

Under the Signs of Ecocriticism: An Interview with Prof. Scott Slovic

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Abstract

In this broad-ranging yet incisive interview, Prof. Scott Slovic answers some essential questions about ecocriticism, environment, and nature in fiction and nonfiction. As professor of literature and environment at the University of Idaho and author of more than 250 articles about environmental literature, he is ideally placed to respond to overarching questions about the field, its history and its current and future directions. Prof. Slovic has also published 25 books in the area, including, most recently, *Ecocriticism of the Global South* (co-edited with Swarnalatha Rangarajan and Vidya Sarveswaran, 2015), *Numbers and Nerves: Information, Emotion, and Meaning in a World of Data* (co-authored with Paul Slovic, 2015), and *Ecocritical Aesthetics: Literature, Beauty, and the Environment* (co-edited with Peter Quigley, forthcoming 2017). He has edited the journal *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* since 1995 and is co-editor of Routledge's new World Literatures and the Environment Series.

The Interview

1) Please let us know about how you came to be an ecocritic?

I grew up in the western American city of Eugene, Oregon, where both of my parents were professors at the University of Oregon—my mother, now retired, was in the College of Education, where she specialised in developing vocational training programs for handicapped adults; and my father, who is still very active at age 79, is a psychology professor who, for many years, has been one of the leading scholars in the field of decision making and risk perception. Every evening when I was growing up in Eugene, our family conversations around the dinner table were about politics and social justice, psychology, and sports. So I grew up being very interested in social issues, the workings of the mind, and various kinds of athletic and outdoor activities.

My father played on the basketball team as a university student, and he has been a distance runner for more than 50 years (he still runs almost every day). I started running with him when I was about ten years old—at age 13, I ran the Trail's End Marathon on the Oregon coast in 2:45 (two hours, 45 minutes), which was an age group world record at the time. I went on to a successful high school running career and did some running at Stanford, and I continue to run several days a week—when I travel to new places in the world, I often explore while running early in the morning. I also grew up playing other sports (basketball, baseball) and spending as much time as possible hiking and mountain climbing—as a high school student in Oregon, I would often travel to the

Oregon Cascades (the mountain range a few hours east of Eugene) to camp and climb mountains for a week at a time with my distance running friends from school. Even today, as I travel to distant parts of the world as a scholar, I look for opportunities to have outdoor adventures with my colleagues. As I write this, I am preparing to travel in a few days to lecture in the United Arab Emirates, and my colleague there has planned a hiking trip and a kayaking trip for us.

After high school in Eugene, I went to Stanford University in California as an undergraduate—my father had also studied there, and my younger brother followed me to Stanford two years after me. During my time at Stanford, where I majored in English, it occurred to me that literature was a field devoted to how human beings experience the world, so I found myself yearning for experience, for adventure. At the end of my second year in college, I took a leave of absence and spent the next two years traveling and working—then I returned to Stanford for a third and final year, during which I wrote an undergraduate honors thesis on ‘indirect modes of autobiography’ (the confessional poetry of James Wright, the self-mythologising fiction of Jack Kerouac, and the ‘concealed essays’ of Loren Eiseley). I didn’t realise it at the time, but my fascination with these particular writers also probably had a lot to do with their engagement with the natural world and with ‘sense of place.’

After college, I worked for a year in the research administration office at Stanford while applying to doctoral programs, and I began my Ph.D. program at Brown University in 1984. It was during my first year at Brown (on the East Coast of the United States) that I found myself missing the mountains and vast landscapes of the West, so when I came across a small new collection of John Muir’s *Wilderness Essays*, which offered tales of his adventures in California’s Sierra Nevada Mountains and elsewhere, I was immediately excited by this work and started to pay more and more attention to nonfiction nature writing as a form of autobiographical prose that had not yet been thoroughly studied by scholars. I discovered Muir’s work during my first semester as a graduate student, and I spent the next several years seeking environmental threads in every subject I studied. We were not yet using the term ‘ecocriticism’ to describe such work. I tended to think of what I did as ‘nature writing studies.’ When I read Old English poetry, seventeenth-century English prose, and contemporary experimental poetry, I looked for environmental themes in the work. When I took a seminar on John Ruskin and Thomas Carlyle, I focused on Carlyle’s writing about British industrialisation and Ruskin’s landscape theories. I essentially constructed my own private doctoral program in ecocriticism without ever using that particular term to describe my work.

