

## ***Natura Naturans* and the Organic Ecocritic: Toward a Green Theory of Temporality**

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### **Abstract**

*If ecocriticism has been a form of scholarship that is integrated with an activist practice, that activism has most often taken the form of rhetorical appeals to conservation and to valuation of a specific place (or “place” as such), a species, or even a privileged mode of representation such as the pastoral, the work of the bioregionally-grounded poet, or green themes in middlebrow novels (Garrard, 2005). Ecocriticism-as-advocacy assumes a particular view of time. An active present is taken as a means of forestalling an undesirable future, with little account for the past; the critic is in a race against time to explicate the water images in this or that poem, and heated debate concerns the limits of an appropriate canon for such an enterprise<sup>1</sup>. Meanwhile, historically-informed and materialist approaches to ecocriticism, have been proposed, which look to the past as a field of determinations and limits on the present: the present as the given product, finished or not, of past causes<sup>2</sup>. Both these approaches, and the Utopian mode—so promising in its ability to imagine a positive political program in addition to the earnest advocacy we already have of the conserve this and care for that type—are all predicated on two unspoken and contradictory a priori: time as a matrix of causality, and hence the objects of time as legible in space in the present, on one side; time as a transhistorical and transcendent Now of reflection and contemplation or another. The former, in that it supports a view of nature as a time-produced and time-bound formation vulnerable and impermanent in its complexity, is appropriate to an activist stance as something to defend; the latter predicates a certain kind of criticism, specifically a detached and aesthetically-oriented gaze. Both positions have merit. However, neither is wholly or solely adequate, and there remains between them a conceptual tension if not contradiction between the political and critical engagements characteristic of ecocriticism since the 1980s.*

Among ecocritics, there has been no systematic and critical treatment of the problem of time relative to nature and culture as processes in history, which is to say, no account of time for the purpose of an activist, historicist,

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and dialectical ecocriticism yet. *Ecocriticism*. Following approaches to critical practice taken by Antonio Gramsci and especially the less-well-known Karel Kosik (a philosopher and democratic activist of the Prague Spring of 1968), I propose a framework in which to understand the activist present *vis a vis* the historical past inclusive of geologic, biologic, and anthropologic scales—the present emerging from these matrices—and hence the future as something contestable by those with some understanding of nature and social formations as processes, a sort of knowledge Perry Anderson refers to as “causal knowledge” (85), opposed to the contemplative transhistoricism or transcendence of the historical latent in much ecocritical work and perhaps epitomized in the recent meditations of Murali Sivaramakrishnan (2011)<sup>3</sup>. Beginning instead with a dialectic of consciousness and conditions, this paper puts forward a materialist understanding of temporality in order to give conceptual clarity to ecocriticism's hermeneutical and political projects, and to show how they can be integrated. By extension, this closes the gap between activist and scientific *eco-* and the subjectivist or aesthetic transcendence of disciplinary *-criticism*, by predicating the critical act in and of a specified position in ecological time, as a constitutive function of that moment.

The approach I propose has another advantage: at present, much ecocritical work often lacks a position of critique that is reflexive and aware of the material and political situation in which it is produced. This is because the transcendental position of subjective retreat debilitates a rigorous understanding of causality and determination, as though the critic is somehow above or beyond contingency<sup>4</sup>. One can posit a transhistorical Present in which epiphanies or spontaneous whatevers may emerge, but only at the risk of sacrificing the materialist premises that make ecocriticism plausibly *ecological*, insofar as ecology is the science of life systems, the “given” material from which culture emerges and on which it depends, to use Sebastiano Timpanaro's terms. Consequently, it is useful to frame a theory of temporality that specifies the location of the ecocritic in time, as a producer of activist knowledge in the context of the ecological and social history of the present<sup>5</sup>.

