

## Theorizing Ecocriticism: Toward a Postmodern Ecocritical Practice

*Metaphorically, the ideas of postmodernity and those of ecology are complementary halves of a new multidimensional environmental ethics and practice*  
—Daniel R. White, *Postmodern Ecology*

In a world much burdened with the wide-spread ecological crisis, the emergence of ecocriticism in the academy had signalled a new and a promising hermeneutical horizon in our interpretations and understanding of the natural world and literature. But since its very beginnings in the 1990s, a basic problem has decidedly threatened the expansion of ecocritical practice on theoretical grounds. It is a crisis closely associated with the ecological crisis itself, namely the crisis of the realist epistemology. Being largely confined to the theoretically discredited parameters of literary realism, ecocriticism today finds itself struggling with hermeneutical closure as well as facing an ambivalent openness in its interpretive approach. This paradox is due to the fact that many prominent ecocritics who aligned themselves with the perspectives of realist epistemology, think it enables ecocriticism to be an open field of inquiry. They ignore the conceptual problems the realist perspectives conjure. Those who promote “a realist variety of ecocriticism,” to use Dana Phillips’s phrase (*The Truth* 135), to legitimize their study of literature in terms of environmental values, and hence to connect literature with the natural world, fail to understand that no interpretive theory can be conceived of without language occupying its center. It is precisely because of ecocritical underestimation of this fact that much work in this promising field of eco-literary studies

does not go beyond simplistic contextual analyses of both literary and environmental texts. One objection to analyses as such can be made on the grounds that they are intellectually uninteresting and no doubt also inauthentic.

In the light of the discussion that follows the essential point I will be making is mainly concerned with rethinking the ecocritical field of inquiry with the purpose of situating it within the broader perspectives of a reconstructive postmodern theory. This paper is also a critical response to the referential turn that continues to inform the practice of ecocriticism which has not really attracted a sufficient critique to date. Although, as Steven Rosendale observes, there is an interest in "expanding the purview of ecocritical practice by widening the canon of texts for ecocritical investigation" (xvii), it is just as he says, "widening the canon of texts," which is not really an expansion in terms of literary theory. It is true that there is also more theoretically oriented ecocritical scholarship today, but these studies often lack a grounded focus with the exception of Dana Phillips's *The Truth of Ecology* (2003), which is perhaps the only noteworthy study to put ecocriticism in theory, although his attack on postmodernism on the grounds that it advocates nature's disappearance is a typical misjudgement. His is an ironic misreading of it. Phillips's understanding of postmodernism is also misleading because he associates postmodern theory with radical relativism. Finding it necessary to correct such misconceived notions of postmodernism I will attempt to conflate ecocriticism with an ecocentric postmodern theory for the purpose of developing a postmodern ecocritical approach which will help expand the ecocritical practice beyond its present limits. My aim then is twofold; first to critique ecocriticism's realist orientation as being inappropriate for literary theorizing, second to provide a valid account of postmodernism which is more reconstructive than deconstructive in its ecological field of vision today.

## I. The Ecocritical Debate

Since the publication of the first major collection of ecocritical essays, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* in 1996, there has been a growing number of scholarly publications, addressing the essential questions of what ecocritics read, how they write, and what their objectives and methods of analysis are.<sup>1</sup> The essays in later collections, such as *Reading the Earth: New Directions in the Study of Literature and Environment* (1998) by Michael Branch et al, Richard Kerridge and Neil Sammell's *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature* (1998), John Tallmadge and Henry Harrington's *Reading Under the Sign of Nature:*

*New Essays in Ecocriticism* (2000), and the selected critical texts in Lawrence Coupe's *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism* (2000), not only explore these questions, the answers of which are rather controversial, but also point to the necessity to formulate ecologically informed critical principles. Similarly the ecocritical essays in the 1999 issue of *New Literary History*, which is entirely devoted to ecocriticism, provide a number of sign posts for building an ecocritical critique of environmental literature; they also show a common concern about the interpretive strategies and analytical premises of ecocriticism with a wider scope and emphasis. What stands out in these essays is the idea that, despite all the attempts to define ecocriticism from a number of ecological perspectives, there is no guiding strategy of interpretation, and no monolithic theory to support it. Lawrence Buell's words in his "The Ecocritical Insurgency," which is the concluding article of the volume, attest to this: "Ecocriticism so far lacks the kind of field-defining statement that was supplied for more methodologically-focused insurgencies by, for example, Wellek and Warren's *Theory of Literature* for New Critical formalism and Edward Said's *Orientalism* for colonial discourse studies" (700). Despite the more recent publications informed by the insights of social ecology and urban environmentalism, as well as cultural studies, feminist, literary, and postcolonial theories, such as David W. Gilcrest's *Greening the Lyre: Environmental Poetics and Ethics* (2002), Steven Rosendale's *The Greening of Literary Scholarship: Literature, Theory, and the Environment* (2002), Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace's *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism* (2001), and Michael P. Branch and Scott Slovic's *The ISLE Reader: Ecocriticism, 1993-2003* (2003), respectively, ecocriticism retains its openness and theoretical ambiguity to date except for its interest in environmental literature, its aim in promoting ecological awareness and bringing ecological consciousness to the practice of literary criticism. Almost none of the definitions of ecocriticism signals a move towards a field-defining theoretical method, nor provide a viable model of interpretation. The only discernible pattern among ecocritical definitions is their focus on the importance of the relationship between literature and the physical environment; they also share the common aim to synthesize literary criticism with the natural sciences, and literary studies with the environmental philosophies. In fact as most of the ecocritics have repeatedly stated, ecocriticism seems to resist a single definition and thus remains, in Buell's description, "a multiform inquiry extending to a variety of environmentally focused perspectives" (*The Environmental Imagination* 430). In his introduction to *A Century of Early Ecocriticism* (2001) David Mazel also observes that "ecocriticism seems less a singular approach or method than a constellation of approaches having

little more in common than a shared concern with the environment" (2). Similarly in his recent book, *Practical Ecocriticism* (2003), Glen A. Love writes that, "What is emerging is a multiplicity of approaches and subjects," and he finds this "rapid expansion of critical effort both necessary and exhilarating," as well as "potentially rewarding" (5). That this expansion is not rewarding in terms of theoretical engagement is a question that is either celebrated or avoided by these critics. To better understand this tendency it is necessary to look at the early definitions.