During my years at Brown, I received a Fulbright grant to study for a year in Germany, traveling to the University of Bonn to work with geographer Hanno Beck, the leading German scholar of Alexander von Humboldt’s nineteenth-century travel narratives. Professor Beck also taught me to be ‘ein freier Redner,’ a ‘free speaker,’ presenting lectures with only a few scant notes, not needing a written text. When I came back from Germany to complete my degree at Brown, I arranged to give six conference talks during my final year as a graduate student and forced myself to complete a thesis chapter for each of these lectures, thus finishing my dissertation in a year.

Briefly, I left Brown in 1990 and became an assistant professor at Texas State University in San Marcos (near Austin). While at Texas State, I received a second Fulbright, which sent me to Tokyo, Japan, for a year to teach courses such as Rivers in

American Literature at the University of Tokyo and an entire graduate seminar on Thoreau's *Walden* at Sophia University. In 1995, I left Texas for a new position at the University of Nevada, Reno, where I worked closely with my colleagues Cheryl Glotfelty, Michael P. Branch, and Ann Ronald to create a new M.A. and Ph.D. program in literature and environment in 1996. We ran this program together and worked with more than 70 graduate students from all over the world until I moved to the University of Idaho in 2012.

Here at Idaho I am professor of literature and environment, professor of natural resources and society, and chair of the English Department—I teach subjects such as Interdisciplinarity and Literary Studies, Foundations of Ecocriticism and Environmental Literature, and MFA Workshops in Creative Nonfiction, and I also teach environmental writing in our interdisciplinary program called Semester in the Wild, which sends a dozen undergraduates every fall semester to live at the Taylor Wilderness Research Station in the mountains of central Idaho, where they take courses like ecology, environmental history, wilderness policy and management, and outdoor leadership. My writing course helps the students to use writing as a way to pay deep attention to what they're experiencing in the wilderness and to make sense of how the various things they're studying all tie together. In addition to my teaching and administration, I continue to edit the central journal in the field of ecocriticism, *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, which I began editing in 1995, and to work on many books and articles in the interdisciplinary environmental humanities. The book I have forthcoming this year, co-edited with Peter Quigley, is called *Ecocritical Aesthetics: Literature, Beauty, and the Environment* and will be out from Indiana University Press in a few months.

2) Please tell us about the history and aims of ecocriticism.

'Ecocriticism' is a term first used by literary critic William Rueckert in a 1978 article titled 'Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism.' I write at length about his article and the history of the field in a recent article titled simply 'Literature' that appeared in the *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, edited by Willis Jenkins, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim in 2016. Scholars have long explored 'nature themes' in literature and other forms of cultural expression—this dates back to the earliest days of textual criticism. The nonhuman world has obviously been important throughout the existence of human beings, right? We would not even exist if we didn't have nature to support us in so many ways, materially and psychologically, even spiritually. In the 1970s and 1980s, though, literary scholars began expanding their environmental approaches to the connections between literature and environment, looking not only at 'nature themes,' but at the actual ecology of language (how words themselves function as a kind of physical-environmental phenomenon) and considering the role of literature and other media in raising public awareness of social and environmental problems and solutions.

It is rather difficult, in a brief statement, to summarise the entire history of this diverse and energetic field that we began to call ecocriticism in the late-1980s when Cheryl Glotfelty, picking up on Rueckert's word, sent a letter to a group of environmental writers and scholars (I also received this letter from her when I was finishing my Ph.D. at Brown and she was still a Ph.D. student at Cornell), suggesting that we should use the word 'ecocriticism' to describe our work. I have also written many articles on the

history of ecocriticism and the ways that we describe this history, such as the new essay ‘Seasick Among the Waves of Ecocriticism: An Inquiry into Alternative Historiographic Metaphors,’ which appeared in Serpil Oppermann and Serenella Iovino’s new collection *Environmental Humanities: Voices from the Anthropocene* (2017). Essentially, what I see happening in the field of ecocriticism is an ongoing effort to expand the scope of the field from Anglophone literature to other national literatures to comparative literature and other media of cultural expression (film, popular culture, material culture). I also see ongoing efforts to achieve new forms of interdisciplinary collaboration in the field and to achieve greater social and political impact.

