Theologico-Politicus

Continens

Dissertationes aliquot,

Quibus ostenditur Libertatem Philosophandi non tantum
salva Pictate, & Republicae Pace possi concedi: sed
condem nis sicum Pace Repüblicae, ipsaque
Pictate tolli non possit.

Johan. Epist. I. Cap. IV. ver. XIII.

Per hoc cogitandum quod in Deo manemus, & Deus manet
in nobis, quod de Spiritu suo dedit nobis.

Hamburgi,

Apud Henricum Jüngers. 1672.
Materialism, Ecology, Aesthetics

Rachel Greenwald Smith

Mental decision on the one hand, and the appetite and physical state of the body on the other hand, are simultaneous in nature.  

The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice.

An ethic may be regarded as a mode of guidance for meeting ecological situations so new or intricate, or involving such deferred reactions, that the path of social expediency is not discernible to the average individual. Animal instincts are modes of guidance for the individual in meeting such situations. Ethics are possibly a kind of community instinct in-the-making.

In 1949, ecologist Aldo Leopold posited an ever-expanding global community that he imagined would grow to include all human and non-human life. He called the ethical underpinning of this community “the land ethic.” Crucially, he argued that this ethic would only emerge in the wake of substantial changes in both historically specific social structures and biologically anchored instincts. Seeing historical change on one hand and biological change on the other as fundamentally linked, Leopold ultimately saw the evolution of the human species as essential to the development of ecological ethics. In what follows, I turn to Leopold’s work as an example of the promises and dangers involved in the attempt to bring together two related but distinct forms of materialist analysis: one that we might call historical materialism and another that we could call corporeal or biological materialism. Whereas Leopold sees evolution as the linking term between historical change and bodily change, I find that what Leopold calls “animal instincts” we might today call “affect.” Given the past decade or so of criticism that demonstrates how we might read affect on a bodily level as culturally
produced, I argue that this way of understanding the production of affective registers might provide a better conceptual anchor for a historically grounded analysis of the production of bodily states and attitudes toward ecological systems. Of course, one of the many means by which affects are produced and circulated socially is literature. Recent work on the relationship between literature, art, and other cultural media and the provocation of affective experience suggests that the particularities of literary form might be involved in producing affects similar to those that Leopold imagined would catalyze humans’ collective impulses. This project therefore argues that Leopold’s work can be used as an unlikely foundation for an analysis of the ecological role of human aesthetic production.

**Evolutionary Praxis**

“When god-like Odysseus returned from the wars in Troy he hanged all on one rope a dozen slave-girls of his household, whom he suspected of misbehavior during his absence,” writes Leopold, beginning his enduring essay with what friends reported to be one of the forester’s favorite anecdotes.⁴ He continues with his oft-repeated punch line for this classical reference, explaining that for Homer, “This hanging involved no question of propriety. The girls were property. The disposal of property was then, as now, a matter of expediency, not of right and wrong.”

Taken at face value, nothing in this argument should be read as particularly provocative. Midcentury readers of Leopold’s work were well aware that the injustices of slavery were primarily defended on the basis of property rights. Yet as the essay continues, Leopold builds upon this initial suggestion to argue that ethical relations, which he defines as relations of mutual obligation, are impossible so long as the rights of ownership exclusively govern interactions. Anything defined solely as property and instrumentalized as such is subject to the freedom conferred on the owner of that property to do with it what he or she will. This is in total conflict with the mutual bonds of an ethical relation. In Leopold’s view, there is thus a direct relationship between social and environmental ethics and the historical development of the concept of property. “The Land Ethic” is a work that is widely understood to be innovative in its advocacy for certain practices of ecological conservation; it is read more often in introductions to environmental studies than in Marxist literary theory courses. Yet it begins with an implicit analysis of changes in systems of political economy and their influence on social, as well as ecological, forms of relation. The naturalist’s most famous essay on ecology can therefore be read, surprisingly, as expressing methodological tendencies that we might ally with historical materialism.

Leopold spent the decade between 1937 and 1947 writing and rewriting “The Land Ethic.” No doubt noting the effects of the implementation of Keynesian economic principles during the period (one can assume that the well-read and public policy-minded Leopold would have been at least peripherally aware of the publication of Keynes’ blockbuster *General Theory* in 1936) and the Roosevelt era’s innovation in social
safety nets, Leopold appears guardedly optimistic that conditions for social ethics might be improving. He notes, for instance, the horror with which Odysseus’s actions are viewed by his contemporaries, as well as, on a less spectacular and admittedly more insular register, the fact that “the existence of obligations over and above self-interest is [now] taken for granted in such rural community enterprises as the betterment of roads, schools, churches, and baseball teams.” Yet despite what he sees as progress in the social sphere, he bemoans the fact that such advances have not reached the ecological domain, pointing out that “[l]and-use ethics are still governed wholly by economic self-interest, just as social ethics were a century ago.” Even as Leopold finds interpersonal and social awareness of obligation and reciprocity to be on the rise, humans in his time have yet to recognize the land, by which he means animals, plants, and nonliving things, as worthy of ethical consideration.

