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### **The Hopefulness of Ecocriticism: Reflections on a Scholarly State of Mind<sup>1</sup>**

I suppose this might be said of almost any branch of humanities scholarship, particularly those branches dedicated to social transformation, but I feel compelled to emphasize my sense that ecocriticism is fundamentally a *hopeful* scholarly and pedagogical enterprise. That is, even in the face of vast and daunting challenges, even in light of daily news about the deepening ecological crises (plural) faced by the planet, ecocritics do their work—their reading and analysis of environmental literature and art, their teaching of students at all levels, their lobbying with local and distant organizations and governmental officials, their monitoring and adjustment of personal lifestyles—with a desire to make things “better.” This may sound ridiculously vague and naïve. What does it mean for ecocritics to be “hopeful” and why is it necessary to bother pointing this out? And is it possible that central role of American ecocritics in the field has had something to do with this hopefulness, as these scholars may intuitively draw upon an essential spirit of hopefulness in American culture?

First, it seems important to note that there have been several forceful critiques of ecocriticism during the past decade, discussions of the aims, methodologies, and general tone of the field that have taken individual scholars to task and suggested a rather bleak prognosis for the discipline. As I discuss in “Ecocriticism on and after September 11,”

such works as T.V. Reed's essay "Toward an Environmental Justice Ecocriticism" (in the 2002 collection *The Environmental Justice Reader*), Dana Phillips's *The Truth of Ecology* (2003), and Michael P. Cohen's "Blues in the Green: Ecocriticism under Critique" (2004) purport to offer constructive critiques of standard ways of practicing ecocriticism, but such commentaries, it seems to me, display a strong tendency to "throw out the baby with the bathwater." Reed argues that most early modes of ecocriticism, from the late-1970s through the mid-1990s (before the advent of "environmental justice ecocriticism"), tended to neglect the human implications of environmental degradation and were thus inferior and problematic modes of literary analysis. Phillips, picking up on some of the themes emphasized in Simon Estok's 2001 article, "A Report Card on Ecocriticism," frets about the anti-theoretical aspects of early ecocriticism and particularly condemns the devotion to realist aesthetics evident in ecocritical scholarship, a tendency that Estok seems to recognize as a side effect of the field's desire to gain traction on actual social and environmental issues in the world and not to become lost in the fog of theoretical jargon and nit-picking.<sup>2</sup> Cohen, for his part, is particularly critical of what he calls the "praise-song school" of ecocriticism, the inclination of scholars to note and celebrate the eloquence and insights of particular authors, from Henry David Thoreau to Annie Dillard, and not to offer enough hard-headed critique of the flaws and misguidedness of such writers.

In his essay, Estok quotes Richard Kerridge's explanation of why ecocriticism "has had problems in getting its theoretical footing":

[U]nlike feminism, with which it otherwise has points in common, environmentalism has difficulty in being a politics of personal liberation

or social mobility ... environmentalism has a political weakness in comparison with feminism: it is much harder for environmentalists to make the connection between global threats and individual lives. (2, 6)

However, as Estok has shown in much of his own recent work, there are profound and readily evident points of connection between large patterns of environmental destruction and the lives of individual writers and readers, such as the meaning of our daily eating habits, particularly vegetarianism versus the eating of meat. At this point in literary and cultural history, with so much emphasis on the implications of individual lifestyles for the broader movement of environmental sustainability, we have a strong sense of individual culpability and empowerment when it comes to causing and responding to the world's environmental problems. Teasing out and illuminating these personal connections, far from being a weakness of ecocriticism and environmental art, have become strengths of the environmental humanities. It is worth recognizing, too, the inherent limitations of too much focus on individual lifestyle practices at the cost of neglecting large-scale systemic reform. Activist-author Derrick Jensen articulates this concern eloquently in the opening paragraph of his 2009 article "Forget Shorter Showers: Why Personal Change Does Not Equal Political Change"<sup>3</sup>:

Would any sane person think dumpster diving would have stopped Hitler, or that composting would have ended slavery or brought about the eight-hour workday, or that chopping wood and carrying water would have gotten people out of Tsarist prisons, or that dancing naked around a fire would have helped put in place the Voting Rights Act of 1957 or the

Civil Rights Act of 1964? Then why now, with all the world at stake, do so many people retreat into these entirely personal “solutions”? (18)

But it is the role of the environmental humanities to explore the communication strategies—such as Bill McKibben’s eye-opening technique of telescoping back and forth between global and personal dimensions of climate change and human reproductive issues in such books as *The End of Nature* and *Maybe One*—that enable us to understand the intersections and disconnections between personal behavior and political action.<sup>4</sup> The focus on individual lifestyle changes may not be enough to launch large-scale cultural reform, but often the appreciation of the implications of our own daily actions serves as the fulcrum that inspires action on a larger scale.

Toward the conclusion of his 2001 essay, Estok asserts that “Ecocriticism at its best seeks understandings about the ways that dynamics of subjugation, persecution, and tyranny are mutually reinforcing, the ways that racism, sexism, homophobia, speciesism, and so on work together and are ... interlocking.” Few ecocritics would deny the importance of exploring and critiquing the harmful tendencies in individual human psychology and in social systems. In fact, the extent to which such analysis might inspire reform of individual lives and broader systems and policies should certainly be regarded, I think, as a *hopeful* aspect of the discipline—it is important to recognize the darkness in our own nature in order to prod ourselves toward improvement, toward change. And yet, I would also argue, that *inspiration* itself is essential to the effectiveness, the sense of mission, that has resulted in the rapid growth of ecocriticism around the world during the past three decades (especially since the early 1990s). Ecocriticism’s potential to offer trenchant social critique is a hopeful sign. But hopefulness itself, as a state of mind for

practitioners of ecocriticism, is perhaps the single most important catalyst, the most important source of energy, within the field.

What exactly is “hopefulness” and where can it be found? One of the more useful articulations of this concept in recent environmental writing is American environmental education specialist Mitchell Thomashow’s 2002 statement about the distinction between “hopefulness” and “optimism” in *Bringing the Biosphere Home*. He writes:

You don’t have to be optimistic to be hopeful. You can’t predict the future by virtue of a trend that you sit squarely in the middle of. And you can never assess the long-term impact of your thoughts and actions. (18)

This book urges readers to use their own skills of observation and cognition to examine the world from wherever they happen to be, the daily experiences of their local lives, as a way of coming to terms with the larger patterns of “biospheric change,” from extinction to global warming. Given the vast predicaments that we now face on Earth, Thomashow imagines that many of his readers will be inclined not to want to know what’s going on—to remain happily ignorant and innocent. What good would it be, in other words, to recognize and worry about these destructive processes at work in the world today, especially because each of us is powerless to produce significant changes on a planetary scale. A college senior, after listening to me give a talk about ecocriticism and environmental writing to a group of some 400 graduating students at St. Bonaventure University in upstate New York, once asked me, “Why should I care?” And in response to her despairing question, I offered Thomashow’s statement, his suggestion that it’s possible to be *hopeful* even if one is not optimistic, that one can live from day to day in a spirit of constructive, positive effort without necessarily believing that everything will

work out in the end. As the author suggests in this quotation, we don't really know where the world is heading, and it's actually quite possible that the future is grim—at least from an anthropocentric perspective—and may even entail the extinction of our own species. But it's still better to live in a hopeful, helpful state of mind—to do one's best to make a positive contribution to one's community and to the planet. At least this will enable one to live a more energetic and inspired life—and to do as much good as possible while alive. I believe many ecocritics, even the naysayers, actually live according to Thomashow's idea, even if they're not specifically aware of his phrase. Many in the field clearly understand how desperate our environmental predicament is, and yet most also strive to do their best, as scholars and teachers and simply as citizens, to have a constructive influence on the world.