## Disciplinary Studies in Ecocriticism

I am describing an old problem, settled in the earliest explorations of the ecocritical project and still repeated now. Suggesting that ecocriticism—a project whose difficulty to define is demonstrated by its repeated attempts at self-definition, as Simon Estok and Terry Gifford suggest—has been predicated on a contradiction between its politically-activist “eco” and English-department-disciplinary “critical” terms is itself more than a decade old. In an early exploratory essay, Lance Newman defines ecocriticism as “a movement based in university literature departments, but one that is ambitious to reach beyond them, in order to accomplish a most serious and important goal: transformation of human relations with nature” (2). Positing that this relationship is demonstrably botched under present conditions is a position that needs no justification, but analyses of the ultimate and proximate causes of this slow-motion disaster and attempts to imagine ways out of it remain contested. According to Newman, ecocritics tend to diagnose the problem idealistically, arguing that “[t]he problem is bad ideas” insofar as “the leading ideas in society determine how it is structured and how it evolves through time” (2), a position to be contrasted against the materialist view that ideas arise in the process of activities rooted in human will-to-power and need, and not the reverse. Following this idealistic diagnosis, most ecocritics prescribe themselves “the task of changing our minds, of convincing us to think in ways that will, in turn, change how we behave, both individually and as a society” (3). A clear-eyed survey of significant and representative ecocritical projects, work that may not itself be current (especially since the watershed that was Tim Morton's *Ecology Without Nature*) but still carries the weight of ecocritical authority, suggest that the very conditions Newman describes—a contradictory coupling of conservative disciplinary cultures and means with transformational, even revolutionary aspirations—have tended to make some

canonical and frequently-cited ecocritics actively hostile to critical social method while simultaneously producing concepts that productively open onto a contribution to such a critical method. Such a survey is beyond the scope of the present work<sup>6</sup>, but can be inferred from the milieu out of which this preliminary work emerged: the *discipline* of reading certain kinds of texts in certain disciplined ways, in order to convince readers also disciplined by the discipline of something that is germane to the discipline or its designated objects.

By contrast, Newman finds this prescription—to change minds by explicating texts in a particular way and thereby change ethics—unacceptable or at best incomplete as a program for an effective ecological politics. To explain why he gives a brief cultural history showing how this paradigm arose: “Ecocriticism’s reluctance so far to recognize the social world as an active force in its tale of a solitary visionary wandering in the woods,” Newman argues, evoking the ecocritically-contested trope of the contemplative and transcendent Romantic poet, “reveals the incompleteness of its departure from the historiographical idealism of orthodox literary studies and cultural analysis” (10). Consequently, “[m]ost believe that such things as deforestation and pollution are symptoms of a society in which our ethical priorities have been disordered by a culture of materialism, a tradition of humanism, or the Pure of another ideological misalignment,” and therefore work to bring about “a realignment that will be accomplished above all by rethinking or reimagining nature” (Newman 10-11). Newman argues that this view is in fact “not ecological enough” and, by inference, uncritical; Newman prefers instead to “explain why the habits of thought and action that we deplore became and remain dominant within this specific ecosocial order” (11), which is to say, Newman proposes Marxist critical practice as an alternative in this context, with the broad aim “to bring under democratic control decisions not only about how much to produce, but also what we produce and how” (13). Newman concludes that ecocriticism must embrace Marxist critical social theory because “[e]nvironmental commitment is finally a matter of consciously attempting to change the most basic structures of social power,” because “the same forces that generate exploitation and oppression, generate ecological damage” (21).

Here, Newman's position represents a longstanding and valuable strand of ecocritical thought. That is, there has long existed in ecocritical and bioregional thought a strong imperative to political transformation that is, at minimum, compatible with the social diagnoses of Marxist critical theory, which, as David Layfield shows, locates ecological crises and social injustices squarely in the social relations and regimes of accumulation that prevail under capital. For instance, Sivaramakrishnan—in an attempt to defend the value of transhistorical and idealist positioning for ecocritical work—quotes Patrick Murphy's 1998 summary of Gary Snyder's ecological politics: “The ecosystem culture is attentive to local particularity and the benefits of heterogeneity, while the biosphere culture relentlessly attempts to homogenize the peoples of the world in the interests of transnational economics” (304). If one replaces the word “culture” with the phrase “social formation”—a reasonable thing to do, since “culture” here does the work “social formation” does in Marxist political economy—then Murphy and Snyder become radicals and their words become indistinguishable from ecological Marxism, and as I have argued in the context of bioregionalism (Anderson, 2012) this is a virtue, and should not be dismissed as mere “constructivism” (Love, 2003).