Much of my own work for many years has focused on the psychological and political-social impacts of environmental cultural studies. In my books *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing* (1992) and *Going Away to Think: Engagement, Retreat, and Ecocritical Responsibility* (2008), I explored how literature may guide us to think more deeply about our personal interactions with the nonhuman world, with other species and with places, and also to develop a political sensibility that might inspire us to ‘engage’ with important social causes and use our voices to try to achieve environmental protection and social justice. The 2015 book *Numbers and Nerves: Information, Emotion, and Meaning in a World of Data*, which I published with my father Paul Slovic, represents an important aspect of the field that I see growing today—the focus on information management and communication, asking how can we understand information about the environment in a way that mobilises the public and our governments to take positive steps to protect the environment. Another important current dimension of what I call ‘fourth-wave ecocriticism’ is the ‘material turn’ in the field, emphasising the ways in which cultural texts represent the ever-present ‘agency,’ or force, of material reality in our daily lives (our bodies!) and our ways of thinking—Oppermann and Iovino, in their 2014 collection, *Material Ecocriticism*, highlighted the power of the material approach to ecocriticism.

3) In *Seeking Awareness in American Nature*, you talk about the psychology of nature writing. Would you please explain what you mean by this?

This book began as my Ph.D. thesis, and in this work I focused specifically on a tendency I recognised in Henry David Thoreau’s work, especially in the daily personal journal that he kept from 1837 to 1861, whereby he focused not only on paying attention to the natural world but on how his own mind responded to the world. His journal, I argued in my book, is a psychological study of his own processes of awareness—awareness of the world and awareness of how his mind reacted to the world. After my opening discussion of the psychology of awareness (I also used such terms as ‘attention and ‘consciousness’), and my chapter on Thoreau’s journal, I traced the theme of awareness in the work of four important contemporary American ‘nature writers’: Annie Dillard, Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, and Barry Lopez. In particular, I looked at how these writers, especially Dillard and Abbey, illustrate their feelings of separation from nature and their reactions to nature’s ‘strangeness’ (what I call ‘disjunction’ in the book), and then I turned to focus on the alternative tendency to emphasise forms of ‘correspondence’ or closeness to nature (‘conjunction’) in the work of Berry and Lopez. The final chapter of the book, which I added at the request of one of the manuscript reviewers for the University of Utah Press, an ecocritic named John Tallmadge who later became a good friend of mine, begins to demonstrate a style of combined scholarly writing and personal storytelling that I called ‘narrative scholarship’ (literally this

means using narrative, or *story*, as a form of scholarly expression)—in this concluding chapter, I tell some personal stories about myself and show myself interacting with and thinking about the world.

I have gone on and done many other kinds of psychological writing in the field of ecocriticism. I would say this is one of the abiding themes of my work. To me, everything we do as human beings has a profoundly psychological dimension to it. When we try to understand information about the world through direct experience or through communication from other people, this is all about how our minds gather and process that information. When we have emotional responses to experience or to information, this is a psychological process. When we are upset about or afraid of certain phenomena, when we yearn for certain things—all of this is psychological. I began focusing on the psychological aspects of ecocriticism back in the 1980s, as a graduate student. Several years later, my colleague Lawrence Buell published a book called *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), which I think is in some ways an expansion of my work in *Seeking Awareness*. Other contemporary ecocritics, such as my Idaho colleague Jennifer Ladino, work in the area of ‘affect theory’ (which is focused on human emotion) and environmental culture—she is currently finishing a book on national monuments and memorials and how these ‘texts’ influence visitors’ emotions and their feelings about particular places.

And the book *Numbers and Nerves*, which I mentioned above, is also a profoundly psychological work, using much of my father’s research on such psychological phenomena as psychic numbing, pseudoinefficacy, the prominence effect, and the asymmetry of trust to explain how people react to information (or *fail* to react to information) about social and environmental situations in the world. We have more recently created a website (www.arithmeticofcompassion.com) that provides explanations of the key concepts of that book and demonstrates in the Blog and Take Action sections of the site how scholarship and other forms of citizen action may enable us to overcome the psychological tendencies that often prevent us from being appropriately sensitive to information. I have an article forthcoming in *The Journal of Ecocriticism* in the next few months on ecocriticism and information processing, focusing on the work of such ecocritics as Rob Nixon, Ursula Heise, and Heather Houser in the context of how we ‘apprehend’ (Nixon’s term) vital information about slow, large-scale, and distance environmental destruction, how we package information about phenomena such as extinction in databases and other non-traditional narrative formats, and how artistic media ranging from novels to photography can be used to convey important environmental information.