Australian environmental essayist William J. Lines offers a rather different take on this subject in his essay titled “Hope” from his 2001 collection *Open Air: Essays*. After describing himself as a fundamentally hopeful person (“I was born sanguine. I rarely feel desperate or depressed” [178]), Lines argues that foolish hopefulness is what politicians and others content with the dismal status quo offer naively credulous citizens. He writes:

Hope-fortified armies overwhelm the truth-tellers. Evidence alone will not dislodge hope.

For years powerful people ignored the facts about global warming—melting icecaps, thawing permafrost, rising oceans, lengthening northern hemisphere summers—because they made sense only outside hope-constructed frames of reference.... Current hopes—

constantly replayed by politicians and the media—render any idea that our economic activity is fundamentally mistaken and at odds with life itself incomprehensible and repugnant. (179)

The challenge, therefore, for those of us born hopeful and for others who are simply uncritical in receiving information from the powers that be, is to develop a sense of when hope is warranted and when it simply blinds us to realities we find difficult to swallow. One might argue that writers and literary scholars—and others working in the environmental arts and humanities—are not well suited to discern and describe the crucial realities, good and bad, of our current environmental condition. We have not been trained in the natural sciences, in most cases, and therefore it may seem that we should leave authoritative announcements of the planetary condition to people better prepared to do so. But to do this—to stand back and abdicate statements about how contemporary society should respond to environmental problems to engineers, natural scientists, economists, and others with “practical training”—would represent a failure to appreciate the importance of the arts and humanities in environmental discussions. Our disciplines—including ecocriticism—are especially well suited to understand the *human* dimension of environmental problems: to explore why human societies (and individuals) act in particular ways, to consider the psychological processes by which we develop our ideas about what’s meaningful and valuable and re-shape our values in response to new information, and to show how important various communication strategies are in making sense of technical ideas in various fields, from law to ecology. Lines’s critique of unwarranted hope is reasonable and appropriate, but his own ability to articulate the distinction between foolish hope and having an essentially hopeful view of life is a very

important contribution to environmental writing—a set of guidelines, in a way, for all of us toiling in this hopeful discipline.

For American journalist Bill McKibben, “real hope implies willingness to change.” In his 1995 book *Hope, Human and Wild*, McKibben responds to Gregg Easterbrook (author of *A Moment on the Earth*) and other environmental “brownlashers,” who became infamous in the 1990s for uttering don’t-worry-be-happy messages, arguing that extinctions and global warming and many other dire environmental occurrences are simply “natural processes” and do not require radical remediation on the part of human beings. Like Lines, McKibben is clearly the sort of writer who wishes his work to contribute to social reform and environmental improvement—he is an activist writer, not simply a neutral reporter (if there is such a thing). And yet he has to tiptoe around the use of the word “hope” in order to avoid seeming like an apologist for the brownlashers of the 1990s who were quickly co-opted by conservative political forces and by industry:

...I hesitate to admit my hope, for the word has been debased—as “hope” is used in the context of the environment, people always seem to hope that the scientists are wrong, hope that their warnings are just “doom and gloom,” hope that we’ll “muddle through.” Such is the message of the currently fashionable crop of “environmental optimists.” But that’s not hope—that’s wishing. Real hope implies real willingness to change, perhaps in some of the directions suggested by this volume. (3)

While Thomashow makes a special point to distinguish between a hopeful statement of mind and a basic optimism about the fate of our species and the planet, McKibben parses the distinction between “hope” and “wishing.” In his inspiring book that offers stories of



community efforts to achieve cleaner, more sustainable environments in India, Brazil, and the United States, McKibben seeks to ground his enthusiastic vision of the future—his *hope*—in narratives that demonstrate how other people in other places might achieve similar improvements. Skeptical of mere “wishes,” he seeks to use the language of story—just as ecocritics might use their analysis of other writers’ stories—to promote positive social reform. Fundamental to the hopefulness of ecocriticism and environmental writing in general is what McKibben calls “real willingness to change”—that is, willingness to change who we are and how we live and willingness to use our work as a tool to change our students, our professions and institutions, and our societies.