Confronted with this prevailing lack of land ethics, Leopold arrives at a basic contradiction in the conceptualization of historical progress, one expressed in tense terms in Karl Marx’s “Theses on Feuerbach” (1845). If, as Marx paradoxically suggests, “men are products of circumstances,” while at the same time “men make changed circumstances,” then what compels those who are deeply informed by existing social and cultural ideology to change? As he points out in The German Ideology (1846), the notion that “life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life” means that the reach of critical discourse as a transformative force is severely restricted. The domain of the critic is therefore not the education of the masses, but rather the analysis of history, which “explains the formation of ideas from material practice.” In grounding change firmly within material productive practices, Marx even ultimately calls into question the usefulness of his own writing, particularly his work in the manifesto mode, since without the proper historical forces at play, “it is absolutely immaterial whether the idea of this revolution has been expressed a hundred times already.”

The liberal Leopold was no Marxist, but in detailing how educational and legal attempts at behavior modification have failed time and again to substantively affect human relations with the land, he echoes Marx’s suspicion toward the circulation of ideas as a revolutionary force. Moreover, it is clear that the question as to how change might occur is particularly sticky in the context of shifting attitudes toward the non-human, entities that cannot, in any traditional sense, rise up and confront their human exploiters. It therefore appears that this pronounced tension between the primacy of historical conditions in shaping human attitudes toward the land and the urgency of finding a way for beings without language or methods of recognizable protest to gain better protection and recognition leads Leopold to argue not for the intellectual persuasion of the masses, but the production of a different emotional or affective orientation to the non-human. Late in “The Land Ethic” he writes, qualifying his comments on the relationship between property relations and ethics, “the belief that economics determines all land use...is simply not true.” Instead, he predicts that
better land use practices will rely upon the cultivation of new “actions and attitudes.” For Leopold, in other words, the counter to historical determination cannot be merely taught; it must rather be deeply felt.

The need for attitudinal change to supplement intellectual persuasion is particularly acute, according to Leopold, in ecological relationships. Ecosystems, he argues, are characterized by their complexity, volatility, and unpredictability. He anticipates later work in ecological science, a larval field in his day, by emphasizing its resistance to understanding through traditional disciplinary methods, arguing, “the ordinary citizen today assumes that science knows what makes the community clock tick; the scientist is equally sure that he does not. He knows that the biotic mechanism is so complex that its workings may never be fully understood.” The actions and attitudes that are deemed necessary for the production of mutual relations with the land therefore must proceed in spite of a lack of information as to the consequences of any given action. So not only is there the typical causal problem of envisioning the source of change within a historical materialist perspective to contend with, but the production of affect that Leopold envisions cannot by definition arise out of enlightenment or demystification. Leopold therefore suggests that ecological ethics are primarily a matter of bodily impulse; hence, “animal instincts are modes of guidance” in situations “so new or intricate, or involving such deferred reactions, that the path of social expediency is not discernible to the average individual.”

The cultivation of certain biological impulses and preconscious reactions are therefore essential, in Leopold’s view, to any form of understanding that we might broadly call ecological.

Faced with the project of reconciling the historical specificity of ethical relations as exemplified in the Odysseus story with the primacy of bodily change in producing less-damaging ecological attitudes, Leopold combines history and biology in perhaps the most predictable fashion given the intellectual environment of the 1930s and 1940s: by invoking the concept of biological evolution. He identifies the movement from cooperative human practices to relations of mutual obligation with land, animals, plants, and nonliving participants in ecosystems, arguing that “this extension of ethics, so far studied only by philosophers, is actually a process in ecological evolution.” As rightly allergic as we may now be to the invocation of evolution to describe short-term changes in human behavior, this move on Leopold’s part makes some sense given the dilemma he finds himself faced with. As ethics, especially those that come into play in situations of ecological complexity, are not for Leopold primarily based on rational human judgment, his biologizing of ethical capacity is conceptually and historically explicable. His attention to historical change makes evolution a useful concept for him insofar as it explains the mutual dependence of history and biology. Perhaps this, too, explains Leopold’s urgency when he declares that the development of a land ethic is both “an evolutionary possibility and an ecological necessity.” Given the failures of formal education and the centrality of bodily change in ethical
development, evolution, it seems, is the only remaining source of hope. It is clear at this point in history that interpersonal, social, and ecological ethics — instinctual or otherwise — are not part of a biological evolutionary process, or at least not one that can be traced decade to decade. Leopold’s inability to anticipate the contingencies of economic and social policy, and, indeed, to assess the ethical shortcomings of his own time, might be the unfortunate result of the particular mode of biological materialism that informs his evolutionary hypothesis. Despite his attention to the development of property relations, for instance, Leopold ultimately lacks an attention to the historical, intellectual, and economic conditions that inform his own present, a time which was characterized by the unprecedented growth of social services that were, in turn, part of a massive compromise to defend American capitalism against socialist movements abroad as well as the internal conflicts that produced the Great Depression in the early part of the twentieth century. Many of the developments that Leopold sees as evidence of evolving social ethics were, in fact, contingent upon the specific economic conditions of his time.