4) What is your view on ecofeminism? How did ecofeminism arise? Could we consider Susan Griffin’s *Woman and Nature* (1978) as the best ecofeminist nonfiction work ever?

I am reluctant to identify a single text as ‘the best’ work ever in its field. Susan Griffin’s *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* is definitely one of the major works, even a foundational work, in the field of ecofeminism. I would also point to various works by Greta Gaard, ranging from her 1993 monograph *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* to her 1998 collection, co-edited with Patrick D. Murphy, *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism*, as extremely important works in the field. More recently, with the publication of her books *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (2010) and

Protest and Pleasure: New Materialism, Environmental Activism, and Feminist Exposure (2016), Stacy Alaimo's work and its emphasis on the embodied female experience of nature has been extremely important to the development of ecofeminism.

I have always been aware of the importance of ecofeminism as a strand of the broader field of ecocriticism, but it was during a small symposium in Taiwan around the year 2010 when I particularly realised how vital ecofeminism was to the political engagement of ecocriticism. I was giving a talk summarising the broader field and sitting right across the table from Greta Gaard, who pressed me during the Q&A period after my lecture to appreciate the fact that way back in the 1980s, during the early years of modern ecocriticism, ecofeminism was in the vanguard of politically engaged writing about literature, culture, and politics. I have never forgotten that confrontation and have always since that time tried to keep in mind the importance of gender, in various ways, in understanding the differences in the ways that various people understand and experience their relationship to the nonhuman world and also the various inequities of power that determine such relationships.

I should mention, too, that there has been a nascent eco-masculinism movement over the years, and I was also involved in that back around 2001 and 2002. I spoke on a panel concerning eco-masculinity at the 2001 conference of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, along with well-known environmental writers Gary Paul Nabhan and Ken Lamberton, and I contributed an article on masculine 'care taking' to Mark Allister's book *Eco-Man: New Perspectives on Masculinity and Nature* (2004), a book that sought to propose the possibility of positive, non-destructive relationships between men and nature, as opposed to the critiques of masculinity—the critiques of 'patriarchy'—inherent in ecofeminist thought.

5) How can Gothic elements combine with ecocritical themes, such as in Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* (2009)?

To be honest, I'm not a specialist in Gothic ecocriticism. For information about this approach to the field, I would point your attention to Tom Hillard's 2009 article in *ISLE* about ecocriticism and Gothic literature (he is especially interested in Nathaniel Hawthorne's nineteenth-century Gothic fiction) and to such 2016 works as Timothy Morton's *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* and Richard J. Schneider's edited volume *Dark Nature: Anti-Pastoral Essays in American Literature and Culture*. Given the seriousness of so many contemporary environmental issues, especially global climate change, and with the strange and alarming upsurge of ultra-nationalist, hyper-capitalist political movements (such as Donald Trump's rise to power in the United States), I anticipate that there will be increasing attention paid to Atwood's work and many other examples of 'cli fi' (already there is a lot of energy in the study and teaching of climate fiction). In the Schneider collection, for instance, there is a chapter on Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy* (which I think you could call cli fi or at least apocalyptic ecofiction). Matthew Masucci, the scholar who wrote the chapter on VanderMeer, uses ideas from Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects* as a lens through which to understand VanderMeer's fictional study of radical efforts to correct a haywire climate and rampant extinction of species by way of creating vast, untouched ecosystemic rehabilitation areas. You could say that the dark, Gothic ideas of eco-disaster collide with a kind of eco-utopianism in VanderMeer's work. The same thing occurs, in a sense, in some of the novels by Kim Stanley Robinson, such as his *Orange*

County series, which describes the transition from the current ‘autopia,’ a Utopian environment for automobiles (freeways everywhere), to an imagined future when everyone is riding mountain bicycles and their devotion to driving cars is a distant memory, something from the dark past.