Newman's proposal, while offering a sound and still relevant diagnosis of anthologized ecocriticism's constitutive contradiction, goes further correctly that a dialectical theory can resolve this contradiction between the imperative to revolutionize the relationship presently obtaining between the *socius* and the material on one side and the resistance to theorizing the grounds, the means, or the ends of such a transformation on the other, embracing instead a nostalgic or idealistic project. This distinction can be understood in terms of temporality: where does the ecocritic presume him or herself to be situated in time—in an abstract Now of reflection or unproblematic objectivity, or embedded in a dialectical process of emergence? The latter possibility opens onto a resolution to the contradiction Newman observes.

## Nature Naturing

For the sake of full disclosure, I should point out two assumptions I make moving forward: first, that matter is real in its own way, and consequently, it is comprehensible if not completely or perfectly so by reason or imagination, and even if our apprehensions of it and concepts for it do not necessarily or consistently correspond to the kind of reality they may present. That is, the shapes of things that appear before our senses may objectively be dynamic processes or static wave forms, for instance, but subjectively they correspond to conventional designations. I make this assumption on the basis of predictability: one plants a viable seed under known conditions, and it not only sprouts, but may produce fruit that reproduces the seed from which it grew: apples to apples. This extends into the conventions of ordinary life as well; if you come to my home and ask me for a bottle of ale or a mug of coffee, we both know more or less what to expect of the container and the liquid. However, the creative work of nature, the living body of this planet, is not to be taken at face value as a set of finished and homogenized commodities, as static, finished, cold, or other to Spirit and hence to be transcended. I understand it as a very complex matrix of *processes* in time. From this assumption, I claim an inquiry into the conditions of consciousness that make an apprehension of this process possible is warranted. Secondly, I assume that such a critical consciousness is possible and real but not a given—which is another way to say that I assume learning is possible but not inevitable. This is a premise I will return to in a recursive, but hopefully not circular, argument. Both these assumptions have a history in ecocritical thought under the concept of “*natura naturans*” or “nature naturing.”

In an exemplary instance of such thinking, Frederick Turner (1996) objects to the ideological uses to which the conventional nature/culture split is put, and proposes instead to understand the forms of human consciousness and practice we call “culture” as itself *of nature*, taking the *The Winter's Tale* (a time-saturated document to be sure) as his point of departure. Shakespeare, Turner claims, “insists that human art is not only a product of nature, but one of the creative instruments of nature doing what it does. We are *natura naturans*, nature naturing” (42). The gerund form of this claim is significant: culture is nature is *naturing*, indicating an ongoing and continuing process in *objective* time. Nature has a tempo independent of subjective experiences of temporality, which may be evident in the archive of natural history and cultural production. Here, I should observe that the very concept of objective time, even in the purview of critical philosophy, is hardly an innocent or uncontested one. I address this problem and suggest an alternative context for it in the conclusion to this essay.

To explore Turner's idea further, one may observe that one characteristic of the world inhabited by people is that it is representable, that we can learn from it and reproduce that learning to others in ways that are themselves reproducible, and in a sense this learning and reproduction of learning amounts to nature learning from itself—and from that learning, can come to transform itself in correspondence to the “art” produced and prevailing in a given social formation. “Art” in Shakespearean English has an affiliation to work, production, and labor in addition to representation and creativity or artifice. If, as Turner suggests, “we” are “nature naturing,” we are involved in feeding and reproducing ourselves in a direct way, through our labors and interactions with each other; the plural pronoun is not incidental, because as Karl Marx (but not only Marx) was correct to insist from 1844 onwards, labor is *social labor*, and the human metabolism with nature is shaped, constituted, conditioned by social activity in social formations<sup>7</sup>. Most fundamentally, *natura naturans* points to the *reproduction of life as such*, biological life as well as more capable or creative life. I call this vulnerable, precarious totality of relations and potentials among beings in necessary relation to each other the Very Big Body, and argue elsewhere for it to be taken as the object of specifically political responsibility by ecocritics (Anderson, “Accumulating-Capital”). Life *in time*, the tempo of objective nature, can premise an environmental politics. Look for yourself and see that time is short.