Yet the very focus on the possibility of biological roots of social tendencies that leads Leopold down the dangerous road of biological determinism in the first place also allows him to fully embrace a possibility that most historical materialists would dismiss out of hand: that human ecological behavior might be as equally contingent upon the cultivation of bodily impulses as upon the historical conditions of production. In other words, Leopold’s work suggests that historical materialism (the analysis of property relations, for instance, or the kind of analysis that allows us to see, in retrospect, how his very work was informed by the particular context of the mid-twentieth-century United States) must be rigorously merged with a mode of analysis that follows from the awareness that relationships between human and nonhuman, sentient and nonsentient beings, transpire at a pre-conscious affective level and that the various productions of human culture including aesthetics, rather than merely reflecting upon these interactions, can therefore be understood to be actors within this incomprehensibly complex ecological web.

**Actions, Attitudes, and Affect**

While Marx’s work has, since its publication, provided a foundation for thinking through the complexities of historical materialism, the work of Baruch Spinoza, particularly as outlined in his *Ethics*, underpins much of the recent work on affect and culture that proceeds from a position of biological materialism. In understanding how Leopold’s dual historical/biological methodology might be relevant today, it is therefore useful to return to Spinoza and trace how his work with the body in general and affect in particular might offer an alternative to evolution in envisioning corporeal aspects of the transformation of human attitudes toward ecological realities.

In Spinoza’s view, the universe is composed of a single substance that is expressed in infinite ways, through the attributes of extension and thought as well as others that
we humans cannot perceive, which in turn produce singular modes or modifications of that substance. Individual ideas or thoughts are modes, as are beings, objects, and all conceptual or extended things. These modes come into contact with one another and produce affections, or changes, in one another. In humans, the bodily changes that take place through these encounters are registered consciously as affects. Spinoza writes, “By emotion (affectus) I understand the affections of the body by which the body’s power of activity is increased or diminished, assisted or checked, together with the ideas of these affections.”

Affects are the cognitive experience of physical responses to interactions that give a body greater or lesser power. Since, according to Spinoza’s conatus, “Each thing, in so far as it is in itself, endeavors to persist in its own being,” affects are pleasurable or painful depending upon whether a being’s potential is augmented or hindered by any given interaction. Pleasure is the feeling associated with the augmentation of one’s capacity to act; pain, on the other hand, registers diminished power.

In this relationship between self-preservation as articulated in the conatus and affective experience, neuroscientist Antonio Damasio finds ideas resonant with the findings of contemporary biological science in his strange interdisciplinary work, Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain. Part meditation on philosophical discovery, part description of neurobiological research, part autobiographical narrative, Damasio describes his mid-career revisiting of the Ethics, where he finds an argument that resonates with his findings from research on brain injuries. Damasio asks of Spinoza’s conatus, “Why should a concern for oneself be the basis for virtue, lest that virtue pertain to that self alone?” His answer is biological, as is, he argues, Spinoza’s:

The biological reality of self-preservation leads to virtue because in our inalienable need to maintain ourselves we must, of necessity, help preserve other selves. If we fail to do so we perish and are thus violating the foundational principle, and relinquishing the virtue that lies in self-preservation. The second foundation of virtue then is the reality of a social structure and the presence of other living organisms in a complex system of interdependence with our own organism.

In other words, the instinct to persevere in one’s own being might counterintuitively reflect social (and ecological) imbeddedness. The conatus, therefore, “contains the foundation for a system of ethical behaviors and that foundation is neurobiological.” It turns out that the foundation Damasio finds in Spinoza is also, importantly, affective. The brain, according to Damasio, produces feelings, not knowledge, as “byproducts of the brain’s involvement in the management of life.” Thus, decisions that appear to be made on hunches or “gut feelings” turn out to be decisions made unconsciously by the brain in efforts to preserve the organism. The feelings come after the fact, and
provide a context for the retroactive narrativizing of the act.