The earliest definitions of ecocriticism come from the contributors' essays in *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) which paved the way for later scholars' reformulations. Particularly Cheryl Glotfelty's definition in her introduction to this book has been of significant influence in leading the way. She defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii), and states that "ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies" (xviii). By an "earth-centered approach" Glotfelty means, in William Rueckert's words, "attempting to see literature inside the context of an ecological vision" (115). Being the first critic to practice ecocritical analysis William Rueckert not only coined the term 'ecocriticism,' but also anticipated the conceptual problem of bringing literature and ecology together. In his founding essay of 1978, reprinted in the collection, "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism," Rueckert wrote: "Bringing literature and ecology together is a lesson in the harshest, cruelest realities which permeate our profession: We live by the word, and by the power of the word, but are increasingly powerless to act upon the word" (115). As the ecocritics endeavored to bridge the gap between literature and the environment, which was to be the mission of ecocriticism, they espoused literary realism as their method of analysis and situated ecocriticism firmly in realist epistemology. To underline this mission of ecocriticism Glen A. Love in his seminal article, "Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Criticism," argued that "[t]he most important function of literature today is to redirect human consciousness to a full consideration of its place in a threatened natural world" (237). In his and in almost all of the early ecocritical discussions revaluing nature meant devaluing and attacking contemporary literary theory. The prevalent belief among the ecocritics was that contemporary literary criticism (especially poststructuralist and postmodern theory) "denigrated" or ignored, as Love claimed, "nature writing, literature of place, regional writing, poetry of nature" (237); that it reduced nature to a mere verbal construct; and thus the ecocritics condemned theory for representing, in Patricia Waugh's words, "an irresponsible ethical relativism," and "self-reflexive narcissism" (*Practising Postmodernism*

53). Therefore, following Rueckert's call they formulated "an ecological poetics" (114) based on a rather naive version of the mimetic tradition of literary criticism. This approach, however, has created theoretical problems and restricted the interpretive strategies of ecocriticism.

Nevertheless, examining the possible relations between literature and nature, and linking ecological contexts with literary criticism produced a variety of scholarly work in the years that followed. Some prominent critics have emphasized the importance of promoting a biocentric worldview through ecocriticism and announced a call for cultural change. This is highlighted especially in the 1998 collection of *Reading the Earth*. The editors Michael P. Branch et al maintain that ecocriticism "implies a move toward a mere biocentric world-view, an extension of ethics, a broadening of humans' conception of global community to include nonhuman life forms and the physical environment" (xiii). This, however, does not solve the problem of the method of interpretation. Concerning this challenge the editors John Tallmadge and Henry Harrington of another collection, *Reading Under the Sign of Nature* (2000), two years later, posit that, "ecocriticism is really less a method than an attitude, an angle of vision, and a mode of critique" (ix). Tallmadge and Harrington underline one important aspect of ecocriticism as practiced today: "ecocriticism, as an emerging methodology, remains open, flexible, capacious, and loosely constructed, capable of supporting the most diverse and sophisticated researches without spinning off into obscurantism or idiosyncrasy" (xv). This observation actually echoes what Scott Slovic had pointed out in his essay on ecocriticism in *The Green Studies Reader* (2000) before: "ecocriticism has no central, dominant doctrine or theoretical apparatus—rather, ecocritical theory, such as it is, is being re-defined daily by the actual practice of thousands of literary scholars around the world" (161). If a critical practice is in a process of being defined daily by thousands of critics it would look like an unfortunate academic janus with procreating faces. Therefore this is a misfortune rather than a scored point for ecocritical enterprise today. According to Tallmadge and Harrington's argument, ecocriticism has grown into a field of literary study which has adopted an eclectic approach to the study of literature. Employing multiple points of view the eclectic approach, however, privileges pluralism and leads to hermeneutical confusion without affording a distinctive ecocritical method of reading. Therefore the eclectic approach has the disadvantage of being too derivative and unprincipled. Being interdisciplinary is one advantage for ecocriticism, but using the methods of other theories as a "mixed herd" to quote Cheryl Glotfelty (xxii), creates a major shortcoming. Lawrence Buell's critique of this

approach in his "The Ecocritical Insurgency" shows the oddity of the eclectic means of ecocritical interpretations:

Yet it would not be accurate to characterize the movement as nothing more than an infinitely-expanding menu of noncompetitive, happily coexistent possibilities, nor to suppose that all who have become associated with it (whether by choice or by ascription) feel equally content to let pluralism take precedence over the quest for consensus. (703)

Furthermore mere contention of the fact that ecocriticism is not a theory, but an attitude, that it should remain loosely constructed, places it on shaky grounds. Avoiding to generate its own systematic theory makes ecocriticism potentially fuzzy in its method. Ecocriticism, like the other contemporary theories of literature, needs its own solid systematic theoretical ground if it wants to offer informed discussions. Anticipating this shortcoming that ecocriticism is "theoretically unsophisticated" (165), Patrick Murphy wrote in *Literature, Nature and Other: Ecofeminist Critiques* (1995): "Unlike new historicist, postcolonial, and cultural studies, which have evolved from a theoretically informed rethinking of the discipline that has produced new scholarship, new programs and departments, and new courses, ecological criticism finds itself in a different evolution at this point in time" (164). In fact, in order to surpass its ambivalent methodological orientation, and to effect change in today's literary and academic community, ecocriticism needs to be more fully engaged in a dynamic interaction with literary theory, not in a derivative sense but to develop its own unique theoretical footing. But, despite a number of attempts at its theorizing from writers such as SueEllen Campbell, Dominick Head, Neil Sammels, Dana Phillips, and Gretchen Legler, who draw mostly from various lines of poststructuralist thought, ecocriticism still remains controversial and antagonistic about its insufficient theoretical engagement.

