

Literature and Environment, the Long View: Thoughts from the Founders of ASLE

Cheryll Glotfelty (University of Nevada, Reno)¹

Abstract

The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) is the primary professional organization of scholars, teachers, and writers who study the relationships among literature, culture, and the physical environment. At a recent roundtable discussion at the Western American Literature Association's Annual Conference, "flash papers" from ASLE's founders offered a fascinating array of view points reflecting on ASLE's twenty-year history. Papers speak to wilderness, post naturalism, science fiction, pedagogy, publishing and climate change. It is our hope that the set of papers collected here will commemorate a historical moment and spark a continuing conversation on the future of the organization.

Happy Birthday, ASLE: Twenty Years Older, How Much Wiser?

The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) is the primary professional organization of scholars, teachers, and writers who study the relationships among literature, culture, and the physical environment. ASLE, with a growing membership of more than one thousand and with nine international affiliate organizations, was founded in 1992 at the Sands Casino in Reno, Nevada at an impromptu meeting that took place at the conference of the Western Literature Association (WLA). The clanging of slot machines just outside the meeting room supplied sound effects for the gamble that the clamorous group of fifty-four founding members were making on the need for and promise of this new field.

Why the WLA? Increasing numbers of environmentally oriented scholars had been congregating for several years at the WLA's annual conference, which had earned an underground reputation as the place where ecocritics were gathering. That the WLA should have become the seedbed for literature and environment owes a lot to the work and warm welcome of long-time WLA leaders such as Thomas J. Lyon, a scholar of American nature writing, under whose editorship the journal *Western American Literature* published early ecocriticism; Glen Love, influential ecocritic and past president of WLA, under whose leadership the 1988 WLA conference in Eugene was inspiringly green-themed; Laurie Ricou, whose scholarship on the Pacific Northwest crosses national borders to embrace an ecoregional model

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of habitat and imagination; and Ann Ronald, distinguished scholar of Edward Abbey, Great Basin nature writer, and local host of the 1992 WLA conference in Reno.

WLA president Sara Spurgeon had the idea to celebrate the twenty-year anniversary of the founding of ASLE at the 2012 WLA conference, which she hosted in Lubbock, Texas. Sara chose a conference theme of Western Crossroads: Literature, Social Justice, and Environment and lined up speakers whose scholarship and writing engaged environmental themes. The distinguished cast of plenaries included Richard Slotkin, Annie Proulx, Barry Lopez, Naomi Shihab Nye, Joni Adamson, and Annette Kolodny. ASLE sponsored two conference sessions. And there was a special session with filmmaker David Sherman and a screening of his film *Wasteland Utopias*. On the opening night of the conference, conferees enjoyed a gala ASLE birthday party, with cake and champagne, speeches, and a display of memorabilia from ASLE's founding. One of the artifacts on display was a copy of ASLE's founding by-laws, bootlegged from the by-laws of the Stephen Crane society and still containing stray references to Stephen Crane.

Celebrating



the 20th anniversary of the founding of the

ASSOCIATION FOR THE STUDY OF LITERATURE AND ENVIRONMENT

at the WLA conference in 1992

Source: Andy Ross

Sara Spurgeon invited ASLE's founding officers Scott Slovic (president), Cheryll Glotfelty (vice president), and Mike Branch (secretary-treasurer) to attend the WLA conference and agreed to let them organize a jumbo, roundtable session of ASLE founders. Of the fifty-four founding ASLE members, nineteen were able to make it to the Lubbock conference, and another emailed proxy remarks. After twenty years, panelists were remarkably spry, attesting to the vitality of this field of study. As panel organizer (or herder of cats, as I came to think of the task), Cheryll invited panelists to share their perspective in three minutes--contributing their three cents--whether it be reminiscing about ASLE's founding, sketching the trajectory of their own work, or recommending future directions for studies in literature and environment. Rebecca Raglon, a founding ASLE member, was unable to attend the WLA conference in Lubbock but as editor of the *Journal of Ecocriticism* she invited ASLE roundtable panelists

to submit their remarks to *JoE* to be published as a set. Below, you will find brief statements from fifteen panelists who responded to Rebecca's invitation. Together these flash papers from ASLE's founders offer a fascinating array of view points, from tributes to tirades, touching on subjects that range from wilderness to post nature, place writing to science fiction, pedagogy to publishing, critical approaches to computer screens, and local reading to global climate change. A lively conversation with the audience followed the roundtable panelists' remarks. It is our hope that the set of papers collected here will commemorate a historical moment and spark a continuing conversation.

ASLE 20th Anniversary: A Community of Ecocritics

Michael P. Branch, University of Nevada, Reno, mbranch@unr.edu

Since my comments focus on the ways in which ASLE functions as a community, I'd like to begin by thanking the Western Literature Association, which was the community of support from which ASLE grew. The WLA performed a fine act of midwifery, for which ASLE folks will be forever grateful.

Back in 1992, when I had the good fortune to help ASLE enter the world, I was still in graduate school. Most of us—even those of us on this panel, who have been in the profession a long time now—can remember the feelings of uncertainty and isolation that are a normal, if regrettable, part of the graduate experience. I was dissertating at the time, and doing so within a department where there were no faculty members interested in literature and environment studies, and where the burden was on me to convince my mentors that anything green was worth working on. Back then it wasn't an easy case to make, especially since I was driven by passion and not by any calculation about what might be professionally viable or marketable. I remember as if it were yesterday the comment made to me by my department's graduate placement advisor in response to the first academic job application letter I ever wrote: "What the hell is an ecocritic, and why the hell would anybody want one?"