Political theorist William Connolly seizes upon this same neurological fact in light of the discovery that there is a half-second delay between certain reflexes, such as physical reactions to pleasure and pain, and conscious awareness of the action. He argues,

If the unconscious dimension of thought is at once immanent in subsisting below the direct reach of consciousness, effective in influencing conduct on its own and also affecting conscious judgment, material in being embodied in neurological processes, and cultural in being given part of its shape by previous inscriptions of experience and new experimental interventions, then several theories of morality...may deserve active contestation.27

Those theories of morality that need to be reconsidered are, in Connolly’s view, both those that “underplay the role of technique and artistry in thinking and ethics” and those that “overestimate the degree to which the cultivation of an ethical sensibility is linked to an intrinsic purpose susceptible to general attunement or recognition.”28 In other words, the possibility of an ethics informed by the biological requires recognition of the absolute singularity of the ethical act (since the brain and body that produce it are specifically situated culturally, historically, spatially, temporally, and emotionally) and the univocity of ethical being (as it serves the organism to socially persist in its own being). In other words, Connolly emphasizes the mutual implication of a historical and a biological assessment of social ethics.

Taking this paradigm beyond the social, political theorist Jane Bennett argues that Spinoza’s work provides an opportunity to rethink the binary that sees living beings as animated and nonliving things as inert in her recent book, Vibrant Matter (2009). The Spinozist philosophical tradition (which includes philosophers ranging from Henri Bergson to Gilles Deleuze) she argues, allows for an understanding of impersonal affects, or “an affect intrinsic to forms that cannot be imagined (even ideally) as persons.”29 Arguing that “organic and inorganic bodies, natural and cultural objects...all are affective,” Bennett posits the usefulness of a specific form of vitalism — one that does not deify the organic but rather identifies both living and nonliving things as possessing the power, to paraphrase Spinoza, to affect and be affected.

The gesture of seeing in Spinoza a basis for endowing non-human beings and objects, as well as conceptual and aesthetic interventions, with a force that we might call agency has a lengthy and fraught history.30 While taking up a Spinozist methodology in relation to ecological issues has been deemed everything from “not quite materialism” to “radical materialism,” most thinkers agree that the Ethics does offer a unique basis for embracing a matter-driven form of analysis that avoids the pitfalls of both crude scientism and liberal humanism.31 This version of ethics is useful to ecological thinkers precisely because human goodness and pleasure is understood
to be contingent upon the cultivation of a love of what could be called “nature” — all that is not human, but is revealed, in Spinoza’s text, to be radically all-encompassing. While environmentalists have most commonly taken up Spinoza to defend the deep ecological view that humans, through proper sensory and intellectual training, can learn to decentralize their own interests in favor of valuing the whole of nature, I would like to pursue another resonance between Spinoza’s work in the Ethics and ecological thought, one that takes up this centrality of affects in registering bodily change and that also emphasizes, like Damasio, affect’s role in situations of complexity and interdependence.

We can see an illustration of this relationship between affect, ethics, and ecology in an essay by Leopold published in the same volume as “The Land Ethic,” the heavily anthologized “Thinking Like a Mountain.” The short piece details Leopold’s own process of coming to consciousness about the dangers of the extirpation of wolves from the deer-hunting grounds of his youth. The essay is often misread as a proto-New Age meditation on the possibility of, as the title suggests, thinking not like a crude insensitive human, but rather like a stoic, all-knowing, and morally superior mountain. In his controversial treatise on the dangers of the deep ecology movement, for instance, poststructuralist Luc Ferry reads Leopold as instating a deep ecological demand while ignoring the fact that “this task” of thinking like a mountain “might be a bit tricky for some.” Science and humanities scholar Dana Phillips takes up Ferry’s reading directly, pointing out that “increasing numbers of ecologists have realized that knowledge of nature of the sort imagined by Leopold is impossible to acquire” and that we cannot “measure ourselves by the alpine, inhuman standards of objectivity and sensitivity that Leopold postulates.” But a close look at the essay shows that it isn’t at all clear that Leopold’s aim was to suggest that such thinking is possible.

The mountain is, for Leopold, able to “listen objectively to the howl of the wolf” unlike all other living things who hear only their own self-interest reflected back at them. He explains, “to the deer it is a reminder of the way of all flesh, to the pine a forecast of midnight scuffles and of blood upon the snow, to the coyote a promise of gleanings to come, to the cowman a threat of red ink at the bank…[yet] there lies a deeper meaning, known only to the mountain itself.” But there is a mode of access to the howl — and to the mountain — that Leopold sees as available to humans and other members of the mountain’s ecosystem:

Those unable to decipher the hidden meaning know nevertheless that it is there, for it is felt in all wolf country….It tingles in the spine of all who hear wolves by night, or who scan their tracks by day….Only the ineducable tyro can fail to sense the presence or absence of wolves, or the fact that mountains have a secret opinion about them.

While the “objectivity” of the mountain is inaccessible, the fact that there
is a “hidden meaning,” or a “secret” that relates to the ecology of the land is not understood but importantly “felt.” This sense that something about the relationship between the wolf and the land is beyond comprehension “tingles in the spine” rather than becoming intellectually available through the kind of knowledge the mountain alone possesses. Far from suggesting that humans learn to think “objectively” like a mountain, for in Leopold’s view it is clear that seeking such objectivity is hubristic, the essay instead points to the centrality of the oft-ignored feeling of the spine tingle to an awareness of the limits of human comprehension. In other words, affect, in this scenario, functions ecologically insofar as it triggers a sense of the limitations of human cognition.