6) What are the best ecocritical novels, in your opinion?

I have written book chapters and articles in the past about such novels as Edward Abbey’s *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, Wendell Berry’s *The Memory of Old Jack*, and David James Duncan’s *The River Why*, all of which are wonderful, even classic, narratives about profound relationships between the characters and particular places in the world—relationships that sometimes lead (as in the case of Abbey’s work, which inspired the formation of the activist organisation Earth First!) to environmental sabotage, or ‘ecotage.’ I have also written about the powerful short stories in J.M.G. Le Clézio’s *The Round and Other Stories of Cold, Hard Fact* and Barry Lopez’s *Light Action in the Caribbean*. Rick Bass’s and William Kittredge’s short stories and novellas are also brilliant, profound explorations of our relationships to places and other species. In other countries, there are writers such as Tim Winton in Australia (read *Dirt Music*) and Gao Xingjian from China (now living in France, the Nobel-prize-winning author of *Soul Mountain*). And I would point to the beautiful fiction-nonfiction hybrid prose of Japanese writer Ishimure Michiko, including her work *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow* (about Minamata Disease in southern Japan) from the late 1960s. I could go on and on. There are dozens and dozens—hundreds—of writers and works that I would point to as being extremely beautiful and important works of environmental fiction. And since you mentioned Margaret Atwood in your earlier question, I would also say a word about her early novel *Surfacing*, which is a very powerful work of environmental fiction.

7) Many notable ecological fictions were written in the midst of the twentieth century. What do you think is the reason for this?

Perhaps the single most powerful piece of ecological fiction, at from least North America, from the mid-twentieth century is ‘A Fable for Tomorrow,’ the opening chapter of Rachel Carson’s nonfiction book *Silent Spring* (1962), one of the books that triggered the modern environmental movement. This opening ‘fable’ imagines a future in which the landscape will be barren and the air will be ‘silent’ (with no songbirds calling) because we have devastated the environment throughout chemical contamination. Thanks to Carson’s intervention and the movement she inspired, we have avoided that ‘tomorrow’ more or less until now, but I worry that the new political situation in the U.S. and elsewhere will give too much power to corporate interests. Already in this country the new regime has appointed a director of our Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) who wants to deregulate industry and make the world safe for polluters. This is a terrible, even tragic, recent development.

Let me also mention, on a different note, that one of my favorite works of environmental fiction is Jack Kerouac’s 1958 novel *The Dharma Bums*, which tells the story of the protagonist’s meditative engagement with the natural world while hitchhiking across the U.S., riding freight trains, and serving as a solitary fire lookout on a mountain top. It is a beautiful and uplifting story of personal discovery aided by experiencing powerful landscapes. This is one of the books that inspired my own early interest in environmental literature. I read and wrote about it when I was a university student many years ago.

8) There are two contemporaneous books about overpopulation: Harry Harrison's science fiction novel *Make Room! Make Room!* (1966), and Paul Ehrlich's nonfiction book *The Population Bomb*. Would you please explain the significance of the overpopulation debate to ecocriticism?

The issue of human overpopulation is another extremely important environmental topic that has occupied my thinking for many years, ever since I was a child. At the age of ten, when I was in elementary school, I read Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb*, and I was so moved by it that I gave my first 'environmental lecture' that year on the occasion of the first Earth Day (April 22, 1970) to the other fourth graders at my school, urging them to think about 'reproductive responsibility.' You could say I was a rather strange child! And that I was destined to become an ecocritic, even though the field of ecocriticism did not even really exist back in those days.

Seriously, I do believe we all need to think carefully—to be *mindful*—about how we plan our families, how many children we bring into the world, and how we consume resources in our lifestyles. The relationship between population size and consumption is essential to understanding our 'ecological footprint.' There would be no 'environmental problem' if there were far fewer humans on the planet, as our impact would be so much smaller than it has become in the past several centuries.

I continue to think about population issues all the time and to include this as a topic in my various classes—I have even taught entire classes in past years on The Literature of Population. One of the best recent books on the population topic is journalist Alan Weisman's *Countdown: Our Last, Best Hope for a Future on Earth?* (2013), in which the author travels to many countries around the world, from China to Iran, from Mexico to Japan, and talks with experts on population policies and practices in each of these countries. It is truly a fascinating and sobering book. I highly recommend it, and I often weave ideas from it into my lectures—such as a lecture I gave a few days ago to a class at the University of Idaho on environmental and population issues in contemporary China.