Turner's essay is also directed in another, equally significant direction, toward a reality-making activity. While *natura naturans* is a concept introduced in Spinoza's *Ethics*, it is also taken up in adaptations of German Idealist categories from their habitat in the philosophy of nature, where Samuel Taylor Coleridge found them<sup>8</sup>, to contemporary ecological thought, as in Kate Rigby's exploration of Schelling<sup>9</sup>. This concerns the subjective apperception of objective temporality in nature, including the sense of crisis. The relation of nature naturing to labor and creativity as a way to specify it into a theory of time in and of consciousness as well as matter, the categories of "subject" and "object" in dialectical and hence processual relation with each other, should be emphasized. Admittedly, this is presented in much the same enlightenment tradition as the problem of transcendent critical and aesthetic judgment; however, I think it more than plausible that Hegel's categories, especially the dialectic of matter, can be taken critically and not idealistically<sup>10</sup>. I will describe this through the concepts of labor, care, and praxis as they are developed in Kosik's *Dialectic of the Concrete*, a text which I hope to show has a contribution to make to contemporary ecological critique in the way it deploys those categories.

This contribution follows on a question: what happens when the conventional sense of temporality does not correspond to the objective tempo of social and natural history, as in the willful blindness to the material consequences of the nuclear arms race on both sides during the Cold War, or to the present cultural milieu of climate change denial and correlated opposition to proper science education in public schools in the U.S.?

### **Labor, Objectification, and the Feeling of Temporality**

Stuart Hall (1980) once productively described culture as a "dialectic between conditions and consciousness" (79)<sup>11</sup>. *Eco-* (conditions) and *-criticism* (consciousness). In specifying both terms of this formula for ecocritical purposes, the category of conditions takes in the complex totality of material (biological, social) determinants brought to bear on the mind and the senses, and that also function as their substrate and condition of possibility: the web of life, complete, and the given local bioregion in particular<sup>12</sup>. Remembering that mind is in important ways matter, and that mindstuff is contingent on culture and experience, consciousness is better understood not as Mind-as-such nor as pure subjective interiority, but rather as the *repertoire of forms* consciousness takes, inclusive of critical consciousness and compassionate responses. In terms of a subject apprehending an object, a reciprocal relation obtains: the history of the apprehending subject determines the ways in which a form presented to the senses may be understood; the same silhouette may be assumed to be an umbrella by a Portlander, a palm tree by a Los Angelino, or a shiitake mushroom to a resident of Sapporo. These canalized mental formations are social in nature and produced by particular historical forces, by the things people do to survive and thrive (labor and creative action), the sites in which they do it (bioregions and built environments), and the ways they learn to do it. They are inflected and often determined by relations of power; Georg Lukacs' description of this "false consciousness" as "second nature" (Kosik calls it the "pseudoconcrete") is in this instance both evocative and accurate insofar as a particular social regime promotes forms of consciousness that are intended to maintain the status quo<sup>13</sup>: "intelligent design" serves the end of petro-capitalism insofar as it helps put the brakes on meaningful climate politics, and hence produces a mismatch between the felt sense of time (everything is fine) and the inevitable consequences of social actions (Dhaka will drown as sea levels rise).

The immediate point is that both the forms of consciousness made available to a given subject (mindstuff) and the objects presented to that subject's consciousness (things) can be assumed to be products of historical processes on cultural and evolutionary scales of time, which is to say that the edge between the two constitutes a site of action from which productive ecocritical work can emerge because it is the point where the objective tempo of history meets the subjective productions of consciousness, where the two interact and

*co-constitute* each other. This is the context in which I draw in Kosik's analysis of labor, objectification, and temporality.

Kosik describes this *co-constitution of consciousness and conditions* as follows: "the only reality of the human world is the unity of empirical conditions, complete with the process of forming them, on the one hand, and of transient or living values and their formative process, on the other. The particular historical character of reality determines whether this unity is realized as a harmony of incarnated values, that is through conditions infused with values, or as a split between empty, invalidated empiricism and ideal transcendental values" (84). This is not merely a methodological matter, as Kosik's diction implies. This objectification also describes everyday life insofar as material life (eating and breathing, and hence working) gives rise to a sense of temporality in ordinary life conditions. It also opens onto a useful distinction between embodied forms of consciousness in which mindstuff corresponds to real needs and possibilities on one side, and the varieties of false consciousness or "second nature" also in circulation on another.

Because consciousness may take variable and often worse than useless forms, the natural world is experienced and apprehended in fundamentally divergent ways—perhaps as an object of idealization, perhaps as a field of resources to exploit. "Nature thus appears to man in a double light," Kosik claims: "it stands out as a power and an objectivity that has to be respected, whose laws have to be recognized so that man may use them to his own advantage, yet sinks to the level of mere material in which human intentions are realized" (121-122). Present activity becomes a product of the past processes, objectified and quantifiable like a set of commodities on a spreadsheet or in a retail shop, an *object*: this is why objectification is called objectification.