The essay therefore demonstrates how a bodily feeling — in this case a spine tingle — can assert perhaps more aptly the historically-produced subject position vis-à-vis ecology than the activities of conscious intellectual thought. There is a powerful registration of the limits of human knowledge in that spine tingle that has as much to do with the particularities of land-use policies of the mid-twentieth-century United States as it does with an unavoidable breach between human experience and that of the wolf, let alone the mountain. Importantly, the bodily change registered by the spine tingle takes place not through a mystical ability to “think like a mountain,” but rather in the face of the inability to do so. The tingle indicates, most of all, that there is something in the howl or the tracks of the wolf that challenges human supremacy most of all because of what we do not and cannot know. The mountain, in its imagined transcendence, highlights the impossibility of that knowledge. To understand would be to have the qualities of the mountain — to endure for centuries or millennia, to provide the very elemental ground on which and in which the ecosystem proceeds — in short, to be everything that humans cannot, despite our technological capacities and boundless ambition, be.

**Ecology and Literary Aesthetics**

“Thinking Like a Mountain” figures the relationship between affect and ecological positionings, but can a work of literature itself influence such positionings? If a work of literature, like any other object, can be understood to possess a capacity to change the bodies that encounter it, then there should be some perceptible impact of the literary upon ecological systems. Engaging with this possibility offers one way of addressing a central conundrum that has plagued the field of ecocriticism since its inception: what is it that literature is understood to do in relation to ecosystems?

This question was first addressed systematically during the mid-1990s first wave of ecocriticism, which emphasized the power of literature to represent nature accurately in ways that challenged prevailing (and exploitive) attitudes towards the non-human. This early wave was largely seen as a corrective to the relative absence of environmentally oriented readings of literature in English departments at the time. Perceiving the disciplinary focus on critical theory as one of many reasons for
this exclusion, first-wave ecocritics tended to be more conservative readers than their contemporaries, focusing primarily on literature’s mimetic capacity and the possibility that literary representations of nature and wilderness might lead readers to embrace environmentalist social positions.

In this intellectual climate, Wordsworth scholar Karl Kroeber daringly pushed back against the majority of his colleagues who saw literature’s relationship to nature as representational and meditative. In an essay that begins with the provocative statement, “the most important environmental literature is un-Thoreauvian,” Kroeber argues that such environmental literature does not necessarily represent nature; instead, literature should be understood to be a part of nature. Arguing that critics have been markedly slow to recognize this distinction, Kroeber writes, “Realizing that anything cultural must be understood as part of a natural ecosystem should radically reorient all critical theorizing of the past 50 years.”

Kroeber’s intervention in the ecocritical discussion functions as a logical extension of the attempt to bring the concerns of environmental science into contact with the humanities: if ecology offers us a world view that sees interconnection among living and nonliving things as primary, then what has been cordoned off as cultural must be instead understood to be, by definition, always already ecological. However, even today, after nearly two decades, ecocritical literary studies have yet to substantively take up Kroeber’s reorientation.

A wide-ranging challenge to the assertion that the relationship between literature and ecology is primarily representational did, however, take place around the same time in the wake of environmental historian William Cronon’s controversial essay, “The Trouble with Wilderness” (1995). In the essay, Cronon argues that wilderness is merely a cultural construct and that in appealing to pristine concepts of nature, “we too easily imagine that what we behold is Nature when in fact we see the reflection of our own unexamined longings and desires.” This contention provoked a second wave of environmental criticism focused on the historically-motivated cultural construction of concepts like “nature,” “environment,” and “sustainability.” It is this second-wave approach that continues to dominate the field today.

In the context of the poststructuralist tendency to see the relationship between literature and other art forms and the non-human as characterized by the capricious construction of concepts of the latter by the former, media theorist Brian Massumi argues in Parables for the Virtual (2003) that we might read human culture and aesthetic production as ecological rather than merely as a reflection upon either some pure external state of nature or as a construction of a concept of “nature” that does not truly exist. Echoing Kroeber’s argument of several years earlier, Massumi does not so much engage the argument that literature represents nature that was so pervasive in Kroeber’s generation as he seeks to redress the critical dominant of his own time that sees nature as merely a projection of culture:
It is meaningless to interrogate the relation of the human to the nonhuman if the nonhuman is only a construct of human culture. The concepts of nature and culture need serious reworking, in a way that expresses the irreducible *alterity* of the nonhuman in and through its active connection to the human and vice versa. Let matter be matter, brains be brains, jellyfish be jellyfish, and culture be nature, in irreducible alterity and infinite connection.40

Massumi, drawing from a Spinozist philosophical lineage, argues that nature and culture, the human and the nonhuman, can be understood as distinct and singular, but also as not entirely external to one another insofar as they are singular expressions of one and the same substance. This means, among other things, that writing is of the same stuff as the jellyfish, but that the jellyfish is not identical to writing nor is it subject to it. Nature and writing are not “discursive” in this model, but rather material. The jellyfish is a singular expression of a univocal substance with particular properties and interactive power, just as writing also functions materially in relation to other substantive expressions. Tellingly, this observation in Massumi’s work exists as an aside to his primary argument which is about affect, not environmental literature per se. Contentions of this sort, despite periodic interventions by scholars like Kroeber and Massumi, continue to be rare in the subfield of ecocriticism.