I've spent the last twenty years exploring that question, and trying to help produce satisfying answers to it. But of course I haven't done so alone. Instead, I've been privileged to do my work as one member of the global and growing ASLE community, which has supported me in more ways than I can easily express. For many of us, ASLE has been an intellectual, aesthetic, and ethical home away from the home of our home departments—a place where our work has been encouraged and its value recognized. In addition to the many ways in which ASLE has worked to legitimate and promote our shared scholarly enterprise, it has also functioned as a surrogate family in which meaningful personal and professional relationships that will last a lifetime have been forged.

At this time I want to specifically mention and applaud the elements of ASLE's institutional structure that provide support and encouragement to those whose scholarly and/or creative work addresses issues of culture and environment. Information about all of these structures may be found on the ASLE website (www.asle.org). Of course there are our major biennial conferences (which are now quite huge), as well as our off-year symposia, smaller gatherings that focus on a specific region, topic, or concept. We also produce several publications that help to disseminate ecocritical work. The peer-reviewed quarterly journal *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, edited by Scott Slovic, is published by Oxford University Press journals and has international reach. *ASLE News*, published biannually, is a rich source not only of news and notes, but also contains calls for papers and conference announcements. We also publish the *ASLE Handbook on Graduate Study in Literature and Environment*, now in its fourth edition, which profiles more than forty departments in which ecocritical work is being conducted.

The ASLE website also functions as a clearinghouse for information about jobs and fellowships, and it includes a searchable database of syllabi that is a treasure to anyone planning a new course in our field. The site also contains an ecocritical library consisting of an introduction to ecocriticism, links to online texts, a range of subject bibliographies, and a substantial bibliographical archive. ASLE also hosts a number of discussion lists and blogs to facilitate communication among members of our community. In addition to the large ASLE listserv, we host a diversity listserv, a graduate student listserv, a listserv run jointly with the Science Fiction Research Association, and another conducted in collaboration with the Conference on College Composition and Communication. Our blogs include the diversity blog, the graduate student blog, and the wonderful On Staying Alive blog run by Mark Long and John Tallmadge, which helps ASLE members connect with each other in order to discuss the challenges and opportunities we face at various stages of our careers. Since 2007 ASLE has also conducted book and paper award competitions in both scholarly and creative areas, and we've supported participation in our conferences through graduate and international travel awards.

Perhaps most clearly indicative of ASLE's commitment to nurturing a community of mutual support is our Graduate Student Mentoring Program, which for nearly twenty years has matched graduate students in departments that cannot provide adequate support for young ecocritics with ecocritical faculty from other institutions. Along with the sessions on graduate student professional development and the one-to-one mentoring meetings we host at each conference, the Graduate Mentoring Program has showcased the generosity and expertise of our members, and has demonstrated how much can be accomplished when we simply remember to give each other a hand.

I'm very proud of the mentoring and support work ASLE has done over these past two decades. Folks who might otherwise have felt isolated or discouraged have been able to find and help each other, allowing the important work of our organization to be advanced through cooperation rather than competition. However different our interests and approaches to the study of literature and environment, we generally share a sense of purpose, and a concern for each other, for literary art, and for the environment. My only regret, as I review the accomplishments of the past twenty years, is that I failed to persuade my co-founders—those of us jammed into that casino hotel room in Reno back in October of 1992—that a better name for the organization would have been Association for Literature and Environment, a name that would have produced the happy acronym "ALE." Nevertheless, here's a pint in the air to what we've accomplished together through the work of this special organization. Cheers, ASLE!

The Roots and Branches of ASLE

Scott Slovic, University of Idaho, slovic@uidaho.edu

I have to begin by saying what a pleasure it is to be here with such a big group of friends and fellow conspirators who packed into the Esquire Room of the Sands Casino Hotel in Reno on October 9, 1992, to dream the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) into being, although when we first entered that room it was our plan, I believe, to walk out with a new American Nature Writing Society rather than the much broader and more flexibly defined organization that we actually created. Breadth and flexibility have remained the hallmarks of ASLE, and indeed the larger field of ecocriticism, ever since that day, it seems to me. I should remind everyone, as an aside, that most of us were not even using the word "ecocriticism" to describe our work in 1992—that term, though tossed out by William Rueckert in 1978, didn't begin to become commonplace until Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm published *The Ecocriticism Reader* in 1996, four years after ASLE came into existence.

I'd like to say a few words now about the roots and branches of our rapidly evolving field. Even as we come together in 2012 to mark the twentieth anniversary of the founding of ASLE, it seems important to acknowledge the much, much deeper roots of environmentally inflected literary and cultural studies—to think back beyond Rueckert's coining of the word "ecocriticism" to the inspiring feminist critiques of Annette Kolodny that immediately preceded Rueckert, to acknowledge the stirrings of ecocritical pedagogy and comedic ecology in the early 1970s work of Glen and Rhoda Love and Joseph Meeker, and to remember the still foundational proto-ecocritical work of Leo Marx, Henry Nash Smith, Joseph Wood Krutch, and Norman Foerster, among many others, in the mid-twentieth century.