In its dislike of theory ecocriticism has often produced a method of writing labeled as "narrative criticism" by Scott Slovic, "praise-song school" by Michael P. Cohen (21), and "curatorial model of literary scholarship" by Dana Phillips (*The Truth* ix). Michael P. Cohen points to the dangers of this approach by positing that such writings might produce a problematic type of sermonizing, fall into travelogues, or remain as journalistic accounts (22) which, apparently, are not fit for literary theorizing. Likewise, in his insightful article "Ecocriticism, Literary Theory and the Truth of Ecology," Dana Phillips criticizes "the antitheoretical spirit of ecocriticism" (578) by stating that the ecocritics "treat literary theory as if it were a noxious weed" (589). As he argues, "[t]he nature of representation is one of the chief concerns of literary theory, but the preponderance of theory is something else

ecocritics dislike about current literary studies" (578). This is hard to understand, because, as Arran E. Gare has pointed out, "[t]heories are ways of experiencing the world, conceptual frameworks in terms of which the world is interpreted and made sense of" (111). In other words, theories are ways of formulating meaning making processes, and they help us develop critical perspectives of how our discourses construct our realities, how language affects meaning making, and how meanings get contested within particular discourses. A wholesale rejection of literary theory, then, is not a wise strategy in ecocritical studies. It only brings uninformed judgments as the one passed by Glen A. Love: "the revaluation of nature will be accompanied by a major reordering of the literary genres, with realist and other discourses which values unity rising over post-structuralist nihilism" ("Revaluing Nature" 236). It is important to note that ecological discourses, too, combine ecological and textual diversity, and richness of meaning. For this reason their meanings resist being totalizable. For example, Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms* (1995), Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977), or Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974), as some of the typical environmental texts, are fashioned to create a reality effect, that is true, but they also contain a multitude of fictional, cultural and ecological meanings. To restrict this richness of meaning only with referential readings would be a failure to pay due homage to them. Therefore, studying environmental literature from a more stimulating perspective of, say its "ecological conception of textuality" (Cooley 252), would actually reveal that after all, all texts are "complex fabric of signs" to quote Hugh Silverman (73), which never consolidate in a relational singularity in terms of textual unity. So, theoretical investigations of both environmental and literary texts would reveal that "neither texts nor biotic communities are closed systems" (Cooley 253). In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* Annie Dillard expresses it more ecologically: "We walk around; we see a shred of infinite possible combinations of an infinite variety of forms" (147). Textual diversity and biodiversity thus shake hands in her book.

Instead of recognizing the text in its semiotic complexity—even though nature writing in general may seem to hide this complexity—representational scholarship in ecocriticism tends to produce a type of literary interpretation in the form of self-indulgence. As Michael P. Cohen cogently expresses it, "[e]cocriticism must question more closely the nature of environmental narrative, not simply praise it, as it has too frequently" (23). To illustrate how "narrative scholarship" finds expression in the referential mode of ecocriticism, let me quote a typical passage from William H. Rueckert's reading of Barry

Lopez's *River Notes*. Describing the act of entering the river in the text Rueckert writes:

More than anything else, this book tries to destroy the human tendency to reduce nature to or transform it into something that it is not, especially abstractions, symbols, or formulae. Nature is. Birds are. Herons are herons. Stone is stone. Grains of sand must be experienced, known, and understood in terms of their own being and individuality. The river is there to experience, know, share being with. The same is true of nature in the larger sense. If you try to reduce very much that find in Lopez's book to symbols, you will only stub your mind. ("Barry Lopez" 143)

As Rueckert's reading clearly shows, this type of overemphasis on the literary representations of the environment produces, what Dominic Head calls, "a misconceived notion of how environmental representation functions" (32), for it mistakes words with things.

Viewing the representations of the natural environment, especially in nature writing, from the lenses of environmentalist philosophies, most of the ecologically informed criticism has, thus, taken a referential turn in its critical practice. Lawrence Buell's views have had a particular impact in encouraging this turn. In his influential book *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), Buell called for a revival of the representational properties of literature, and argued for the importance of investigating "literature's capacity for articulating the nonhuman environment" (10). Buell's critical stance against the tendency of contemporary literary criticism to see everything, including nature, as a discursive construct echoes the general ecocritical dislike of theory:

All major strains of contemporary literary theory have marginalized literature's referential dimension by privileging structure, text(uality), ideology, or some other conceptual matrix that defines the space discourse occupies apart from factual "reality" [...] Structuralism and post-structuralism broke down the barrier between literary and nonliterary, not however to rejoin literary discourse to the world but to conflate all verbal artifacts within a more spacious domain of textuality. (86)

Buell posits that "environmental interpretation requires us to rethink our assumptions about the nature of representation" (2) and thus advocates a return to the mimetic tradition of referentiality in literature: "Clearly the claims of realism merit reviving," he states, "so as to enable one to reimagine textual representations as having a dual accountability to matter and to discursive mentation" (92). In his "The Ecocritical Insurgency" Buell praises ecocritics such as Howarth and Love, who attempt to "redirect critical attention toward literature's engagement with the physical environment" (705). This engagement



according to them best manifests in a referential mode of writing. Besides Buell, whose views continue to inform ecocriticism, the British critics Terry Gifford and Laurence Coupe have also been influential in directing ecocriticism towards the tradition of referentiality. In his *Green Voices: Understanding Contemporary Nature Poetry* (1995), Terry Gifford focuses on the so-called extratextual presence of nature in poetry, stating that his book is “about our living relationship with the material reality we sometimes call ‘the environment’ or ‘nature’ or ‘our inner selves’ or ‘our bodies’” (10). Similarly Laurence Coupe in his Preface to *The Green Studies Reader* (2000) identifies his aim as one of analyzing the realm of material culture and nature as opposed to the textual studies in ecocritical practice. In the same vein the American critic Leonard Scigaj in his *Sustainable Poetry: Four American Eco-poets* (1999) promotes referentiality in the study of nature poetry. These ecocritics tend to perceive environmental literature as a potential resource for examining the importance of environmental values. They formulate their interpretations on a naive understanding of the relationship between literature and the material reality of nature.