But what would taking the contention that literature is ecological seriously mean for the study of literary aesthetics? If literary works can be understood to be agents of change that participate in ecological systems, how might we analyze their effects? This is a historical-aesthetic question: how do the formal qualities of a particular cultural work physically influence its historically specific readership?41 The particularities of the work, its social context, and its readership are historical questions. The answer to how such a work in such a context accomplishes physical effects must take the specificities of form and aesthetics equally seriously.42

The work of journalist and experimental nonfiction prose writer Charles Bowden exemplifies the role of form in the possibility of cultivating these kinds of ecologically-oriented affective states. His 2009 ecological meditation, *Some of the Dead Are Still Breathing: Living in the Future* vacillates between personal essay, experimental prose, and investigative journalism, at times moving dizzyingly among genres in a single paragraph or scene. But this sense of generic vertigo is part of the emotional and ecological thrust of the book, which sees “living in the future” as dependent upon a loosening of focus on details and solutions and the cultivation of an affirmative stance toward the ugly, violent, catastrophic, and heartbreaking contemporary world. Bowden chronicles his own hopeless journey through one disastrous attempt at changing the world for the better after another. By the time the book opens, the author spends his days sitting on his back porch drinking coffee and writing next to a coiled rattlesnake. Sharing his space with this poisonous snake ultimately offers
Bowden an alternative to despair. He learns to embrace the aspects of the natural and artificial world that are often banished, subjected to violence, and neglected because they index the inevitability of death. He observes that “love of nature often leaves skid marks on the ground when it comes to snakes.” Yet Bowden does not admit the snake in order to understand or love the snake in any conventional way. He writes, “I am baffled by the literature proclaiming some deep communion with nature. In my travels toward other bloods I have simply learned how feeble my perceptions are.” Bowden therefore echoes Leopold’s suggestion in “Thinking Like a Mountain” that encounters with the nonhuman might at best produce awareness of human limits rather than clear, instrumentalizable knowledge.

But Bowden’s commitment to the snake goes beyond simply acknowledging his lack of understanding in the face of the strange creature; the book describes the author’s many confrontations with violence and death as efforts to learn how to affirm the world rather than retreat from it. In the midst of a description of a journalistic project, he abruptly pleads, “there must be a way to say yes where you cross the river, face the corpse and stare into the dead eyes. Just as you accept the broken levee, the flooded and ruined city. The angry skies, the rising human numbers, and seas racing inland. The ice melting, also.” Yet it is not at all clear from the content of the book exactly how Bowden cultivates that “yes.” Cryptic assertions like this appear like non sequiturs and pepper his essays on Mexican drug cartels, Earth First!-style sabotage missions, crime in the slums of Rio de Janeiro, and post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans. The cultivation of that “yes” seems to occur primarily, despite these occasional assertions, through form rather than through content.

Consider, for instance, Bowden’s attention to color in the opening lines to the book:

I see red. The color flashes across the gray light as the black coffee wafts across my face. The dark comforts me and so I rise before first light. The moonless nights are best because in the blackness even the trees lack form....Everything gray at first. The first licks of color — a tint of green, a blush of rose — come and go.”

This red flash across gray vision repeats throughout the opening pages of the book as it is slowly revealed that the red is the body of a cardinal that lives in the Bowden’s backyard. Though he later painstakingly outlines the reproductive habits of the cardinal, the redness of the bird is primary and this primacy of color over function often leads to obscure passages where color is the only discernible quality of experience. The focus on color here and elsewhere in the text is given in explicit opposition to a focus on realistic detail, privileging the production of aesthetic sense over the use of literature to comprehend or understand. If anything, the focus on color leaves the imagined world less distinct, less comprehensible. In this way, the blackness of the night is preferable precisely because it leads to a situation where...
“even the trees lack form.”

Despite the subversion of traditional forms of understanding in favor of abstract impressions, Bowden’s work does not essentially produce a state of absolute incomprehensibility or confusion; to the contrary, the deferral to formal abstraction works to order the otherwise disconnected, fragmented world by artificially assembling incommensurate objects together in order to construct a logic through them. The continuity of red as it recurs in the text allows the cardinal eerily to appear figuratively in places it otherwise could not be: in a wine glass as the speaker guzzles red wine at the roof bar in the Hudson Hotel, on the fingers of women in a market in Rio as they paint their nails a blazing red, and in the blood of a soldier who is accidentally shot and killed by his friend.

