pressing conditions of Wallis' challenging ecological deconstruction of the American scene: that which appears strange and remote to some human modes of consciousness is not only always already within our locale but is part of the very fabric that sustains our consciousness, wellbeing and materiality. Latterly, at least in Berry's connection to photographer Ralph Eugene Meatyard, it appears in the photography curated by Wallis that these twentieth century American subjects were informed consenters to the disturbing otherness within human identity rather than narcissistic navigators of noumena.

To take a step back from these localised antagonisms, the complexities attending the question as to whether human beings are irreducibly *in* and *of* nature, or exist at some irretrievable remove outside the bounds and 'rules' of the natural world, are daunting. During the editorial process for this issue, the editors' were notified of a lecture series in Edinburgh, 'Facing Gaia: A new enquiry into Natural Religion' by Professor Bruno Latour, 18-28 February 2013. This event is distanced intellectually and chronologically from the lectures given in the capital of Scotland by William James early last century, as referred to by Bristow in his reading of the Western Australian poet, John Kinsella's version of ecological pragmatism as an act of thought embedded within place consciousness. And yet, this year's promulgation repeats the political imperative of our times – developing ethical openness to our earth systems, as articulated by Kinsella's poetics of situated knowledge that is explicitly mindful of a historical and internationalist contour to radical thinking in the humanities. We have never been Latourian until now.

It is thus timely for *AJE* to revisit an understanding of Transcendentalism, knowingly capitalised in the articles herein as an ideological position and historical fact rather than a temporal and subjective state of rational, solitary consciousness. While Latour refuses the promise of a transcendent place above the moil of the *polis*, he is also reasserting (indirectly) the now-familiar claim that for Western cultures, the desire for transcendence has been diluted, if not annulled, by the comforts afforded in modern, industrialised

societies. This appears true in Harris's reading of MacGregor's post-Whitmanian, confrontational body politics. Its overt anxiety thus complements Harold Fromm's account of the ethical impasse environmentalism cannot afford to understate or overlook:

[...] the ills of suburbia are not so drastic as to encourage an unduly hasty shuffling off of this mortal coil ... television and toilets have made the need for God supererogatory. Western man does not generally live in fear of Nature, except when earthquakes or cancer strike, for he is mostly unaware of a connection with Nature that has been artfully concealed by modern technology... there is rarely a need, except at a few moments during one's lifetime, to go crying either to papa or to God the Father' ('From Transcendence to Obsolescence: A Route Map' *The Georgia Review* 32 (1978): 545-6.

Estrangement begets collective delusion: to keep with Fromm, humans lose the active sense of the necessities of life – not only is nature there *for* humans, but, in being so removed from the imperatives of natural world, humans edit out (unconsciously or otherwise) the daily understanding and awareness that we are dependent on earth's intricate and fragile ecosystems for survival. *AJE* 2 seeks to contribute to a project that addresses this convenient denialism. Reactionary and habituated refusals to acknowledge our ultimate condition are, then, implicitly questioned in the ecocriticism within the collected articles here.

Our journal—dedicated to cultural ecology and Ecocriticism—is not bound by an obligation to deconstruct the quotidian necessities of modern life nor the vagaries of individual will. The editors note, however, that this collection of critical vantage points summons up the onto-poetics of a human-earth continuum in the late postmodern state of non-nature. Moreover, these critical accounts offer clear indication that our contemporary planetary imaginary affords no transcendence from nineteenth and twentieth century understandings of 'roots' that we now claim as being green, albeit ironically.

We hope Readers enjoy this selection of articles and insist that we invite submissions on a continuing basis.

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[Note: Guest editors for Vol. 3 will be Kate Rigby and Linda Williams. Vol. 3 will feature selected papers from the ASLEC-ANZ 'Regarding the Earth' Conference. *AJE* Journal Manager: CA. Cranston]