In this context it can be stated that at its best ecocriticism uses literature as a pretext to study environmental issues and evaluates relevant texts according to their capacity to articulate ecological contexts. The critical practice in ecocriticism then operates from the premises of mimetic theories of literature. The mimetic tradition of criticism itself is founded upon the assumption of “[r]eferentiality of literary meaning” (Riffaterre 107), according to which representations of nature in environmental literature, and especially in nature writing, are assumed to have a referential accuracy of realistic detail, and to be transparent. As such they are considered to provide an unmediated access to the natural environment itself. This is, however, what Michael Riffaterre calls a “referential fallacy” (108), which is based on the misconception of finding faithful recordings of the natural world in environmental literature, and referential meaning in literary texts. In this regard, what characterizes much of ecocritical practice can be defined as a “certain yearning for the return of the referent” in Peter Brooks’s words (73); but this is not an unproblematic return.

This approach disregards the question of how accurately literature can represent the natural environment, or to be more precise, how exactly language refers to reality. Since representations of reality in literature are always already culturally encoded, and because they are cognitive constructions, the answer to this question remains a matter of contestation. Thus the troublesome question of how adequately can any text provide a stable access to reality is always linked to cultural assumptions and to conceptual frameworks which are subject to

change. If such an access is under erasure and is always deferred, as poststructuralist theory asserts, then, in Gary Lease's words, "our many representations of nature and human are [...] always and ultimately failures" (5); or as Michael Bennet argues referring to poststructuralist theory, "we can never definitively know something outside of the language we use to describe it" (299). In Etienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey's formulation, "the real referents 'outside' the discourse [...] has no function here as a non-literary non-discursive anchoring point predating the text" (91). According to them this anchorage, which they argue is more complex than "representation," functions "as an effect of discourse. So, the literary discourse itself institutes and projects the presence of the 'real' in the manner of hallucination" (92). Representations of nature both in environmental and traditional literature project an effect of reality but do not merely represent the *real* material condition of nature. In fact what they do is create a model of reality that fashions our discourses and shapes our cultural attitudes to the natural environment. The roots of the ecological crisis, for example, are traced back to such a model known as the dualistic paradigm, or model of reality, in the social sciences.

## II. The Postmodern Debate

The postmodern debate around the idea of 'representation,' however, has shown that the notion of representation is a highly problematic issue. As Thomas Docherty points out, in its conventional, untheorized form, representation "is an 'imitation,' more or less adequate, more or less precise, of something whose ontological status is more stable and assured, more grounded or foundational. The representation itself, in words, paint, music or movement, exists in order to 'evoke' that supposedly prior presence, more or less successfully" (97). This is essentially a realist epistemology which Buell invoked in his call for reviving the claims of realism in ecocriticism. But, we already know from postmodernism that representation is "always already misrepresentation" since the "relation between representation and prior referent can only be *ironic, deceptive*" (Docherty 98). It is deceptive because, as Linda Hutcheon reminds us, "*Reference is not correspondance, after all*" (*A Poetics* 144). Contesting the mimetic postulate of referentiality of meaning Michael Riffaterre also maintains that, "the representation of reality is a verbal construct in which meaning is achieved by reference from words to words, not to things" (107). It is important to understand that "[t]his is not really a devaluing of the referential dimension of language at all, as many theorists of postmodernism assert," as Linda Hutcheon rightly states (*A Poetics* 145). Postmodernism does not deny the existence of

reality, but what it claims is that in the “shifting epistemological terrain that comprises the contemporary world” (Smith 6), reality is already mediated by representation within a set of discourses, and thus there are only competing interpretations to truth claims and no ultimate grounds of explanation for a preexisting reality. In Linda Hutcheon’s lucid explanation: “postmodernism challenges our mimetic assumptions about representation (in any of its ‘scrambled menu’ meanings): assumptions about its transparency and common-sense naturalness” (*The Politics* 32). Postmodernism does not claim to erase the referent itself, it “acknowledges its existence as representation—that is, as interpreting (indeed as creating) its referent, not as offering direct and immediate access to it” (*The Politics* 34). This is what most mimetically oriented ecocritics fail to understand. One obvious example is Kate Soper’s misreading of postmodernism:

In short, it is not language that has a hole in the ozone layer; and ‘real’ thing continues to be polluted and degraded even as we refine our deconstructive insights at the level of the signifier. Hence the inclination to respond to the insistence on the textuality of nature [...] by claiming to refute it with straightforward realist kick, by pointing to the latest oil-spill or figures on species extinction and saying, ‘there’s nature fouled and destroyed by human industry, and I refute your anti-naturalism thus.’ This is an understandable response to those who would have us focus only on the play of the ‘sign’ of nature. (124)

Like Kate Soper’s, Michael E. Soulé’s argument against deconstruction also echoes similar concerns:

Living nature—the native species of plants and animals in their native settings—is under two kinds of siege; one is overt, the other covert. The overt siege is physical; it is carried out by increasing multitudes of human beings equipped and accompanied by bulldozers, chainsaws, plows, and livestock. The covert assault is ideological and therefore social; it serves to justify, where useful, the physical assault. A principal tool of the social assault is deconstruction. (137)

Noting the dangers of reducing all reality into a text, David Mazel, in his article “Performing ‘Wilderness’ in *The Last of the Mohicans*,” also asks the same question that Kate Soper and Michael Soulé pose: “If ‘nature’ is ‘merely’ a text, what about environmental destruction?” (103). As these exemplary quotations indicate, this type of criticism assumes that postmodernism—which here is taken to be synonymous with poststructuralism<sup>2</sup> is a meaningless celebration of the play of language which disregards everything that is outside it. Deriving from Derrida’s assertion that “there is no presence before and outside

semiological difference" (12), or in other words there is nothing outside the text, this approach inevitably imprisons nature and practically all reality within an endlessly differentiating play of signifiers. If everything is a 'text' to be endlessly revisable in infinite interpretations nature loses its ontological primacy. It is out of this extreme textualist view—which takes all reality to be a linguistic construct—that these critics think postmodern theory draws its basic premises. Naturally then their claims justify the perils of such an approach; and as Rebecca Raglon and Marion Scholtmeijer do, we can readily blame the radical theories of textuality and condemn language as a "guilty participant" (248) in the environmental destruction. This is a schizophrenic feature of poststructuralism rather than postmodernism which, according to Patricia Waugh, suggests that "there can never be an escape from the prisonhouse of language" (*Metafiction* 53). This is not the defining characteristic of postmodernism. However it is on this erroneous understanding of it that these critics project their criticisms, and thus promote the return of the referent. Postmodernism may have initially flirted with this pole, but its other, more legitimate pole today, in Waugh's explanation, "accepts a substantial real world not entirely composed of relationships within language" (*Metafiction* 53). Brenda Marshall's accurate definition would be useful to cite here to clarify the confusion about what postmodernism really is:

Postmodernism is about language. About how it controls, how it determines meaning, and how we try to exert control through language. About how language restricts, closes down, insists that it stands for some thing. Postmodernism is about how 'we' are defined within that language, and within specific historical, social, cultural matrices [...] it's about power and powerlessness, about empowerment, and about all the stages in between and beyond and unthought of. (4)

The most important aspect of postmodernism is that it "expresses a crisis about the legitimation of modern forms of knowledge" (Waugh, *Practicing Postmodernism* 54). By exposing how knowledge is socially and historically conditioned, postmodernism shows that knowledge and truth are not objective and universal realities. In other words, postmodernism questions all totalized forms of knowledge as well as the underlying structures behind specific discursive practices that disconnect human culture from nature and that perceive nature only as a verbal construct. That the present forms of knowledge have not initiated sufficient political and social action against the ongoing environmental destruction across the globe clearly indicate their failure. Accordingly all are anthropocentric and responsible for social and ecological oppression. Behind the ecocritical resistance to theory, then,

lies the fear of falling into purely textualist, constructionist model of nature and thus moving away from addressing environmental issues in literature. But ironically, it is the postmodern, or in the following case poststructuralist thought, that unravels the destructive social and cultural matrices that make environmental degradation possible. Arran E. Gare makes an excellent point in this regard:

Poststructuralism not only exposes the structures which make environmental destruction appear inevitable and which constitute people as the agents of this destruction; it has been called upon to explain why environmentalists are failing in their struggle, and to show them how to be more effective. (92)

By disclosing the instability of present socio-political and cultural structures and epistemologies as power poles that desensitize human communities today, postmodernism opens space for a new, more ecologically sound theory within itself.

The global environmental crisis provides ample evidence to dispute the deficient logic of radical textualism which reduces nature to nothing more than an abstract concept. Surely, such a view leaves little room for nature to effect change in human consciousness and justifies the above criticism. But associating this extremist position of social/linguistic/cultural/textual constructionism with postmodernism is also misguided, because postmodernism does not situate itself in this model of what Eileen Crist calls "epistemic relativism" (6) at all. It is a mistake to think that postmodernism portrays the natural world as "mute, intrinsically meaningless, ontologically indeterminate, epistemologically unavailable, and aesthetically indistinct" (Crist 8). Obviously this type of reasoning is far from producing any transformation in any of our discourses; instead it contributes to the perpetuation of the anthropocentric thought. Postmodernism not only subverts this pattern of thinking, but also works to validate the dynamic complexity and intrinsic value of nature's ontological existence. Therefore, it is rather unfortunate to see that even the most theoretically oriented ecocritics, like Dana Phillips, mistake postmodernism with extreme relativist positions. When he boldly but wrongly claims that "postmodernists are the kind of relativists" (*The Truth* 33), he repeats the common misunderstanding of postmodern thought. This is not too surprising, because for many critics postmodernism represents a disruption of reality, a purely textualist orientation, or loss of fixed referents in the real world. But it must be remembered that since postmodernism rests on "conflicting positions of different theoretical discussions" (Oppermann 20),<sup>3</sup> it should not be reduced to one limiting defining position such as textualism or relativism. This is precisely because it "installs

and then subverts the very concepts it challenges" (Hutcheon, *A Poetics* 3). For this reason it cannot be claimed that, while it is so critical of all truth claims postmodernism would easily fall into the rhetoric of social or linguistic constructionism as a reliable truth claim about nature's status. Just as the grand narratives have been, the constructionist and textualist positions are also manufactured knowledges ordered by a particular version of postmodernism which has become rather obsolete today. The doctrine of constructionism is as dubious as the doctrine of objectivism en route to the desired theory of the domination of nature. It is another insistent epistemological theory to collapse the ontological reality of the physical environment to a disembodied textualized world, another specific form of hegemony. By insisting on the rhetorical nature of truth, textualist/constructionist argument crafts the natural world into a disempowered object of human domination. This is a dangerous vision that closes off the possibility of generating a sound ontological theory of nature based on the principle of relationality. Instead it generates a rhetoric of absent referents and deferred signifieds. This is not what postmodernism advocates. Postmodernism in its ecological outlook does not represent the ecosystem as a social formation, or as a discursive construct. The relativist forms of knowledge claims are not offered as alternatives to totalized forms of knowledge within this vision of postmodern thought; nor can nature be theorized in terms of textualist forms of knowledge without falling into moral irresponsibility.

### III. The Ecocentric Postmodern Approach

Postmodernism in its general framework is based on the idea of heterogeneity which makes it complicit with the ecological principles of diversity, interconnectedness and relationality. This is an ecologically informed, reconstructive postmodern theory which can provide a discursive change in our conceptual fields. One of the major characteristics of ecocentric postmodern thought is the deep questioning of all hierarchical systems which basically privilege the concept of domination. Because postmodernism emphatically dismantles disjunctive opposites, it opens space for mutually constitutive relationships between culture and nature. In this system nature is no longer perceived to be the Other. Therefore, it can no longer be treated in terms of power relations. The ecocentric postmodern thought fosters a cooperative learning process shifting attention from the position of authority to the idea of relationality. As I have argued elsewhere<sup>4</sup> postmodern theory as such is to be understood as an unfolding process and its narratives will be multidimensional and rhizomic in nature. The concept of rhizome is essential in understanding the ecological dimension of postmodernism,

because it is embedded in the principles of multiplicity, connection, heterogeneity, and rupture (Deleuze and Guattari 7-12). These principles are the defining features of ecologically oriented postmodernism. The ecocritical analysis of literary texts in a postmodern perspective as such will be polysemic and multivocal, opening up new strategies of reading, taking into consideration conflicting viewpoints, and exploring and engaging in environmental issues with a serious concern to the ways in which they have been written. After all when the new science reveals nature as a complex phenomenon “constituted by forces of diversity, evolution, instability, and by a complex dialectic of order and disorder” (Best and Kellner 203), it inevitably necessitates a reconstructive postmodern theory which has to be multiperspectival to theorize this new way of modeling reality in literary discourses. Thus, to critically assess the ways in which nature has been defined, constructed, interpreted, recontextualized, reflected, represented or misrepresented in narrative fiction and nature writing will be a significant ecocritical concern to build a field-defining ecocritical postmodern theory which can explore the problematic relations between culture and the environment in their literary contexts.