Late in the book, persuaded by the deep ecological conviction that saving hundreds of thousands of aquatic specimens that die in monofilament drift nets daily is worth the potential loss of his own life, Bowden joins the crew of a ship that hopes to find, charge, ram, and sink Japanese shipping vessels. When the crew finally finds the fishing fleet and charges one of the ships, their prow pierces the body of a live shark stuck in the half-harvested net. The shark’s body explodes, the net becomes detached from the ship, and it floats freely in the open sea, continuing. Bowden imagines, to ensnare and kill silently and indefinitely. This scene, narrated a second time at the end of the book in retrospect, this time removed from the details of the maritime context, offers yet another, darker perspective on the meditation on color that begins the book. Bowden writes in the final pages recalling his initial sentences, “Sometimes, in the hours before dawn as I sit with coffee in the darkness, I see that big shark coming up in the drift net, the skin glistening, and then we hit, and it becomes a smear of red.”

The flexibility, mobility, and abstractability of the red of the cardinal therefore destroys the stock environmental literature perspective on affirmation, which is often limited to the pleasant and ephemeral, as in “I say yes to the cardinal, that fleeing expression of nature that happily flutters across my backyard.” Instead, it stretches affirmation to its limit, forcing that “yes” to also adhere relentlessly and much more painfully to the destroyed shark, the thousands of pointlessly killed fish, and the body of the dead soldier, not to mention, elsewhere in the book, rattlesnakes, a dying tortoise, the devastation of post-9/11 New York, murderous, grieving elephants, and so on. The seemingly obscuring mediation of color over shape and function in Bowden’s fiction produces not the feeling of being adrift in a sea of incomprehensibility but rather the feeling of affirming life despite its ambivalent incomprehensibility.

In a short section of the book in which he describes his irrational attraction to a specific blue lampshade, Bowden offers the following comments on the relationship between color, form, and feeling:

Color for me is a desire and desire for me is a real force and this force for me is not rational but something that precedes reason and tramples it....
Perhaps form does not follow function. Perhaps at times form follows nothing at all but desire, and desire feeds off some swamp within life itself that cannot be mapped or charted or weighed or balanced.\textsuperscript{48}

Form stripped of function, for Bowden, is therefore counterintuitively not at all aligned with empty aestheticism. This is particularly noteworthy given the extreme suspicion toward consumerism and superficiality in \emph{Some of the Dead Are Still Breathing}. Color as it is articulated and mobilized through literature is therefore envisioned in the text as activating the harsh, “trampling” force of desire, a force that is associated with the irrational and, insofar as it allows for the production of affirmation, the ethical.

Symbolist Susanne Langer argues in her 1953 work, \emph{Feeling and Form}, “What [art] does to us is to formulate our conceptions of feeling and our conceptions of visual, factual, and audible reality together. It gives us forms of imagination and forms of feeling, inseparably; that is to say, it clarifies and organizes intuition itself.”\textsuperscript{49} The arts, therefore, shape the activities of feeling so that the affective map of a given time can be understood as much to emerge out of the art of the time as vice versa. If Bowden’s work produces something materially and historically distinct, it does so by using the obscuring and connecting power of abstract qualities like color in order to mediate a powerful reordering of contemporary intuitions to offer fertile affective possibilities in relation to contemporary ecological devastation. It does so not by producing the kind of pleasure we might find in literature that offers an experience of identification with another organism — to the contrary, it explicitly condemns such projects as anthropocentric and exploitive. Nor does it incite immediate action, again suggesting that such a problem-solving approach denies the ways in which such actions often turn away from the inescapability of pronounced biological, ecological, and geological change.\textsuperscript{50} The “yes” that bleeds out from the cardinal to the murdered shark in wild flashes of red signals the production of a bodily responsiveness to events and things that is not contingent upon the promise of pleasure or activity. Bowden sees this responsiveness as a way of engaging with the coming ecological catastrophe that allows him to “accept but not submit.” If his book is successful in transmitting that “yes” beyond its pages, perhaps we can read it as modeling a textual process whereby activity emerges paradoxically out of committed passivity, an unshakable sadness that leads strangely to love.

\textbf{New Materialisms}

Attention to work like Bowden’s, which is at once more experimental and more unfashionably associated with the nonfiction “nature writing” tradition than texts that are generally taken up by contemporary literature critics, requires a critical perspective that itself necessitates rethinking what a materialist literary practice means today. It involves sitting at an uncomfortable crossroads between attending to the historical material and to the corporeal material that inform our
present circumstances. In so doing, it involves considering our aesthetic products as interventions within histories characterized as much by specific productions and deployments of feeling as with ideas, concepts, and political formations.