At the same time, I'd like to explain my own absence from WLA meetings for the past thirteen years (since the 1999 Sacramento meeting). I see, in looking over my travel records, that until this year I've been lecturing almost every October for more than a decade at environmental conferences in Japan, Italy, South Africa, Turkey, India, China, and France, just at the time when WLA was meeting. The field of ecocriticism, while still deeply associated in some ways with the scholarly and literary culture of the American West, has exploded—is currently exploding—as a global phenomenon. We have kindred spirits in far-flung corners of the world, exploring Taoist, Tamil, Bushman, and Hittite ecologies, using terms like "Kulturökologie," "la geocritique," "Tinai," "shengtai piping," and "shizen bungaku" to describe their work and their subject matter. There are, by my accounting, ten international branches of ASLE at this moment—in Japan, the UK, South Korea, continental Europe, Australia/New Zealand, Canada, India, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Cameroon, with others under discussion in Latin America (especially Brazil), Turkey, West Bengal (India), and Iran. In fact, as I traveled to Lubbock a few days ago, I was reading Salman Rushdie's fascinating new memoir about his life under the Iranian fatwa, while at the same time responding to emails during my layovers in Seattle and Houston from a professor in Tehran who is asking for help in developing her ecocritical study of Persian literature for possible publication, eventually, in ASLE's journal, *ISLE*. Even professors, students, scholars, and government officials far away from the American West are finding today that their lives, their work, and their societies have been somehow touched—somehow supported—by the work of ASLE and, by extension, the work of the WLA.

While the roots of ASLE and ecocriticism are deep and the branches increasingly wide, something special has occurred in the twenty years since ASLE was formally founded. I do think ASLE and sister organizations such as WLA have helped to spur the intertwined disciplines of ecocriticism and environmental writing forward with tremendous excitement and traction. In the past twenty years we have observed three energetic, identifiable, and ongoing waves of ecocriticism—and in recent months, various colleagues in North America and abroad have been helping to define a new fourth wave of ecocriticism that began to take shape in 2008 or so and is now becoming clearly visible with an emphasis on material and applied ecocriticism. The Summer and Fall 2012 issues of *ISLE*, which offer special clusters of articles devoted to "Material Ecocriticism: Dirt, Waste, Bodies, Food, and Other Matter" and "Ecocritical Approaches to Food and Literature in East Asia," respectively, highlight the theoretical and practical aspects of fourth-wave "material ecocriticism."

WLA and ASLE: Fraternal Twins

Ann Ronald, University of Nevada, Reno, ronald@unr.edu

Celebrating the birth of ASLE twenty years ago reminds me of WLA's own birth nearly fifty years ago. I see many similarities between the two inceptions, a few differences, and lots of redundant growing pains. ASLE and WLA are twins, of a sort, fraternal rather than identical.

Just as this group of friends and colleagues got together at a mother meeting of WLA and conceived of an Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, so a smaller group got together at Rocky Mountain MLA and imagined a meeting dedicated solely to the literature of the American West. Two dreams, two fledgling literary associations, two excellent literary journals. ASLE blossomed rapidly, attracting new members and growing exponentially in its early years. *ISLE* quickly became a leading publication in a burgeoning field. WLA and *WAL*, designed by a smaller set of scholars, grew more slowly. Even ten years later, at the first meeting I attended, I believe there were only about thirty-five participants. In contrast, since the beginning ASLE has drawn hundreds to every meeting. Today, in fact, ASLE's membership is more than double the size of WLA's, and its journal circulation is much wider, too.

Another difference between the two organizations is the international flavor. In part because of the ASLE leadership, and in part because of the far-reaching scope of eco-writing and eco-criticism, ASLE has always had a presence around the world. In contrast, WLA necessarily has a more regional focus, although in recent years we've expanded our borders. Now *WAL* regularly publishes essays about Hispanic writers and WLA often meets in western Canada. ASLE and the content of *ISLE*, however, span continents and oceans.

Now I'd like to move back to my original analogy, and point out perhaps the greatest similarity between the two associations and the two associated fields of study. Like other thematic types of literary study, like Marxist thinking and feminist literary criticism, WLA's and ASLE's emphases began as literary advocacy. Both groups were attempting not only to attract new readers but also to argue for the seriousness of their respective fields. WLA was rejecting the Zane Grey formula and boasting about the rigor of writers like Wallace Stegner. So, too, ASLE was insisting on the importance of global environmental issues and touting the thoughtfulness of the men and women writing about our eco-world. Both groups also were building a tradition, recovering relevant writers from previous generations while introducing new voices as well.

Because of their advocacy roles, however, both WLA and ASLE fell into similar traps. In my opinion, the earliest literary criticism from both camps was more descriptive and less theoretical than today's scholars produce. It's almost as if that's part of the growing pains—to move from unabashed applause to a more critical sophistication. But move, we did, though in both instances that movement took a little time.

Today, both organizations and their hundreds of members testify to the value of the visions of their founders. For that, we celebrate their births and their birthdays and their continued good health. WLA and ASLE, fraternal twins, now and always.

ASLE: The Beginning

Mark Busby, Texas State University, mb13@txstate.edu

The fall 1992 Western Literature Association meeting where ASLE was formed as an associated group with WLA was my 14th WLA (this is my 31st or 32nd). The year before I had moved from Texas A&M to then Southwest Texas State, now Texas State-San Marcos. One of my new colleagues was a young faculty member named Scott Slovic. Scott had begun a graduate concentration in creative writing for the new MFA program at SWT and a nature writing study group for grad students and faculty. I began to meet with that group, and soon Scott and I began working together on various grants focusing on environmental literature. And so it was that before the WLA meeting, Scott and I had spoken about the plans for creating the WLA association for the new group to be called ASLE, and I knew that Scott had spent a great deal of time and thought with others on organizing the meeting.

Scott and I may have shared a room that fall. At any rate as I recall Scott was out for an early morning run (around 4). He was excited about getting the group going. As most of you know, Scott was then and has been throughout his career one of the most dedicated and tireless campaigners for the study of environmental literature, and he sensed that this organization would be an important one.