In the spirit of McKibben’s use of concrete examples of communities around the world that have demonstrated through their actions—such as transforming cities from automobile-based transportation systems to urban designs that emphasize public mass transit—the possibility of achieving constructive change, I would like to offer four particular reasons that I find ecocriticism to be a particularly hopeful academic enterprise. I’m sure one could come up with additional reasons, but these are several examples that I find especially heartening.

First, ecocriticism helps us to appreciate the special importance—the *particular* power—of words, of language. Language is essentially connected to how we think about everything in our lives, and our discussions of environmental topics certainly involve very delicate uses of language. Many powerful people in the world—including politicians, corporate and military leaders, and even natural scientists—assume that the “bottom line” (the most important aspect) of any discussion is the economic message. Ultimately, what we most care about is the cost of taking this action or that action—or of

not doing something. But William Lines, whom I quoted above, has also articulated quite eloquently the flaw at the heart of such thinking—and in doing so he highlights the monumental importance of language in our discussions about the natural world. Lines writes in his essay “Money”:

People exploit what has a price or what they conclude to be merely of value; they defend what they love. Love cannot be priced. But to defend what we love we need a particularising language, for we love what we particularly know. The abstract, objective, dispassionate, and dissociative language of economics and science ... cannot replace and cannot become the language of familiarity, reverence, and affection by which things of worth ultimately are protected and conserved. (26)

In this essay, the author argues that exploitative and destructive approaches to the natural world are inevitable as soon as we accept the discourses of economics and science as the necessary ways of discussing environmental decisions. As I travel around the world attending environmental meetings these days, I find that Lines’s concerns about finding the proper language to capture our true environmental values, our *love* for places and animals and experiences, resonates with listeners in wide-ranging cultures, with people in India, Argentina, South Africa, and France. In China, for instance, I often meet students and other people who have compelling personal stories about how their hometowns have been changed—usually degraded—as a result of industrialization. “My hometown used to have a very clean lake nearby,” the stories often begin. “When I was growing up, I could drink directly from the lake. I could swim in the water. And then a factory was built near the lake. There are now more jobs for the people in the town, but we can’t use

the water from the lake anymore. So how should we, here in China, find a proper balance between economic development and environmental protection?” Lines would argue, I think, that as soon as we begin using “abstract, dispassionate, and dissociative language” to discuss this dilemma, the odds are stacked in favor of environmentally destructive policy—policy that supports economic development in a way that nullifies the importance of environmental protection. The role of ecocritics—and others in the environmental arts and humanities—should be to find a way to bring what Lines calls “particularising discourse”—the vivid language of images and emotional connection—back into the conversation. This is not to say that we must entirely jettison economics and science (and the languages associated with such fields), but that we must work to reinvent language, to meld somehow the broad (and often useful) abstractions of such disciplines with the language of personal attachment (what Lines calls “love”). Recognizing the central importance of language in our environmental discussions—and helping societies to use language in more refined, careful ways—is a great reason for hope in ecocriticism.

Here’s an interesting example of the power of words from an prominent American politician, former U.S. Vice President Al Gore, who wrote the Foreword to Bill McKibben’s 2008 anthology *American Earth: Environmental Writing Since Thoreau*. Gore confesses in his opening comments:

It is humbling for a politician—even a recovering one—to reflect on the role writers have played, and continue to play, in developing and shaping the environmental movement. A truth eloquently expressed has an influence greater than any elected official. This collection includes powerful writing by Rachel Carson as well as many other authors known

for their attentiveness to the natural world: John Muir, Edward Abbey, John McPhee, Wendell Berry, Annie Dillard, Michael Pollan, Bill McKibben. (When I was serving in the Senate, McKibben’s description of the planetary impact of chlorofluorocarbons made such an impression on me that it led, among other things, to my receiving the honorific title “Ozone Man” from the first President Bush.) (xvii-xviii)