The same logic also describes *subjectification*, the processes by which subjects are shaped, formed, and have their being as objects by determinants eternal to mind such as social formations and material contexts. Consequently, it is from the process of objectification at the site of labor that the felt sense of temporality emerges as Kosik describes it: "In the labor process, results of past labor are transformed while realizing intentions of the *future*. The three-dimensionality of human time as a constitutive dimension of man's being is anchored in labor as man's *objective doing*. The three-dimensionality of time and the temporality of man are based on objectification. *Without objectification, there is no temporality*" (Kosik 122). The site and conditions of labor, necessary to the reproduction of biological and social life, is understood as the machine of objectification: *the forms labor takes determine the forms by which societies objectify, which in turn determine the contours of time which are representable or available to consciousness in the same society.*

Kosik's invocation of "past labors" directs attention to the metabolism of human activity and material, bioregional conditions, ably described by Alfred Schmidt. Volcanic activity and erosion transform past geological formations but without intentionality for a future shape; the geological formation we call Mount Lassen simply Lassen itself into being without intention or cooperation. This is how the felt experience of human time differs from the time of biospheres on one scale, or geological formations on another. Labor is also significant as the site in which the forms of objectification emerge and are disciplined in that it opens onto a consideration of how a society can assume a relation of responsibility or care for a site or a planet, beginning with responsibility for the fundamental and vulnerable life-conditions a bioregion may offer (Anderson, "Accumulating-Capital). It should be emphasized that in Kosik's description, the relation to nature that prevails in labor under capitalist social relations, in which the living process of a bioregion is transformed into an inert object of consumption and, for the few empowered to make decisions about these relations, the accumulation of capital—is the metabolism of time. Which is to say, Kosik's understanding of temporality is already ecocritical insofar as it emerges from a description of that relation of social practices to the natural world.

Significantly for a green cultural studies, Kosik presents labor and collaborative activity as the point of mediation between nature and culture. Kosik at once situates his argument in the framework of nature naturing, but also moves to complicate it: "Man is a component of nature and is himself nature. At the same time, though, he is a being which, having mastered both 'external' and his own natures, forms a *new* reality in nature, one that is irreducible to the latter" (71). This novelty can be suggested by reference to cultural practices and products. For instance, to return to Turner's example, *The Winter's Tale* as a cultural phenomenon cannot be explained in an integral or complete way only by reference to its historical origin, in and of particular bodies at a certain time. Its history, inclusive of its reception, reproduction, and the creative uses to which it has been put, is longer and broader than the text's moment of arising, and for this reason, categories such as culture and consciousness are necessary to describe it. When read in this context, Kosik's invocation of the discourse of nature-mastery so familiar in dialectical materialism since Friedrich Engels' *Dialectic of Nature* emerges with an entirely different set of meanings. Where in Engels such a mastery of natural productive forces by social man is optimistically assumed to be both possible and good, an anthropocentric and short-sighted position unacceptable to both ecocritics and ecologically-oriented Marxists<sup>14</sup>, Kosik, as Mildred Bakan argues, puts his optimism elsewhere. In Bakan's interpretation, "man, recovering himself intellectually as *natura naturans*, understands himself as creative and vital, in his own being integrated with nature as making itself" (80). Mastery here implies creativity and purposiveness—as in mastery of a craft or a discipline as a precondition of making something new—rather than mastery as control, domination, or exploitation. In the nondual context of nature naturing, "mastery" connotes a view of human social agency as a function of nature as competent to, and increasingly skillful in, learning how to care for itself.