9) In our current world with state-of-the-art technology, many people feel that humans have become alienated from nature—similar to what Jonathan Bate describes in *The Song of the Earth* (2000). Would you please give us your thoughts?

I appreciate Bate's approach in this important book, which helps to show how British Romanticism arose, in part, as a response to urbanisation and industrialisation and the increasing alienation from the pastoral life that occurred in Britain and continental Europe and elsewhere in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Leo Marx's classic *The Machine in the Garden* (1964) traces some of the same history. I do think I absorbed much of this thinking when I was growing up and in my early years ago a student—the idea that we are somehow separate from nature and need to find ways to reconnect with the nonhuman world. I guess I still do adhere to this in a certain way, always hungering in my personal life to have outdoor adventures, even if this only means walking in my home neighborhood with my dog or going for runs in city parks when I'm traveling around the world.

But one of the profound lessons of material ecocriticism is that we are never truly separate from the physical environment, the material world. We are always connected,

breathing nature into our lungs, absorbing nature (and non-nature) through the things we eat and even through our skin—and we are always propelling ourselves out into the world, through our garbage, our waste, our out-breathings. The advent of the new material ecocriticism has shaken up my feelings about our relationship with nature and given me the sense that perhaps we need to re-think and make more complicated the idea of Romantic alienation from nature that Bate and many others have written about.

10) How do you see the importance of pastoral writing in classic literary texts, such as the works of George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, and so on?

Many ecocritics have written about this, including not only Leo Marx, of course, but more recently Richard Kerridge's study of Hardy's work (in the collection *Beyond Nature Writing*) and Terry Gifford's various books and articles on varieties of the pastoral. Traditionally there has sometimes been a certain skepticism among non-ecocritics toward the discipline of ecocriticism, an assumption that ecocriticism is a field entirely devoted to pastoral literature and other modes of ex-urban writing. I believe this idea has now been safely dispelled. Ecocriticism is applicable and even indispensable to almost every field of literary and cultural studies, as it's a way of understanding who we are as a species and how we live in relation to the larger planet and other inhabitants of the planet. The notion that the countryside is a place to which we might retreat from urban complications and live simple, atavistic lives close to 'nature' really does not apply very well to what ecocritics do today. First of all, we understand, à la the Georgic tradition, that the countryside is a place of labor – not only a place of retreat from labor, a place of recreation. Second, the new pastoral criticism, in the mode of Gifford, directs us to think about the post-pastoral, which means a focus on how once-pastoral landscapes have been transformed into urban, suburban, and even industrial and sometimes post-industrial spaces.

11) To what extent is nature a significant subject in literature? Do science and technology conflict with nature in the field of ecocriticism?

Nature is present in every work of literature. Even when it is not visible or not prominent, nature's invisibility or apparent absence is a subtext of literary work, often influencing characters' thinking and their relationships with each other, their feelings about themselves. There is simply no work of literature that cannot be approached ecocritically. I believe this.

Yes, sometimes science and technology lead to human behavior that is destructive to the natural world and to public health. This is indisputable. The single best selling work of American environmental literature is Terry Tempest Williams's memoir *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (1991), which tells the story of how people in her family, especially women relatives, have suffered from various kinds of cancer due to the fact that they live (or lived) in the state of Utah, which is downwind from the Nevada Nuclear Test Site, where atomic weapons were exploded in military experiments in the 1950s and '60s. Williams's book exposes the threat to public health caused by the military-industrial complex. Other famous works, such as Sandra Steingraber's cancer memoir *Living Downstream: An Ecologist's Personal Investigation of Cancer and the Environment* (1997), focus on industrial contamination as an environmental and public health hazard.

But it is important to note, too, that not all science is environmentally destructive. Environmental science is vital to our understanding of what is happening to our ecosystems and to our own health and habitat. As I've said elsewhere in this interview, one of the important new trends in ecocriticism is the study of information management and the environment. This is closely related to the field of environmental communication. One of the goals of environmental communication studies is to explore how we might communicate the important ideas of environmental science more effectively to the general public, so that people will truly understand the importance of climate change, extinction, habitat loss, and other subjects.