The ecologically oriented postmodernism draws attention to the linguistic manipulations behind the discursive constitution of nature at the bottom of which lies human oppression of the nonhuman world resulting in the environmental degradation. Exploring how human representations have produced specifically anthropocentric nature discourse, with postmodern lenses, would lead to the formation of new insights about how language shapes our understanding of the nonhuman world. Michael Lundblad’s discussion of Chinua Achebe’s *Arrow of God* from what he calls “malignant” discourses of postcolonial and ecocritical perspectives provides a useful example to the manipulative use of language in the context of environmental problems. Another fine ecocritical study of colonial perspectives in African literature is by Byron Caminero-Santangelo. Although Santangelo writes in favor of representational criticism his discussion of “environmental degradation and colonial conservation” sheds light on the colonization of nature in terms of the anthropocentric use of language. Christine Gerhardt’s essay on “The Greening of African-American Landscapes,” too, is noteworthy as it focuses on the convergence between ecocriticism and postcolonial theory.<sup>5</sup> More pertinent to the subject is Cheryl Lousley’s essay, “Home on the Prairie,” in *The ISLE Reader*, which is another fine example exploring the relationship between writing “nature” and cultural narratives (319). Similarly, Jeffrey Myers’s discussion of ecological imperialism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, which reproduces “‘acts of mastery’ [...] over the ecology of Africa as a whole” (98), and George

B. Handley's postcolonial reading of Derek Walcott's poetry in terms of a "loving desire for place" (11), and "historical belonging in the landscape" (13-14) point to how specific forms of discourses can powerfully engender meanings and influence the unconscious mechanism of our readings and misreadings of nature. Seeing the act of narration in a given environmental text as a signifying process, the ecocritic can expose how meanings are produced over nature within specific discourses as indicated in the postcolonial examples. In the light of this premise, the insights of ecocentric postmodern theory will provide the ecocritic with necessary analytical tools to explore ideological forces behind the discursive constructions of nature.

The postmodern ecocritical theory fosters not only ecological perceptions of our connection with the natural world, and perceives nature as a process of unfolding and dynamic flow, but also contests the dominant ideological discourses behind various representations of nature. This is a model of reality which has an integrative, participatory, and a nondualist framework. In this respect, this "transformed postmodernism," in Jim Cheney's words (87), shares the same ecocentric vision of environmentalist discourses. In fact, "the ideas of postmodernity and those of ecology are complementary halves of a new multidimensional environmental ethics and practice" (White 32-33). As Dominic Head argues, "ecocriticism can legitimately respond more directly to the theoretical implications of postmodernity, through a differently conceived reorientation, or informed recentering of human activity" (30). Although Head proposes Green architecture as a good model to apply to ecocriticism, blending the emphasis on textuality and the pursuit of ecological issues in literary analysis to produce a new theoretical ecocritical orientation, he is also aware of this method's dubious flexibility. Perhaps the gap between the poststructuralist emphasis on pure textuality and ecocritical focus on nature as a pure referent can be bridged by considering the possibility of another characteristic of ecocentric postmodernism: a dialogic interaction of texts and contexts. A dialogic construction of human/nature interactions would also conjoin literary and scientific discourses. As Patrick Murphy maintains, "[d]ialogics lets us recognize the mutually [d]constitutive character of these dyads" (12), and "provides a conceptual framework for being able to critique and affirm without absolutes" (15). A dialogic ecocritical analysis also prevents the ecocritic from lapsing into pluralism. According to Murphy, employing dialogics as an ecocritical method actually leads to multivocality which directly associates it with the ecocentric postmodern approach: "That is not surprising, for anyone employing dialogics as a method must find herself constantly shuttling back and



forth between text and context, discourse and community, and personal and political" (20).

Moreover, the postmodern ecocritical theory can address postmodern fictions within which nature may not appear to be of primary concern but may nevertheless function as a literary device to affect the signification process. Particularly metafictional novels demand such an inquiry. At a random selection, Ronald Sukenick's overtly self-reflexive and discontinuous texts, which revel in linguistic play, can be given as typical examples to metafictional writing. Even in his highly subversive metafiction *Out* (1973), there is enough ecocritical material for critical scrutiny. Although the characters are indefinite verbal entities in this novel, who journey across the United States from New York to California, they reflect an implicit longing for natural energy. One character called Empty Fox recites a short poem which stands out as a metaphor for nature's reviving power for the artist/narrator:

Without the wind  
The kite is dead  
With it everything  
Is possible (140)

The metaphor of the wind is connected to narrative freedom, which allows the writer to expose its interpretations in a playful manner. Since nature signifies open possibilities, the text playfully contests any interpretive totalization, and shows the reader how 'reality' is verbally constructed out of its prior interpretations. Sukenick says in an interview that, "[n]o matter how you come at 'reality,' it is already interpreted before the fact. Then what you do is move into the interpretations and deal with the *interpretations*, not with reality, because that's what the really acute artist realizes he's dealing with" (282). Of course Sukenick is not the only example to cite here as a typical metafictionist. Raymond Federman, Donald Barthelme, John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, William Gass, among many others, are prominent early postmodern American writers whose works would bring new perspectives of exploration to ecocriticism and help expand it. Ecocritical analysis of postmodern fictions, then, can challenge arguments like Dominick Head's who posit that ecocritical practice may not be applicable to narrative fiction which do not "meet ecocritical requirements" (33).