I tell this story in the vein of *Citizen Kane*, where every narrator is the center of his own story. So this is mine. The meeting began with Scott serving as temporary chair committed to following all of Roberts Rules of Order specifics. After he set up the purpose and structure of the meeting, Scott opened the floor for nominations for permanent chair of the meeting. As I sat there and from my perspective, I felt deeply that Scott was the soul of the beginning of ASLE and that he should be the one to take the organization forward but that he would not push himself. So when he opened the floor, I immediately nominated Scott as the permanent chair, and as I remember that day, Scott was elected, and the rest is history, as we saw the affiliated organization grow beyond WLA and begin its own meetings and publication.

Scott and I continued to work together at Texas State, submitting a large National Endowment for the Humanities grant that didn't get funded as budgets were cut. Scott guest-edited the journal I coedited, *Southwestern American Literature*, and that special issue on environmental literature is now the largest single volume of the journal. The issue became the basis of one of Scott's early anthologies, *Getting Over the Color Green*. Not long after, Scott moved on to University of Nevada-Reno and began a center on the environment and the humanities there, but we continued to work together. Scott encouraged me to write a chapter for John Elder's two-volume *American Nature Writers* on Texas writer John Graves, widely-known in Texas as the Texas Thoreau but little-known outside the state. That chapter partially became the basis for the first major essay collection on Graves, *John Graves, Writer*, which Terrell Dixon and I coedited, published by the University of Texas Press in 2007. And then later when I directed summer institutes for college teachers funded by NEH, Scott served as one of the four major presenters.

So I am here today to remember and honor the 20th anniversary of ASLE and to note my small part in the process and also to underscore the large effect establishing the organization had on the course of American literary studies and to emphasize how my association with it enriched the rest of my career.

The Genius of ASLE

Frank Bergon, Vassar College, bergon@vassar.edu

I want to express and emphasize the obvious: the genius of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment lies in its focus on literature. As the organization's name indicates, ASLE advocates not the study of "environmental literature" or "wilderness writing" but simply "literature" without any qualifying adjectives or prepositional phrases, joined by a simple conjunction to its twin subject, "environment." The beautiful catholicity of this approach, distinguishing ASLE from many other organizations with overlapping environmental concerns, lights up the contours of ASLE's uniqueness.

In the two minutes left to me, if the co-chairs will allow it, I want to make two points—actually, two and a half points. First, the association's invitation to literary study has allowed and continues to welcome innovative investigations of a wide range of literature that might otherwise be excluded from ecocritical perspectives. The field is open to study of what in the olden days, when I was young, Lionel Trilling once called "high art" or "serious literature" or even "advanced art." Though we no longer use those terms, such work is identifiable and welcome for study in relation to the environment, as in the recent *ISLE* essay by David B. Morris on Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. We've seen fine studies, like Patrick Dooley's *ISLE* essay on Robinson Jeffers, of poets and novelists overtly concerned with place and environment, while, at the same time, I'm sure several of you are at work on bringing unexpected ecocritical approaches to other imaginative literature, however it's defined, in surprising ways, whether the subject is a graphic novel or a lyric poem.

It's appropriate that ASLE sprang from the WLA, an association I was attracted to, as were many of you, for its balanced appreciation of scholarship and the arts. *ISLE* continues this appreciation in its ongoing publication of articles, essays, poetry, and fiction. What many of us share is a love of language. Whether in storytelling, poetic expression, or personal reflection, the boundaries of genre fade. Which leads me to my second point about the writings of naturalists, explorers, and scientists, particularly in the American eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Much work has been done, but much is still left to do, in defining how the tension between the competing languages of art and science in writings about the natural world, along with wildly vacillating styles of scientific and artistic discourse, has created a body of work, often relegated to the genres of "nature writing" or "natural history," though still in need of fuller aesthetic understanding and appreciation as "literature."

My final half-point is that perhaps ASLE might consider, along with the publication of *ISLE*, a series of e-books that would include hard-to-find, forgotten, neglected, or out-of-print anthologies and editions of writing about the natural world, similar in value to the Library of America, only, in this case, to provide an online source for the continuing study of literature and the environment in exciting and expanding ways.

ASLE the Pill

David Robertson, University of California, Davis, robertsonda@me.com

(The paragraphs in bold are to be read fast, as on the radio.)

This Advertisement is brought to you in part by the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment and in part by the Western Literature Association, AND BY LISTENERS LIKE YOU. THANK YOU.

Scene I. A young professor walks across campus dejectedly, head down, staring at his feet. An old professor, strides confidently up to him.

"My, you look at a loss. What is the matter?"

"Oh, I've lost my zest for teaching. I think I am suffering from pedagogical dysfunction. It's hard to even get myself up to enter the classroom."

"I have just the solution for you. The pill is called ASLE. Your chair can prescribe it for you. She may try to get you to take the generic pill MLA, but for your career's sake, don't accept anything but the authentic. The ASLE pill is sure to invigorate your teaching. You will enter the classroom heads up and confident.

You should be advised that the Modern Language Association's Committee for Ethical Vigor and Vitality has filed a complaint with the Reliable Narrators of the American West, claiming that all the data in this advertisement is, NO ARE, UNRELIABLE.

Scene II. The two professors young and old meet again on the campus' grassy quad. The young professor strides confidently up to the older professor and gives him a big hug.

"Wow, that was some pill. Actually, my chair never mentioned the generic MLA. She said I could try Postmodernism if I wanted, though it was her impression that it was now out of date and therefore impotent. She had heard good things about ASLE. So I joined and my performance anxiety went away immediately. Thank you."

Note that ASLE may have certain side-effects: if you find yourself giving a lecture that lasts longer than four hours, then see your department chair immediately.

Scene III. The young professor and his chair sit side by side in an evergreen forest, but, note, they are not holding hands.