12) How do you see the role of ecology and nature in utopian texts?

This question is, in a sense, the flip side of the earlier question about the Gothic. As I said above, there is certainly a tendency in some environmental writing and some ecocriticism to think about apocalyptic topics and the dire condition of the planet today and, quite likely, in the future. But there are also strong examples of eco-utopianism, ranging from Ernst Callenbach's novel *Ecotopia* (1974) to the futuristic novels of Kim Stanley Robinson. I would argue that we need both dystopian and utopian narratives to help us imagine the dangerous and hopeful alternatives we face on this planet and to guide us to think carefully about these options. We also need realistic narratives—what would these be called? Simply 'topian' studies of the here and now perhaps. We need dystopian, topian, and utopian narratives, and by considering all of these options and combinations of the three, perhaps we'll gradually come to think more clearly about the meaning of our lives on earth.

13) What is the apocalyptic narrative in ecological fiction? Please give us your thoughts on environmental apocalypticism in literature.

This is another extremely large topic and a difficult one to approach in a brief, efficient way. Let me do so like this: I would suggest that one of the most important purposes of apocalyptic narratives in general, including environmental apocalypticism, is to steer audiences *away* from apocalyptic futures, to warn us or to make us feel a regret for something that we might lose in the future. This is what I write about in my chapter 'Be Prepared for the Worst' in the book *Going Away to Think*—I refer to this as 'anticipated nostalgia,' a sense of nostalgia (or regret) for something that we have not yet lost. I would argue that the prompting of nostalgia for phenomena we might lose in the future if we're not careful is one of the important purposes of cautionary environmental literature, such as Rachel Carson's 'A Fable for Tomorrow' and even Norman Maclean's *A River Runs Through It*. I have written about this in a 2014 article titled 'Varieties of Environmental Nostalgia,' which appeared in Françoise Besson's collection *The Memory of Nature in Aboriginal, Canadian and American Contexts*.

14) How does wilderness represent the possibility of apocalypse in Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature*?

I'm not sure I read McKibben's book in this way. The upshot of McKibben's 1989 book, which is one of the earliest popular treatments of global warming, is that we have fundamentally altered the planet. He argues that there is 'only us'—that there is nothing in the planet that has not been touched somehow through human (technological) action and through human decisions. Animals must all live on a planet that has been

fundamentally changed by our industrial presence. The chemistry of the oceans and the upper atmosphere of the planet have been changed through human actions. Pretty much every aspect of the earth (except perhaps volcanic geology) has been changed due to our human behavior. This is the point, I guess, of the concept of the Anthropocene—the idea of a new geological era in which humans have changed the planet.

For McKibben this is not really an apocalyptic scenario, a situation in which all existence will end. But our lives will be, or already have been, altered on the most basic level. This is a scenario of loss and sadness—and a situation in which we must come to terms with our own power and hubris and self-centeredness. I think McKibben is grappling in his book with the emotional and philosophical meaning of the Anthropocene (not yet using this word), but he is not exactly writing about apocalypse or about wilderness. He would, in fact, say that there really is no such thing as true wilderness left on the planet.

15) How have postcolonial scholars engaged with ecocriticism?

Postcolonial ecocriticism is an extension of environmental justice ecocriticism, a branch that began to develop in the mid-1990s. The first major expression of postcolonial ecocriticism, I believe, was the collection *Caribbean Literature and the Environment* (2005), edited by Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Renée K. Gosson, and George B. Handley. The major thrust of postcolonial ecocriticism is that much of the damage caused to native human communities through the colonial process all around the world was similarly inflicted on the biota and on natural systems in general. In other words, human cultures and natural systems were similarly affected—and in most cases, damaged—by colonial processes. Postcolonial ecocriticism studies various kinds of postcolonial texts in order to shed light on the depredations of colonial and postcolonial power.

16) Which one has the more important role in ecocriticism: fiction or literary nonfiction?