This last parenthetical statement, recalling Gore’s experience in reading McKibben’s various writings about climate change in *The End of Nature* and various articles in *The New York Times* and elsewhere, indicates the politician’s appreciation for the enduring, profound importance of communication strategies in guiding us as individuals and societies to think in certain ways about our relationship to nature. It is easy for artists and students and professors of literature to lose heart—to think that our work is relatively trivial and peripheral to the serious discussions about the fate of the earth happening in corporate offices and government agencies. But when Gore states that “A truth eloquently expressed has an influence greater than any elected official,” he is reinforcing the idea that ecocriticism—as well as the texts that ecocritics study—is truly central to our success or failure in environmental decision making.

One final, brief example of the importance of words—a key reason for the hopefulness of ecocriticism. I could offer innumerable examples, as could most readers of this essay, I’m sure. The intrinsic appreciation for the importance of language is what draws most of us into the field of literary studies. Using insightful wordplay in his 2000 book *Hope Is the Thing With Feathers* about extinct and endangered birds in North America, Christopher Cokinos writes:

...we can restore — we can *restory* — these vanished birds to our consciousness. That can be an important act of recovery of the human spirit *in* the nonhuman world. I know I risk nostalgia [...] but anyone who sees the past as important territory — as a map for the present and the future — risks that allegation. Curiosity began my journey, which led to regret, which brings me always to wonder and dedication. (3)

Playing with the similarity between “restore” and “restory,” Cokinos suggests here that the practical effort to restore damaged places and species, to *heal* nature, is somehow deeply related to telling the stories of lost and threatened phenomena. When we tell the stories of “vanished birds,” we bring these birds back into our “consciousness” — we remember them. And in doing so, we overcome the despair that results from recognizing the ongoing diminishment of the world, the steady loss of habitat, of species, of clean water and breathable air. Cokinos outlines his process of research and storytelling by suggesting that his work follows the pattern of curiosity, followed by regret, followed ultimately by wonder and dedication. “Dedication” means commitment to make a difference, to fight for the protection of species not yet lost — and in a broader sense, this means the commitment **any of use** might feel to protect the lakes and rivers and mountainsides and animal species we know from our own experience and believe to be endangered by human encroachment. Essential to such commitment, though, is language — the idea that “restorying” is deeply related to actual efforts to “restore,” to protect, the world.

A second reason I find ecocriticism to be a hopeful discipline, even at a time of rampant social and environmental problems throughout the world, is that there is strength

in diversity, and ecocriticism is, at its most fundamental level, a pluralistic field. We have no simple consensus about what topics should be central to our conversations, no dominant methodologies, no individual scholars from whom emanate the essential teachings of the field. Lawrence Buell, the author of three ecocritical monographs and a longtime professor at Harvard University, is one of the most distinguished American scholars in this field, and even he has taken pains in his 2005 work *The Future of Environmental Criticism* to emphasize the diversity of approaches within ecocriticism:

Altogether, the story of literary ecotheory's relation to critical models has been unfolding less as a story of dogged recalcitrance—though there has been some of that—than as a quest *for* adequate models of inquiry from the plethora of possible alternatives that offer themselves from whatever disciplinary quarter. Cybernetics, evolutionary biology, landscape ecology, risk theory, phenomenology, environmental ethics, feminist theory, ecotheology, anthropology, psychology, science studies, critical race studies, postcolonial theory—all these and more.... The environmental turn in literary studies is best understood, then, less as a monolith than as a concourse of discrepant practices. (11)