Such a project appears to be very much underway in a range of current interdisciplinary conversations, including the much-discussed Spring 2010 conference at Johns Hopkins University on “New Materialisms” that held presentations by ecocritic Timothy Morton as well as Jane Bennett. But it is noteworthy that both critics anticipate substantial friction in the reception of their work. “What method could possibly be appropriate for the task of speaking a word for vibrant matter?” Bennett asks. Her answer exposes her own trepidation in relation to her peers: “What seems to be needed,” she declares, “is a certain willingness to appear naïve or foolish.” Likewise, Morton admits of the kind of questions he asks, “like any attempt to think outside of the Marxist box, they land you in a hippie-looking place.”

Hippie-looking, naïve, foolish, these are all dangerous things to appear to be in the contemporary academy. Yet equally dangerous is the continued reluctance on the part of many literary critics to engage with the consequences to the study of culture of a view of ecology that takes human life out of the naturalized center. Given the Copernican revolution underway in the biological sciences, the humanities are in a precarious position. Either the objects of study of the humanities, that is, the results of human activity in producing art, literature, historiography, and philosophy, will continue to be analyzed under the consensus of innate human supremacy and exceptionalism, or there will be a need for some very naïve, foolish, and possibly even hippie-looking criticism as we work to imagine how our objects of study might influence not only human culture but also ecological forms of engagement.
Notes

1. Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics* (1677)
2. Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach” 1845
3. Aldo Leopold, “The Land Ethic” (1949)
5. Leopold, SCA 209.
12. Leopold, SCA 205.
16. For an excellent biographically anchored analysis of Leopold’s departure from Benthamite faith in the social function of individual self-interest, see Goodwin’s “Ecologist Meets Economics.”
17. Leopold, SCA 203.
18. Goodwin points out that Leopold would have studied extensively with social Darwinists during his time at the Yale Forestry School.
20. This influence ranges from the fleeting nod, as in Sianne Ngai’s brief mention of Spinoza’s work as a foundation for her project in *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2005) to the basis for a total rethinking of corporeal experience, as in Brian Massumi’s *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke UP, 2002).


30. Bennett’s use of Spinoza to complicate hierarchical distinctions between humans and no-humans, and living and nonliving things is not, of course, unique to her work. There is a long legacy of Spinozan work in the field of environmental ethics, much of which stems from the work of Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess. Naess, highly controversial and deemed unorthodox in both philosophical and political circles, is best known for coining the term “deep ecology,” which outlines a philosophy based upon the radical decentering of humanity in relation to other ecological participants, a philosophical position that continues to inform environmentalist groups such as Earth First.


32. This use of Spinoza to complicate the nature/culture divide should ultimately lead to the abandonment of the term “nature” altogether, as Timothy Morton points out in *Ecology Without Nature*. Indeed, thinking “ecologically,” that is, in terms of systems of interaction between humans and nonhumans, seems to lead inexorably to this conclusion, as humans and human action must be considered to be every bit as much a part of “nature” as anything else.


35. Leopold, SCA 129.

36. Leopold, SCA 129.

37. This division within ecocriticism between a “first wave” and “second wave” was first outlined by Lawrence Buell in his work, *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2005), and has since become a guiding framework for many studies of the field.


41. In posing these questions, I align myself with contemporary scholars such as Jane Thrailkill (see note below) who is interested in what critical possibilities might open up by intentionally committing the affective fallacy as outlined in W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley’s “The Affective Fallacy” in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington: U Kentucky P, 1954).

42. The work of American literature scholar Jane Thrailkill offers an excellent example of this kind of synthesis. As she explains of her recent work, *Affecting Fictions: Mind, Body, and Emotion in American Literary Realism* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2007), “[t]he tools of historicism are mustered here against historicism’s antiformalism, suggesting a new direction for a historically engaged criticism that, under more cognitive models of subjectivity, has tended to neglect the affective and corporeal elements of the experience of literary works” (159).


44. Bowden, *Some of the Dead Are Still Breathing* 60-61.
45. Bowden, *Some of the Dead Are Still Breathing* 91.
47. Bowden, *Some of the Dead Are Still Breathing* 216.
50. In this sense, Bowden’s work could be read alongside a small cluster of environmentally-oriented texts that take catastrophe as inevitable and begin to imagine what life might look like after ecological devastation. Bill McKibben’s *Eaarth* (New York: Times, 2010) and Alan Weisman’s *The World Without Us* (New York: Thomas Dunne, 2007) are both popular nonfiction works in this vein. I also have explored similar suggestions in the work of critical theorist Paul Virilio and science-fiction writer Octavia Butler in “Ecology Beyond Ecology: Life After the Accident in Octavia Butler’s *Xenogenesis* Trilogy,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 55:3 (2009): 545-65.