"Mastery" thus understood opens onto a problem that, in my view (in "Critical Bioregionalist Method"), a critical approach to green cultural studies, critical ecocriticism or bioregionalism, can address. Nature natures through determination, through necessity: you have a body that must be cared for and has certain minimal conditions even for bare existence. This is the "given" that is nature, recalling Timpanaro's diction. Such are the conditions. But what of consciousness, the condition of possibility for care, for managing necessity? As I have already observed, human subjects have an imperfect, baffled understanding of their situation variously characterized in cultural studies as false consciousness, false nature, the spectacle, or ideology. G.I. Gurdjieff describes the double bind, an imperative to be aware and take care on one side against the mechanical determinations within and without the human subject as "The Terror of the Situation" in his baffling and hilarious puzzle of a novel, *Beelzebub's Tales to his Grandson*. Kosik presents it in his concept of the *pseudoconcrete*. In Kosik's hands, L. Roland Irons argues, "the production and reproduction of consciousness are situated in everyday life" (167), where the contradictions of the capitalist social formation are a felt reality—as are their ideological distortion. According to Irons, under such a regime, "individuals become preoccupied with the future of their present *state of utility*, and the results of planning for the future become mechanically derived from the given system rather than dialectically structured on the principle of 'free' social activity" (174), which is to say that *forms of consciousness* become objectified, and the horizon of imaginable possibilities and values becomes reduced and recursively bent into mechanical habit or regimes of external control, and away from the capacity to work creatively and collaboratively in a relation of care. These forms serve as immaterial means to reproduce material results, the maintenance of the present order. This is the kind of false consciousness Kosik characterizes as "pseudoconcrete," described as a "chiaroscuro of truth and deceit" (Kosik 2). It is "[t]he collection of phenomena that crowd the everyday environment and the routine atmosphere of human life, and which penetrate the consciousness of acting individuals with a regularity, immediacy, and self-evidence that lend them a semblance of autonomy and naturalness" (2). The reproduction and objectification of these repertoires of seeming necessity produces the problem of false consciousness, which can be addressed through critical consciousness at their point of production, hence making it possible to address the causes of crisis in addition lamenting their results. How so?

## Care and Critical Praxis

Invoking the problematic of care in the context of a discourse of care, work-making, and time may, at first glance, imply an inscription of Martin Heidegger's description of fallenness—care as *Sorge*, trouble, worry<sup>15</sup>. While it is clear that Kosik may have been influenced by Heidegger's thinking, Kosik's concept of care is both more prosaic and more optimistic than Heidegger's: "Care is not the everyday consciousness of the struggling individual, one that he would shed during leisure. Care is the practical involvement of the individual in a tangle of social relations conceived from the position of his personal individual, subjective involvement" (37). It is less an imposition than a commitment, even a matter of the heart, a practice of love, by which the metabolism of everyday life and its preconditions are cared for. Kosik is optimistically describing a world in which critical and creative *praxis* is possible, in which *natura naturans* opens onto a space of increased creativity and lessened necessity through collaborative and creative social action: self-aware and hence critical, not mechanical or externally manipulated and exploitative, activity. Kosik defines *praxis* as "the creative activity of mankind" (84), the creative work impacting the relation of consciousness to historical conditions: both the formation of them, but also the representation and transformation of them (Kosik 112). Mildred Bakan explains the significance of Kosik's position in phenomenological and existential terms: "To be open to *things*, however, in terms of work, is to be open to their *possible transformation*. The transformation of things opens us to their causal relations. The transformation of nature requires the intelligent use of natural resources, which requires bodily effort and social organization" (88), a responsibility that follows not from a "resigned alienation from nature, as Sartre would have it, but as part of nature itself" (94). With the emergence of *praxis*, nature naturing can become a metabolism of self-care<sup>16</sup>.

*The ecocritical task* that follows from such a position is threefold: to work *creatively*, imagining a new relation of the particularly and uniquely capable life of human culture, characterized by the dialectic of consciousness and conditions, to the totality of vulnerable life, the Very Big Body; to work *critically* rather than thematically, with an eye toward natural and social relations in their material reality, in their totality; to work *rhetorically, thematically, or performatively* to produce in a public such a form of consciousness. Each of these is a complex task with divergent modes of articulation and possibility and are already undertaken in different ways among ecocritics, inclusive of but not limited to the work of offering "green readings" and producing "nature writing." Before describing only one of them, the critical task, it is helpful to reflect on the conditions in which such an alternative may be produced or considered, addressing the "alternative to what?" question.