Postmodern explorations of ecological contexts and issues of these writers' metafiction, and of less experimental postmodern novels by the British writers would no doubt enhance the ecocritical practice. For example, Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983), Jim Crace's *The Gift of Stones* (1997) and *Quarantine* (1997), J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986), Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* (1989) and *Gut Symmetries* (1997), Julian

Barnes's *A History of the World in 10/2 Chapters* (1989) and *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), Peter Ackroyd's *Milton in America* (1997), Lawrence Norfolk's *The Pope's Rhinoceros* (1996), Ian Watson's *Whores of Babylon* (1988) are, with the exception of Coetzee's *Foe*, some of the British postmodern novels which can be examined with the lenses of postmodern ecocritical methods. A postmodern ecocritical analysis would also address the perceived conceptualizations of nature in metafictional texts. In view of this issue John Cooley makes an appealing point by suggesting that, "A healthy textual environment, much like a healthy biosphere is best promoted by encouraging conditions favorable for the production and reception of a numerous and diverse textuality" (253). Diverse textuality is highly complicit with ecological fact of biodiversity. Hence intertextuality, textual diversity, and ecological interrelatedness of the ecosystem converge to facilitate a postmodern ecocritical practice. The referential dimension of language no doubt holds an important place in environmental literature; however, its self-reflexivity as explored by the postmodern writers cannot be off handedly dismissed in ecocritical evaluations.

Surely nature cannot be regarded only as a textual construct (the whole ecosystem is out there regardless of how the human language constructs it), nor can it simply be discussed outside the implications of contemporary literary theory. Since nature has both an ontological existence outside the realm of language and rather problematic textualized versions within the human discourses that are ordered according to ideological and social practices, it deserves an interactive dialogic approach. In this regard ecocriticism can evade totalizations created by foundationalist arguments in environmentalism today as well as the relativism created by pluralist arguments. Thus the polemic about realist versus textualist views, which only helps generate just another version of duality that the environmental philosophy successfully critiques, can be bypassed. In this respect the representations of nature in literature can neither be wholly dissociated from their referents in nature, nor from their complex conceptualizations in language. The emphasis on the constructed nature of the physical environment may dissolve the unchanging, static, and monolithic conceptualizations of the identity of nature in the human realm and discourses, and the referential criticism's emphasis on accepting nature's existence as nontext may prevent the critic from falling into the prisonhouse of language. These two views are not mutually exclusive. The epistemological dangers of alienation from nature, or the textualist perils of seeing the world only as a text can be avoided. Making the two views coterminous creates a new recognition of the interweaving of these two opposite theoretical approaches, creating a multiperspectival system

of interpretations. This can provide the ecocritic with useful ways of integrating textualist and contextualist approaches; because, "we belong not only to networks of language and culture, but also to the networks of the land" (Campbell 211). Just as ecocriticism can enrich the postmodern thought by its more salient worldly and moral footing, the postmodern thought can enhance ecocriticism by its critique of the referentiality of meaning. It is at this intersection that ecocriticism can build a multifocal stance and challenge the extreme formalist adherence to textuality by bringing in ecocritical notions of interconnection, biodiversity and integral awareness of nature. In other words, our rather problematic history of interrelations with nature can afford us to reformulate our knowledge of nature. As John Cooley states: "Ecocritics will find some fertile common ground with contemporary literary theorists. Both camps embrace an organic or ecological conception of textuality, viewing any given text as a complex community of intrinsic and extrinsic rationality" (252). Cooley concedes that texts are "organic communities of interrelated entities" (252), an analogy which can prove to be very useful in the ecocritical debate about textualist and realist approaches. As Patrick D. Murphy cogently argues, "words shape not only the reality that human beings perceive, but also the experiencing of reality, of corporeal existence, shapes the way that human beings use and understand language in the form of discourses, dialects and utterances. This referentiality links literature and all forms of writing with human agency, and human agency evokes the matter of responsibility" ("The Four Elements").

Moral responsibility to nature as the determining factor of such criticism supersedes the uniformity as well as relativity of extremely realist and textualist positions. Ecocriticism may successfully confront the range of interpretations projected upon nature by the human imagination in its expanded purview. By exposing the deep structures of anthropocentric discourses which sustain deliberately exploitative ideas and attitudes towards the natural environment in literary texts, ecocriticism may explore the ideological threads in the constructions of the nonhuman world and develop theoretical tools for ecologically informed readings.

The following list of questions from a postmodern stance can be useful in generating a theoretically legitimate postmodern ecocritical analysis as well as help orient ecocritical practice towards postmodern fictions: From what ethical and ideological position is nature textually constructed in a given literary text? What are the political reverberations of this approach to environmental issues? How is language used to create specific cultural views of those issues? Does the constructedness of nature totally decenter its empirical dimensions? How is the text

ordered to challenge the reader to confront difficulties and questions concerning the environmental problems today? Do the postmodernist representational strategies obscure the real conditions of nature's material existence? Do they present partial truths about the environmental issues? Does the absence of nature in a given fictional narrative create any sociological implications about human/nonhuman separation in the context? Does any kind of place (be it natural environment or the urban space) occupy a conceptual and aesthetic space in the narrative? Does nature hold an ontological primacy in the narrative, or is it an absent presence? Does the use of fragmentation, discontinuity, play, and other devices of postmodern fictions suggest any ontological alienation from the natural world? Does the environment have a passive subject position? Are there any suppressed ecological elements in this discourse? Does the text generate any fundamental dichotomies between nature and culture? In short the object of ecocritical analysis, in the light of questions posed as such, is to examine the processes and conditions of the constructions of nature and/or their absence within the present discourses that literary texts employ.

Let's consider an ecocritical analysis of a postmodern text, Coetzee's *Foe* (1986), in which nature (in the guise of tongueless Friday) appears as a discursively shaped subject position. The meaning of nature is constantly shifting as it continues to be fashioned by the narrator Susan Barton's discourse. Ecocritical analysis here would explore how the textually constructed nature of nature and human identities underline the dynamics of their domination, show how the categories of dominance are represented in such a discourse, and finally expose how this domination is subverted. To illustrate briefly from the novel, let me quote from Susan Barton, who is telling the story of Crusoe and Friday to Daniel Defoe as she claims to have lived on the deserted island with them.