Time Travel

David Copeland Morris, University of Washington, Tacoma, dcmorris@uw.edu

When I was in high school almost a half century ago, I had the mixed experience of being taught by a couple of a fierce ideologues fired with the Truth of New Criticism. One of these exceptional teachers, I believe, had earned an MA from Yale and had even taken classes from the then revered but now neglected guru Cleanth Brooks. I graduated high school in 1965, one year before Derrida delivered his paradigm-shifting lecture "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" at Johns Hopkins. Unbeknownst to my teachers, the high tide of New Criticism on which they were riding was about to begin its long withdrawing roar.

It may be difficult for some to recall, and for others to believe, but the followers of New Criticism were every bit as dedicated to its principles as are current critics to the tenets of feminism, new historicism, postcolonialism or any other of the plethora of critical approaches under the umbrella of postmodernism. And though largely disparaged now, New Criticism had something important to offer: a close attention to the details and structure of a text apart from its connection to historical, biographical or literary contexts. For example, when students responded to an assignment in one of these New Critical classes they were forbidden (on penalty of a failing grade) to refer to history, biography, other writers' works, or even another work by the same writer. This draconian approach instilled in students a salutary habit of attending strenuously to the details and pleasures of the text, to the specific words out of which it was composed. However, it was clear to me even then, as it is to everyone now, that this constricted, dogmatic approach to reading literature left out immense regions of interest and concern. Where was the text's relation to literary history, to politics, to ethics, to social action, to the burgeoning interest in the environment?

This high school experience with earnest, dedicated, ideologically committed teachers taught me a lasting lesson about critical practice: a fresh, new fruitful approach can all too easily slide into dogma. I bring this ancient history up for its relevance to the birth and growth of ecocriticism. The advent of ASLE, *ISLE* and the ecocritical perspective they represent liberated criticism from anthropocentric rigidities of many kinds, marking a necessary and vital opening up of vision. ASLE and ecocriticism provided a nurturing home for many wandering souls.

But I see a danger on the horizon in the possibility of new interpretive rigidities replacing older ones. Since about the time of the publication of William Cronon's essay "The Trouble with Wilderness," many ecocritics have--in the name of social justice--been quick to drop deconstructive bombs on formerly valued concepts such as wilderness, nature and beauty. The notion of Wilderness, for example, has come to connote for these critics something like a playground for the idle rich. Deconstructive weaponry, however, can be used on any target: "social justice" can be made contingent and put in skeptical quotations marks just as easily as any other value term. Just peruse Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* or *The Anti-Christ* to erase any doubts about this. The value of social justice is no more a given than the value of beauty--indeed the latter notion has a much longer and deeper human history. Cronon and his followers, for all their claim to privileged historical insight, are unwilling or unable to confront this historical fact. Righteously rapping the knuckles of a literary text for its failure to uphold a particular

time-bound and narrowly defined notion of "social justice" (I'd put the term under "erasure" if I knew how to do it on my computer) can too easily become smug and self-blinding reflex.

It is worth recalling Wordsworth's contention that literature affects us to the degree it pays "homage...to the grand elementary principle of pleasure, by which [a human being] knows, and feels, and lives, and moves." My quarrel in the end is with dogma, any dogma that limits a reader's access to this fundamental pleasure. ASLE was founded partly in rebellion against dogmatic strictures on how to read. May it long continue in its rebellious ways.

The Enduring Qualities of Wilderness

Don Scheese, Gustavus Adolphus College, dscheese@gustavus.edu

Since the publication of my first two books—*Nature Writing: The Pastoral Impulse in America* (1996), *Mountains of Memory: A Fire Lookout's Life in the River of No Return Wilderness* (2001)—I've continued to focus on the related concepts of the wilderness and the pastoral.

I've been examining the Anasazi (or Ancestral Puebloans) and how this prehistoric culture has caused me to modify the traditional notions of wilderness as uninhabited space. More recently I've been reconsidering the idea of the Machine in the Garden with regard to the bicycle and how this form of muscle-powered technology may or may not represent a legitimate presence in the wilderness.

Let me conclude with a story. The other day I was hiking in the Wichita Mountains National Wildlife Refuge in southern Oklahoma en route to this conference. As I entered a boulder-strewn, oak-shaded, prickly pear-studded canyon, I passed a sign that read Charons Garden Wilderness Area. Whenever I see such a sign, whenever I enter a wilderness, I'm thrilled and inspired, knowing that I have arrived in Sacred Space.

Problematic and flawed though the concept and reality of wilderness may be, I still believe it remains relevant and resonant in the 21st century. It seems we need to be reminded from time to time that wilderness is vital to both humans and the nonhuman environment. In the Wichita Mountains, for example, the successful recovery of the endangered black-capped vireo has occurred through the creation of this "sky island" sanctuary rising above the southern Plains.

Not just endangered species need wilderness, but people too: the illegal immigrant crossing the desert wilderness of the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge seeking a new life in El Norte; the recovering addict hiking the mountain wilderness of the Pacific Crest Trail for therapeutic reasons; Native American tribes like the Mescalero Apache seeking to reclaim and protect their sacred lands in the White Mountain Wilderness of New Mexico; and yes even the stressed-out 21st-century recreationist seeking an afternoon of serenity and solitude in the Charons Garden Wilderness.

The concept of wilderness is large, and it contains, and will continue to contain, multitudes.