I can't really answer this. I think both are extremely important—and so are poetry, drama, oral literature, film, popular culture, and other media and genres. I can say that contemporary ecocriticism started, in a sense, with a strong focus on 'nonfiction nature writing.' However, many of us, even as we focused our research on nonfiction, were also reading, teaching, and writing about fiction and poetry and other genres (such as 'journal writing'). These days, certainly, there are ecocritics working on a wide variety of cultural media and genres, and most of us would not say that either fiction or nonfiction plays a more important role in the field, except perhaps for cli fi enthusiasts, who might argue that fiction (in literature and film) is an especially potent way to convey messages about climate change to mass audiences.

17) How do you see the role of cinema about nature and environment (Ecocinema)?

Environmental film is a hugely important topic, both for scholars and for the general public. Many people these days are more likely to consume narrative art by way of films and other media, including video games, rather than through literature. This is such a large and important topic that I can hardly begin to address it here, except to say that ecocinema has been one of the important sub-branches of ecocriticism since the 1990s,

but it has only become more important, and now there many scholars around the world who specialise in the field, often focusing on specific regional and national bodies of film, such as Rayson K. Alex's work on Indian film and Kiu-wai Chu's writing about Chinese and other East Asian eco-film traditions. I believe this branch of ecocriticism is only going to increase in importance, and it will also expand to include more and more studies of alternative media, such as video games and what's called 'procedural literacy.'

18) We live in a world in which advanced technology has surrounded all aspects of human life. How do you see ecocriticism in a few decades?

My forecast for the future of ecocriticism will be shorter than my description of its past, simply because I can't go into much detail about what hasn't yet happened. But I suspect that ecocriticism will blur more and more with its sister disciplines in the environmental humanities and that all of these fields will increasingly join forces with the social and natural sciences and policy studies. We have been touting ecocriticism's interdisciplinary potential since the very beginning of the discipline in the 1980s and '90s, but we are just beginning to see truly interdisciplinary collaborations. We have so much more to achieve in this area—interdisciplinarity. I have begun teaching courses (graduate seminars) on Interdisciplinarity and Literary Studies, aiming to deepen my own understanding of the processes and pitfalls of interdisciplinary work. In a nutshell, I imagine that ecocriticism will become more and more enmeshed with other disciplines. I also hope that ecocritics and our colleagues in such fields as history and philosophy and religious studies within the environmental humanities will increasingly be invited to sit at the table with economists, legal scholars, and policy scholars and politicians, analysing the state of the world and discussing how to reshape human society so as to mitigate our destructive impact on the planet and on each other.

19) As the last question, you have taught ecocriticism and environmental literature for many years. Do you have any suggestions for the best ways of teaching these subjects in literature classes and courses?

I have no simple secrets, except to say that each of us who teaches any subject really needs to try to make the subject 'our own,' to find our personal approach to the material in order for us to be excited about it and to bring the subject matter to life for our students. I simply hesitate to suggest that there are a few 'best ways' to teach the fields of ecocriticism or environmental literature. I tend to experiment with the material every single time I teach a new class, always trying to keep the material fresh for myself and to keep up with the changing discipline.

Many years ago when I was a visiting professor in Japan I had the opportunity to meet a famous scientist and writer about organic farming named Fukuoka Masanobu—essentially a guru in the field of organic farming, a philosopher. I was just a young professor at the time, right out of graduate school. As we sat in his simple hut in the mountains on the island of Shikoku, I asked Fukuoka-san if he felt scholars like me, in the humanities, might have something important to contribute to the understanding of the relationship between human society and the environment. His somewhat cryptic response to me was, 'Listen to the *uguisu* [the Japanese word for *nightingale*].' What he meant was that we must not forget to continue to engage ourselves with the actual world, the physical world—that we must not, as humanists, lose ourselves in

human texts and ideas and words. I think this is good advice. It is relevant even to how we teach ecocriticism and environmental literature, and this is one of the reasons I enjoy so much the experience of teaching environmental writing in the University of Idaho's Semester in the Wild Program, which takes place in the middle of the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness in the central Idaho mountains. When I'm with the students in one of our outdoor classroom settings, talking about writing as we watch golden eagles circle overhead and observe deer crossing the nearby river, we remember the true essence, the reality and importance, of what we're contemplating. Our studies become viscerally important. We can accomplish this by merely opening the window of our urban classroom occasionally and letting in the humid air of Kuala Lumpur or the sounds of noisy traffic in New York City. Anything that demonstrates the connection between words and the world will help to bring the material to life.

Suggested Readings

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