Buell's conclusion that this discipline should be seen "less as a monolith than as a concourse of discrepant practices" accommodates the genuine diversity of concerns, methodologies, and vocabularies that exist in the field. To me, this implies a discipline that is flexible, tolerant, and encouraging—a scholarly movement that actively *invites* scholars within literary studies and in other fields to participate in the shared effort to illuminate the connections between interesting human texts and pressing environmental

issues. The field is *inclusive*, not *exclusive*. Of course, some ecocritics, such as Simon Estok in his 2009 article “Theorizing a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia,” express ambivalence about the “openness” of this field and suggest some “ecophobic” writings should be barred from the ranks of ecocriticism or “environmental literature.” But, while I appreciate Estok’s desire to hold ecocritics to a certain ethical code (a code of environmental correctness, one might say), I flatly disagree. In my own work as editor of *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, and as a teacher and scholar and organizer of academic events in this field for many years, I’ve found it important to facilitate open and respectful conversations among a wide range of people—to transcend disciplinary, political, geographical, gender, ethnic, and language boundaries whenever possible. I see little to be gained by strictly drawing the borders of proper ecocriticism and shoving all else aside.

To me, the rapid expansion of ecocriticism within the American academy and in scholarly, artistic, and political circles throughout the world is a sign of hope. Japan, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and the United States may well be the countries with the longest traditions of ecocritical scholarship, dating back several decades now (much longer if we consider David Mazel’s collection *A Century of Early Ecocriticism*, which recognized a wealth of proto-ecocritical work from 1864 to 1964). These days, there are rapidly growing communities of ecocritics in many other countries throughout the world, from Argentina to Finland—and also in places like China and India, which have enormous human populations and quickly expanding economies. In India, where the exploding population has the potential to make this country a particularly powerful (some might say “worrisome”) ecological force in the coming decades, ecocriticism has existed

for decades now (Nirmal Selvamony, for instance, has been teaching courses and publishing books and articles on Tamil ecopoetics since the 1980s), but the field has really begun to flower during the past half-decade with the formation of two scholarly organizations (ASLE-India and OSLE-India) to promote research and teaching.

Swarnalatha Rangarajan, the founding editor of the *Indian Journal of Ecocriticism*, offered the following statement in the journal's inaugural issue (published in August 2008):

In Indira's fabled net, every jewel reflects all the other jewels and all jewels are reflected in the single jewel. I would like to employ the same metaphor to describe the twelve essays featured in this inaugural issue. IJE views this collection of essays as a vital node that will provide the link to other important aspects of ecocritical writing in the issues to come. (ix)

How appropriate to use the traditional Indian idea of Indira's jeweled, multifaceted net as a metaphor to describe the diverse perspectives represented in the journal's first issue—and by extension the diversity of the discipline at large. For me, the rapid internationalization of ecocriticism (as represented by the explosion of new branches of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, which was founded in 1992 and now has more than a dozen official branches with several more currently being developed), and the wide range of ideas being promoted by scholars in far-flung corners of the globe, is certainly a reason for hope.

And even though I have some reservations about the “ambivalent openness” described in Simon Estok's 2009 article, I do appreciate the increasing sense of political urgency that I encounter in Estok's work and in other recent examples of ecocriticism. In



other words, I find the intense focus on political urgency to be a third reason for hope. Ecocriticism, for many people, does not simply represent literary scholarship for the sake of professional advancement—this is not academic business as usual. Puerto Rican scholar Camilo Gomides put this quite succinctly when he offered the following definition of ecocriticism in a 2006 article:

Ecocriticism: The field of enquiry that analyzes and promotes works of art which raise moral questions about human interactions with nature, while also motivating audiences to live within a limit that will be binding over generations. (16)

To be honest, this definition, if strictly applied, would exclude many of the studies published in *ISLE* and other journals of ecocriticism from the category of “ecocriticism,” as it might be difficult to claim that all of the works of art studied in these journals clearly raise “moral questions about human interactions with nature” and urge audiences “to live within a limit that will be binding over generations.” But certainly some of the books and articles that we encounter these days do seek to accomplish this, more or less. Consider, for instance, John Felstiner’s *Can Poetry Save the Earth? A Field Guide to Nature Poems* (2009). On the first page of his Preface, Felstiner writes:

If poems touch our full humanness, can they quicken awareness and bolster respect for this ravaged resilient earth we live on?