The Long Way Home

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In 1992, I should have said goodbye to several regulars at WLA, for once ASLE was up and running, the ASLE conferences were a better fit for their work. I still think of many of the conversations I had with folks I no longer see very often. At the 1994 WLA conference I participated in a big plenary roundtable discussion on “Defining Ecocritical Theory and Practice.” I began by declaring my loyalty to Place Studies and then to suggest that I was more a “fellow traveler” than an ecocritic. I was teaching in Montana and nearly all my work was on the West. And then I moved. When I arrived in Rhode Island, there were few opportunities to teach courses in Western American Studies, so in order to think about place, I retooled. My connections to ASLE were helpful—people shared syllabi with me, I read *ISLE* from a different perspective, found books new to me, and began to teach courses in New England Studies. Many of my students had very little developed sense of place, and so we worked from the ground up, literally. What I thought of as my “benign exile” in Rhode Island taught me to be more attentive to the components that compose a sense of place, and thinking about the components made my teaching and scholarship far more attentive to the earth than it had been when I was in my home country. For my scholarship, this recalibration resulted in a wild piece of prose for a conference to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation. Instead of a traditionally argued paper, I rethought the language of bureaucracy and the language of water. The Bureau didn’t quite know what to do with me, but that piece of writing changed my scholarship indelibly.

By the time I returned to Montana after a ten-year sojourn in the low country, I looked a lot more like an ecocritic than when I left. And my classes had changed significantly. At UM, one of my great ecocritical pleasures has been derived from a class I call “The Elemental West.” In that class I challenge students to attune themselves to the way the elements have their say in a text. Beyond events—dust storms, earthquakes, floods, and fires—how do the elements matter in a text, in a story? Many of my students are in UM’s MFA program in creative writing, and I am heartened by the ways in which they make the earth present in their stories and essays. More than as event or plot points, these writers have found ways to let earth, wind, fire, water, biota into the worlds they imagine. In their inventive, counterintuitive, sensual, conceptual, wild, or subtle ways they teach me how to think about what ecocriticism can do. Without ASLE and *ISLE* I wouldn’t be reading such astonishing new work. As my ASLE comrades have helped me re-think my work and my relationships with places, so I think ASLE has helped other WLA members “ground truth” both our scholarship and the assumptions we make about the roles Western American Studies can play in conversations outside the field. I hope we continue to grow and change together.

Where ASLE Has Led Me . . .

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When I wandered into that casino-hotel meeting room in Reno, back in 1992—for some meeting to talk about some new “environmental lit” association—I didn’t know what to expect. I quickly decided I liked the cool dude running the meeting (great energy) and I was excited about the possibilities: like-minded

people! other professors who loved to hike! other teachers who hated MLA and regularly taught Edward Abbey—preferring him to, say, John Barth. But I wasn't sure, as the slot machines k-chinged in the background, about further new directions in my career. I had recently "signed on," more or less, to the engaging Cather Circle; and this was my first WLA, and in fact my first trip to Nevada—even my first time in a casino (what an innocent). Everything was so new! Did I need another newness in my life? Turns out I did.

That initial meeting was fun—lively, humorous, optimistic—but it was the first ASLE conference a few years later, in Fort Collins, that really sparked my interest in this new association, which I could see was being run by some truly inspirational (and very nice) people. Fort Collins sealed the deal. It introduced me to a number of important authors I should be reading and teaching, to the terrific work of environmental lit scholars all around the country and world, and it led to a number of strong scholarly/hikerly friendships, which I'm pleased to say are still going strong. I would therefore date my "ASLE journey" back to 1995, and I can report, with great satisfaction, that it has led me in new directions and to a whole bunch of new places—which, given our time constraints here today in Lubbock—I'm just going to list (in no particular order).

It's led . . . to more teaching outside of the classroom—on hikes and camping trips, especially in our nearby Adirondacks. To much more interdisciplinarity in my teaching—with a reading of environmental texts often leading us to public policy issues, or philosophical issues, or even some spiritual questionings. To scholarly and critical work on people such as Louise Erdrich, Terry Tempest Williams, Rick Bass (and many others). Geographically, ASLE led me directly to Turku, Finland, where I spent a wonderful year as a Fulbright professor—and it was my enthusiasm for American environmental literature and my ASLE connections which landed me this appointment. And then that whole year in Finland led me to some fascinating wild places—bogs in southern Finland, islands in the Baltic, national parks north of the Arctic Circle—where I was eager to study how my host country thought about and managed "the wild" and how this compared with American attitudes and policies. ASLE continued to lead me to those big (ever bigger) and exciting biennial conferences but I eventually discovered how much fun the small, intimate, and very "place-based" off-year conferences were—and I was delighted to be led, over the course of even-numbered years, to Crawford Notch, NH and Farmington, ME and (most recently) beautiful, rainy Juneau. ASLE has led me to countless writers and thinkers, whose work has shaped my life as well as my career, and I just don't have time to start naming names. But I'll just toss out one—Bill McKibben. Along with others, he has shown me the interconnectiveness of everything and has helped move my personal environmental journey from "environment as esthetic domain and arena for personal growth" to something like "environment as who we are as a people and what we believe in, and what kind of future we're creating for ourselves and our kids."

I guess the farthest ASLE has led me—in terms of miles, not ideas—was Beijing, where I participated in a terrific environmental lit conference which featured Scott Slovic as keynoter. Studying some environmental Chinese novels (in translation) was great, but my biggest thrill was meeting enthusiastic young Chinese scholars, many of whom were very excited about bringing ASLE to China. I think I believed, by the end of that Reno meeting twenty years ago, that this new organization was going to be a success—but I never dreamed it would have this remarkable, world-wide outreach. And it's Scott who deserves a lot of credit for this.

So . . . thanks to ASLE; thanks to McKibben, Williams, Bass and many other fine writer/activists (you're an inspiration to us); and, finally, thanks to three ASLE bodhisattvas whom I must single out—Michael Branch, Cheryll Glotfelty, Scott Slovic. You guys put ASLE not just on my personal map but on the map of the world. A remarkable feat in just 20 years! For me, it's been a great journey and I'm hoping there are still miles to go . . .