Friday has no command of words and therefore no defence against being re-shaped day by day in conformity with the desire of others. I say he is a cannibal and he becomes a cannibal; I say he is a laundryman and he becomes a laundryman. What is the truth of Friday? You will respond: he is neither cannibal nor laundryman, these are mere names, they do not touch his essence, he is a substantial body, he is himself, Friday is Friday. But that is not so. No matter what he is to himself [...] what he is to the world is what I make of him. Therefore the silence of Friday is a helpless silence. (121-22)

Susan Barton's account is typical of postmodern understanding of language. As the above quotation reveals, Friday is the discursively constituted Other, and stands helpless on his own as he lacks the ability

of speech. As a subject Friday signifies nature in his helpless silence and gets inevitably subjected to human constructions. Susan Barton's statement—"The true story will not be heard till by art we found a means of giving voice to Friday" (118)—points to the problem of giving voice to nature. Though Friday stands out as the symbolic embodiment of nature, the whole natural phenomena in the novel contribute to the signifying process itself. The question to be addressed is how the nonhuman voices may find expression through their discursivity, and in relation, how the otherness of such voices are embedded in our usage of language. But the prime question the novel poses in its postmodern play of enunciation is how the otherness of nature enters language as a non-speaking subject. Donna Haraway's explanation is fitting in this respect: "The world neither speaks itself nor disappears in favor of a master decoder. The codes of the world are not still, waiting only to be read" (198-99). The ending of *Foe* reveals the importance of such codes waiting to be read. A different narrator takes over Susan's story and finds Susan Barton dead as well as the dying Friday on the floor of her house. Putting his ear to Friday's mouth he listens: "I begin to hear the faintest faraway roar: as she said, the roar of waves in a seashell; and over that [...] the whine of the wind and the cry of a bird" (154). When this unidentified narrator presses his ear closer to Friday's mouth he hears the voice of nature: "From his mouth, without a breath, issue the sounds of the island" (154). Thus, nature defies its final defeat even in death and asserts its own 'natural' voice. This is how the text makes nature subvert its subjugation into discursive formations by the human agency.

As Coetzee's novel dramatizes and effectively suggests, nature is 'written' by the human agency, culture, history and politics, and thus unable to intervene in these forces, because it is already determined as such. However, the 'writtenness' of nature does not in the least change its existence as a force in itself. It continues to function as an ontological force, sending warning signals with its tornadoes, ozone depletion, climactic shifts, extinction of species, melting of the icebergs, and global warming as a final response to the detrimental human interference with its elementals, and regardless of how these forces are constituted socially or culturally which the human agency sees as generating multiple meanings for the concepts they deploy. It is through this act of interpreting that nature enters the social and scientific discourses. Thus the question of how the human beings and institutions interpret nature and get to participate in the constructions of ideological perspectives is the question that the postmodern ecocritical theory can fruitfully explore. Since how nature is ideologically conceptualized, socially constructed, and culturally constructed is related to our ongo-

ing destructive relations with and our harmful treatment of nature, the postmodern ecocritical approach would inevitably focus on how its identity in many literary texts is created out of such terms as otherness, difference and oppression, as well as nostalgic romantic notions.

If ecocriticism positions itself at the cross-roads of an ecocentric postmodern theory and environmental philosophies it can achieve a broader perspective, and generate critically subversive and challenging interpretations of those literary texts dealing with representations of nonhuman nature, as well as critiques of authority in which nature still holds a politically and discursively powerless position. Then ecocriticism can offer a multiperspectival approach that probes into the problematic relationship of representation and the natural environment. To work towards such a goal would be to expand the theoretical horizon beyond the present limitations of the realist conventions as well as the radical textualist contentions. In a world much shaped by the local and global processes of decentralization, discontinuity, and fragmentation at socio-political and cultural levels of interactions with the ecosystem within the human communities today, it is not possible to ignore the postmodern condition and write according to the nostalgic desires of realist traditions. Therefore ecocriticism should be placed, in Rosendale's words, "in a more productive relation with other, perhaps suspiciously humanistic perspectives and critical practices" (xvii). This goal in my opinion can be attained by a postmodern ecocritical theory.

#### NOTES

1. See Michael P. Cohen's insightful essay, "Blues in the Green: Ecocriticism under Critique" which elaborates upon these questions (11-12). *Environmental History* 9.1 (January 2004): 9-36.

2. Postmodernism is often used synonymously with poststructuralism. Although they share common interests and similar concerns, equating them might be misleading because, poststructuralism is, as Marshall writes "an overly large umbrella term for a methodology" (7), whereas postmodernism is a style of thought that critiques and challenges the grand narratives of Western metaphysics, and as a larger worldview it transcends the dualism in Western thought. So poststructuralism is a method of reading and postmodernism is a mode of thinking.

3. See my article, "Toward an Ecocentric Postmodern Theory: Fusing Deep Ecology and Quantum Mechanics" for a more detailed argument on and introduction to the ecocentric postmodern theory. *The Trumpeter* 19. 1 (2003): 7-35.

4. *Ibid.*

5. See the following essays which are available online:

Lundblad, Michael. "Malignant and Beneficent Fictions: Constructing Nature in Ecocriticism and Achebe's *Arrow of God*." *West Africa Review*. 3.1 (2001)

<<http://www.africaresource.com/war/vol3.1/lundblad.html>> ; Caminero-Santangelo, Byron. "Environmentalism and African Literature: Old Questions and New Directions." <<http://africa.wisc.edu/ala2004/seminars/theory/carminero-santangelo.pdf>>; Gerhardt, Christine. "The Greening of African-American Landscapes: Where Ecocriticism Meets Post-colonial Theory." *The Mississippi Quarterly*. 55.4 (2002): 515(+19). Expanded Academic Asap. Gale Group Databases. College of Staten Island Lib., N.Y. Fall 2002. <<http://www.infotrack.galegroup.com>> .

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