Can poems help, when the times demand environmental science and history, government leadership, corporate and consumer moderation, nonprofit activism, local initiatives? Why call on the pleasures of poetry, when the time has come for an all-out response?

Response starts with individuals, it's individual persons that poems are spoken by and spoken to. One by one, the will to act may rise within us. Because we are what the beauty and force of poems reach toward, we've a chance to recognize and lighten our footprint in a world where all of nature matters vitally. (xiii)

Felstiner's ardent urgings that readers sensitize themselves to the "pleasures of poetry" not for poetry's sake alone, but for the sake of environmental commitment, seem to me a hopeful extension of Gomides's call for a stricter, more politically focused mode of ecocriticism. While I do not believe that *all* ecocritics must work, all the time, in such an explicitly urgent and political framework, I do find this particular strand or sub-movement within ecocriticism to be inspiring and important, and some of my own work these days certainly aspires to contribute to this movement.

Finally, let me mention a fourth reason for ecocritical hopefulness—a reason that is perhaps related to the idea of ecocritical diversity. I am constantly encouraged and inspired by the way ecocriticism seems to be reaching out to bring new generations into the field, meaning both young students and experienced writers and scholars who are compelled to turn toward environmental concerns in their later years. John Felstiner, whom I mentioned just above, devoted most of his career as a professor at Stanford University to writing books and articles about such poets as Pablo Neruda and Paul Celan and to translating their work from Spanish and German into English. But he had long been deeply concerned about the environment, and in 1999 he decided in his early sixties to turn toward the field of ecocriticism—and at the age of seventy-three produced his magnificent and urgent book, *Can Poetry Save the Earth?* More common, though, are the

arrivals of high school and university students into the ecocritical ranks.<sup>5</sup> I see this in America certainly, but I find that students in other countries throughout the world are equally interested in environmental issues and eager to find ways of connecting the teaching and study of literature with environmental topics. The hunger of all generations, young and old, to support the ecocritical movement is, for me, a reason for hope.

I recall a passage from *Red Sky at Morning: America and the Crisis of the Global Environment*, which James Gustave Speth, Dean of Yale University's School of Forestry, published in 2004:

A new vocabulary or way of discussing the issue can help this along. No group could be better suited to undertake such a redefinition and new articulation than the young people I see on campuses across the country. I hope that they can lead in making the grand [global] challenges of today have the same immediacy as the local environmental threats of the 1970s.  
(200)

Regardless of which issues we find to be of particular concern in our own lives and communities, it is often the case that newcomers to the field, especially young students, seems to be able to bring extraordinary verve and imagination and healthy innocence to the problems. It is easy for those of us who have been working in specific niches for many years to become encased in certain mindsets and vocabularies, so, as Speth says, we need young people to redefine and freshly articulate these topics. The fact that so many new people every year seem to be recognizing the importance of ecocritical ways of understanding literary and environmental questions is certainly a reason for hope.

Contemporary ecocritics in the United States and throughout the world have often been inspired to enter the field of ecocriticism as a result of their encounters with the various works of nineteenth-century American author Henry David Thoreau, especially *Walden* (1854). In fact, Thoreau (and the genre of nonfiction nature writing) occupied such a central place in the initial wave of American ecocriticism (in the early 1990s) that some ecocritics have sought to move “beyond nature writing” (in other words, beyond *Thoreau*)—see, for instance, the 2001 collection of articles edited by Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace. Nonetheless, in many ways, Thoreau’s words and ideas reverberate through the fields of ecocriticism and environmental literature—his emphasis on simplicity, on awareness, on living carefully, and, yes, his hopefulness. The final lines of *Walden* read as follows:

I do not say that John or Jonathan will realize all this; but such is the character of that morrow which mere lapse of time can never make to dawn. The light which puts out our eyes is darkness to us. Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star. (333)

As we bounce from one crisis to another—from civil unrest to economic downturns, from war to climate crisis—it is always heartening to read Thoreau’s concluding words, “There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star.” What we take to be the downward “tipping point” of human history is actually but one moment in a string of moments—history continues, the earth continues to turn. There is more day to dawn, and there are more challenges to face. While it seems likely that the human species will never solve the “environmental crisis” (in fact, “crisis” may be the wrong word to describe our

ongoing predicament), we will continue to do our best to tackle various aspects of problem. Ecocriticism, practiced in a hopeful—if not optimistic<sup>6</sup>—spirit, may be one of our best tools for understanding and engaging with our environmental condition.

**Notes:**

1. An earlier version of this article was presented at the October 2008 International Conference on Literature and Environment at Central China Normal University in Wuhan, and it appeared in the proceedings of that conference, edited by Nie Zhenzhao and Chen Hong, which was published by Huazhong Normal University Press in 2011.
2. Those who are interested in the relationship between ecocriticism and theory might wish to follow the debate on this issue in the pages of several 2009-10 issues of *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*. Simon Estok's article "Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia" (Spring 2009) argues that the field requires kinds of theory in order to appreciate destructive ("ecophobic") tendencies in modern societies and lifestyles, while S.K. Robisch's fierce rebuttal, titled "The Woodshed: A Response to 'Ecocriticism and Ecophobia'" (Autumn 2009), claims that we need something other than theory to inspire and provoke genuine social and environmental activism. The intensity of this debate resulted in Special Forum on Ecocriticism and Theory, coordinated by Anthony Lioi and Scott Slovic, which was published in the Autumn 2010 issue of *ISLE*.

3. For an alternative perspective, one that endorses the importance of personal responses to environmental issues (in addition to the pursuit of system social change), see Michael Pollan's essay "Why Bother?" (*The New York Times Magazine*, 20 April 2008). The intrinsic hopefulness of Pollan's argument is remarkably similar to the attitude that defines the scholarly field of ecocriticism. He writes: "Going personally green is a bet, nothing more or less, though it's one we probably all should make, even if the odds of it paying off aren't great. Sometimes you have to act as if acting will make a difference, even when you can't prove that it will."
4. This is what I focus on specifically in the chapter "Seeking a Discourse of Environmental Sensitivity in a World of Data," collected in this book.
5. EBSCO/Salem Press published *Nature and the Environment* in its Critical Insights Series in 2012, including essays by seventeen prominent North American and European ecocritics on major themes, authors, and texts in the field of environmental literature. The specific audiences for this book are high school and introductory-level university students (and their teachers), as the project aimed to support the inclusion of environmental literature in courses offered to younger students.
6. Throughout this essay I have emphasized the word "hopeful" rather than the word "optimistic," taking my cue in doing so from Mitchell Thomashow's distinction between the two words (as discussed above). However, in the Winter 1992 issue of the journal *Weber Studies*, I published an article called "Marginality, Midnight Optimism, and the Natural Cipher: An Approach to

Thoreau and Eiseley,” in which I discussed a distinctive American brand of optimism that I detected particularly in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century works of these two writers, but also traced back to Puritan minister-author Cotton Mather in early eighteenth-century New England. What Eiseley described as “midnight optimism” is a knack for detecting bright opportunities even at times of severe darkness, even at “midnight.” One could argue that the field of ecocriticism, as we now know it in the early twenty-first century, is a product of industrial civilization’s degradation of the life-sustaining planet and the desire of scholars in the humanities to use our skills to help ameliorate the destructive tendencies of our species. To the extent that we engage in our work as ecocritics in the spirit of hopefulness during a grim time, we are all, whether we live in the United States or Japan or anywhere else in the world, midnight optimists in the spirit of Mather, Thoreau, and Eiseley.

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