Reading New Places in a Time of Change

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While still a graduate student in 1988, I had the pleasure of working as an assistant to Patty Limerick and Charles Wilkinson in the planning of the symposium “A Society to Match the Scenery: Shaping the Future of the American West,” one of the meetings that defined the early work of the Center of the American West at the University of Colorado. Today, the 1991 collection published from that symposium, which I still admire, feels to me a little like a screen shot of western “revisioning,” a moment falling somewhere between the classic western mistakes and mythologies and the rhizome and the simulacrum, a moment when the map of Wallace Stegner’s “geography of hope” may have been a bit worn around the edges, but at least had not yet been replaced with a GPS. Just as that event allowed participants to speak their own personal visions about the future, so we have that opportunity here.

In the spirit of my native understatement, let me say that I believe we have not done such a bang-up job of creating a society to match our scenery, certainly not the job we might have hoped for in 1988—and that is the case whether the scenery we navigate be the high sagebrush of the Green River below Pinedale, the sprawling expanse of the Sand Hills, the canyons of Cedar Mesa, or even Reyner Banham’s “Plains of Id,” stretching south from downtown LA to the Venice boardwalk. Each of these geographies, in its own way, embarrasses the efforts of our often woefully mismatched society to live successfully and gently within it.

Approaching texts, figuring out how to read them, has always been my primary interest. This initial dance has for me been bound up with place and environment. Some decades ago when I first read Osborne Russell’s 1848 *Journal of a Trapper*, I became fascinated with what it might have been like to read Shakespeare in the “Rocky Mountain College,” a hastily built winter camp in a high valley at the foot of great peaks a thousand miles west of St. Louis. How would the place and the circumstances shape the reading? My own experience suggested that it would. I remembered the times that books and places had come together for me, the summer I weathered out a three-day storm in a tent at Island Lake in the Wind Rivers reading Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* or the long, cold autumn I spent pouring concrete in Idaho, reading Solzhenitsyn. The stories and the experiences meshed, deepening and contextualizing each other, the books and the life and the place becoming disorderly and involved with each other. The part of my work with students through the years that has most interested me has been conducting field courses in literature that have *emplaced* texts by reading them within their settings—reading Reg Saner in Chaco Canyon, Mary Austin along the Gila, Frank Waters at Bandelier, allowing place to become textualized, text contextualized.

To the extent that any of this complex ecology of reading and being in place has ever been sustainable, it has never been an imaginary sustainability of equilibrium or permanence, but rather the kind of ecology that exists in natural systems, a dynamic, non-linear experience, a trajectory of meaning described paradigmatically and syntagmatically through an oscillating range of states of mind, sensory responses, and values. Although in 1991, Wallace Stegner referred to *sustainability* as the “cant word of contemporary environmentalism,” reading Bill McKibben in *Rolling Stone* these days can be a demoralizing encounter with the likely obsolescence of sustainability on any recognizable scale, largest to most localized. We may be finally reaching the point where Charles Bowden becomes wrong when he argues that “nothing done by Americans is for keeps.” We are now making mistakes that for all practical purposes might be permanent.

If sustainability is the boat we have already missed, and the perhaps unbounded and unmitigated dynamic of global change its replacement, we will need our place-defined and adaptive reading strategies and practices more than ever to engage with the full accompaniment of climatic, environmental, social, political, and humanitarian consequences associated with it. Only the tools we have prepared for dynamic, *implaced* reading will benefit us in an environment where place becomes unstable and protean. The places we will need to understand through texts will be changing even as we define and experience them. The texts we understand through places will be abbreviated and shifting. We face a declension from what we know of where we are. A new agility in reading may be the necessary future of literature and the environment. That may be the new Rocky Mountain College.

Science Fiction Comes to Walden Pond

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This is less reminiscence and more provocation. Not quite a manifesto, mainly because I don't have space for wild metaphors. But you can imagine me as a less insane, certainly less violent F.T. Marinetti with a backpack, one copy each of *A Sand County Almanac* and *The Dispossessed*, and a Blackberry. There are many reasons for looking back. The comfort, not always the delusion, of nostalgia is one. I rather like nostalgia, actually. More important is how we learn, how we can lean forward more skillfully after having looked behind us and around us in this moment. What does ASLE do now? What do its members—scholars and creative writers—do now?

While editing *Isotope: A Journal of Literary Nature and Science Writing*, I read a great deal of really uninspired environmental writing, blandly epiphanic pieces that rolled out the same old tired tropes of so much nature writing. At home, the last thing I wanted to read was more nature writing. So in the hammock I found myself returning to that which I had left behind: Science fiction.

I found especially in its more literary forms (what Orson Scott Card derides as Li Fi), in the work of such writers as Kim Stanley Robinson, Ursula Le Guin, John Brunner, Paolo Bacigalupi, Carol Emshwiller and Brian Aldiss among many others, a core environmental concern... and indeed science fiction may be our most consequential environmental literature . . . in no small measure because it's read by the technologists many enviros despise.

When *Orion* magazine asked me and others to attend a small gathering a few years ago under the rubric of Forget Nature Writing, I didn't chafe. I do want us to forget nature writing. And I don't want us to forget nature writing. Mostly, I want us to cross-breed it with science fiction. I want us to write and to examine work that understands the following truths: Hope is more interesting than despair and hope for civilization and wilderness may hinge on right action that is at least as much technological as it is ethical.

Five years after ASLE formed, the Kyoto Protocol was signed in Japan. Since then, greenhouse gas emissions have risen not fallen, and we are facing the prospect of biospheric triage that likely will involve massive, deliberate and risky interventions in climate processes—a field known as geoengineering—in order to get us and the rest of the species on this planet through a bottleneck of our own making.

How can ecocritics and nature writers explore this likelihood, what the Abbey-reading Canadian scientist David Keith calls the ultimate form of restoration ecology? Does injecting stratospheric sulfur aerosols to reflect sunlight back into space fall into the category of a thing preserving biotic integrity in the Leopoldian sense? I believe so.

And there are a myriad of other hybrid endeavors arriving and persisting: GMOs, cross-species genetic engineering, increased digital/human interfaces, drones that track endangered species and on and on. Transhumanism. Posthumanism. Post nature. On and on.

I'm asking us as writers, critics and citizens not to abandon the ethical compass of much nature writing but to embrace the scary leading edge of technological/ecological mediations and to do so in our writing for each other, our communications with citizens outside the academy—including our elected representatives—and, of course, our students. I don't have the room to say more about the science-fictional saturation of environmental thinking that I'm asking for, but I briefly give a shout-out to the developing linkages between ASLE and the Science Fiction Research Association. And I plead with you: After the sophomores have read *Walden*, assign Brunner and Le Guin and screen Cameron's "Avatar" and Herzog's "Wild Blue Yonder." Science fiction may point to the very acts of restorative creativity that we need as a corrective to the depressing moral tone of too much nature writing. It also seems, to me, to be more hopeful than not. And it may make a difference—a good one—for nature itself.

Living through the Electronic Screen

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First: Gratitude. Having survived the onslaught of super-storm Sandy in November 2012, I am immensely grateful to have electricity – to say nothing of an undamaged home. But the storm provides clear evidence of global warming.

Second: The Shaping of Human Consciousness. It seems to me that my students spend an increasing amount of time staring at screens of all kinds: laptops, iPads, cell phones and the like. I wonder what the effect is upon their consciousness. More and more, the contents their minds register as "experience" comes from looking at such screens. Less and less of their experience is registered from direct participation in the "natural world." I would venture to say that an electronic world of communication is replacing the world of nature as the immediate source of experience. So the trajectory of modern communications is reshaping human consciousness. It is a descent into Plato's Cave. Our life experience is the dance of electrons on a screen. I ask them: "Is this the highest and best use of your consciousness?"

Third: Are we in a new phase of human history? Are we plunging into a world reshaped by the dynamics of world-wide climate change? Are we simultaneously reshaping human consciousness? If any of this is so, what is the new ecology? How does a computer-nurtured human consciousness find a balance with a changing natural world? Or is such a balance an antiquated notion in our brave new world?

A Brief History of ASLE

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Clonk, clonk.

That was me, once upon a time, rapping my knuckles
against a stone--but from the inside.

And if you had picked up that stone,
a river cobble, say, sun-dried and warm
in Colorado's Never Summer range,

which was even then melting inside the past tense
of its name, flake by ghostly snowflake,

its slopes, even in winter, darkening

like storm clouds,

and if you'd pressed that cobble to your ear, hungry

for the antique sound of tumbling

stream water,

you might have heard me

knocking away in that crushed darkness, imploring

you, or gravity, to slam down a hammer

to release my song of stone,

my epic poem

of the pilgrimage of continents,

or maybe their opposite:

immense, stuttering land-plates downshifting

to a still point before grinding their way back home

to the equipose of Pangaia.

Or, no matter how hard you listened,
stone to your ear, you might not have heard me
at all.

Perhaps I was reluctant to knock too hard?
How many others, with how many of their own stories,
might have felt like me, stuck inside stone?

But now, along the twisting length of rivers
coast to coast and beyond the coasts,
there's hardly a cobble
you can lift without hearing

Open me up!
or a hammering that knows it can split
a rock from inside.

In fact,
you can hear the hammering now,
in this room.

This is ASLE.

First Instruction

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Let's think a little on *pond*. No no—not *that* pond. Not the one near Concord. But an everywhere, unnamed, uncanonized, pond. So unassuming, we might call it a Canadian pond, even if more than a little Henry David splashes down in it. I'm thinking of Don McKay's poem "Pond."

Eventually water,
having been possessed by every verb—
been rush been drip been
geyser eddy fountain rapid drunk
evaporated frozen pissed
transpired—will fall
into itself and sit.

Pond.

McKay has some Grade 4 children standing gawkily in the poem's second movement. In ponds nearby the school, or in jars and aquaria in the classroom, many of us at age 9 or 10, encountered our first learning of biology. Such ponds, some of them portable, we received, at least indirectly, our first instruction in ecology. In "a small pond, only a few yards across . . . there will representatives of almost every class of living thing." (Burton 8)

Pond reflects—an ecologist looks into it for an understanding of contributing water sources (ground water aquifer, stream flow, surface run off), the characteristics of the watershed (geology, soils, topography), and culture (forestry, agriculture, residential, commercial, industrial uses). (Primer) So, McKay keeps musing the pond's capacious receptivity: *every verb recall*; "nothing declined" he realizes; "pond" is a noun, hence still, become a verb. And it's also small, nearby, known and familiar: **local**. The pond is in us.

But not static. Wind is crucial to pond ecology, creating turbulence and hence mixing and metamorphosis:

stirred by every
whim of wind, it translates air as texture—
mottled, moire, pleated, shirred or
seersuckered in that momentary ecstasy from which
impressionism, like a bridesmaid, steps

The vocabulary here reads beauty in the dappled: spotted and smeared and wavy and unstable—we might as well say disturbed. Pond becomes a work of art, a painting, a moment in which we comprehend not only an intricate interdependency of scaup and pollen, and that global circulation of water that Linda Hogan terms a "planet birthing itself," but also a place and a way to *see the air*: to understand the language of breathing and gases we cannot see or feel.

Pond is home: we might as well say *oikos*, eco-, ASLE.