In terms of "uneven development," in labor and in the exploitation of bioregions, the temporality of the present demands an alternative. The familiarity of these claims does not diminish their truth value: time is running short and this cannot go on much longer, in fact it may be too late already. Natural materials, life forms, are of themselves qualitatively different, creative. Like creative human labor, these qualitatively different flows are homogenized, "enclosed" (to invoke Snyder's recuperation of the Trajedy of the Commons) by capital into a qualitative regime of valuation as a productive force. Under capitalist social relations, those whose creative labor is exploited—the earth's bioregions and native cultures, and the overwhelming majority of its working population—has no say in how the quantitative value of that productive act is to be distributed, nor how or what will be produced, and with little meaningful regard for the utility ("use value") of that produce considered. Capital, as a class, reserves those decisions to itself, and has little incentive to regard the qualitatively divergent needs, capacities, histories, or simple sustainability of life of those it exploits in its decisions<sup>17</sup>. And where the products of nature are more or less legible as objects of history—a stone does not obfuscate the history of its production when a geologist examines it—the products of capital are not so transparent<sup>18</sup>. The destruction of a particular forest is not immediately visible in the living room of an exurban McMansion tacked together from the cellulose extracted from that forest, or the foreclosure notice waiting in the mailbox<sup>19</sup>.



The point is that this work of reading things in and of the world and writing about them is a political project *par excellence*: “Recognizing, and becoming conscious of the character of the system as one of exploitation is an indispensable condition for the odyssey of one historical form of praxis,” that of capitalist accumulation, “to culminate in a *revolutionary praxis*,” Kosik argues (112). This concept of temporality presents a position of integrated critical thought and political action that can be helpful to the ecocritic. This is the practical significance of the preceding philosophical speculations on temporality. Thoughts on their practical application follow.

## The Organic Ecocritic

To be determined at present is to have been so in the past; to have a history and to be part of one is to be neither something nor nothing. Not *something* in the sense of a static, independent, and salvable soul independent of social life and biological need (the sovereign consumer-citizen of neoliberalism)—but not *nothing*, because one is a recognizable pattern of affiliation, among others, with certain capacities such as the ability to learn. I follow Antonio Gramsci, in short, in describing the determined subject as a process and as competent to critical consciousness, that is, coming to be aware of the ways in which one is embedded within dynamics of need and exploitation (one is exploited in laboring to meet one's needs), much as very many others are also embedded in the same dynamic, with an eye toward transforming it. Gramsci works within the same Enlightenment ethos Kosik does: “in putting the question 'what is man?' what we mean is: what can man become? That is, can man dominate his own destiny, can he 'make himself,' can he create his own life? We maintain therefore that man is a process, and, more exactly, the process of his actions” (351). *Actions* are here taken in both volitional, creative, and conscious terms, as well as that complex of mechanical and unconscious actions characterizable as compulsion, routine, or habit. There is a way to understand this distinction in Cultural Studies, for instance, where the Terror of the Situation is expressed primarily through an appeal to the aesthetic—for instance, Guy Debord understands the subject as wholly identified with the spectacle, but leaves the door open to “art” as a conscious alternative, while Herbert Marcuse is able to think the one-dimensional-man and the Great Refusal at once.

But instead of playing one side of the mechanical/creative binary against the other, Gramsci, the imprisoned optimist, instead posits the *distinction* or decision between conscious and unconscious action as the site of agency: “If one's individuality is the *ensemble* of these relations, to create one's personality means to acquire consciousness of them and to modify the *ensemble* of these relations” (352). Embedded within this description of the dialectic of consciousness and conditions are the premises of Gramscian politics. Absent the possibility for critical consciousness and socially-useful knowledge, there can be no “organic intellectuals” organizing and teaching the laboring class, understood here to include not only a now globalized proletariat but also the sum of animated nature made vulnerable by the consequences of capitalist accumulation (hence, the “organic ecocritic”). And for Gramsci this politics is necessarily social and plural, insofar as “each individual is the synthesis not only of existing relations, but of the history of these relations” (353). This description of agency has a great deal of descriptive power for repositioning the ecocritic in the historical time of the local or bioregional totality of life-relations in which the body and the culture of the “organic” intellectual inheres, as well as the Very Big Body. To the point, this *critical position* is in productive contrast to the mainline surely not the whole of contemporary ecocriticism I have described: the present and consciousness of it are understood as contingent on the past, and are necessarily plural rather than reified into the singular neoliberal subject or, for that matter, a metaphysics of a collective unconscious or dialectically-emerging World-Spirit.

## Conclusion: Time to Draw It All Together

*Dialectics of the Concrete* is significant and warranted primarily because it recuperates a specifically dialectical materialism, and with that a conceptual opening onto objective time that may sidestep the conceptual and political problems presented by the “vulgar materialist” categories of Soviet Marxist orthodoxy and the idealism latent in the Hegelian texts from which it derived. Gramsci summarizes this orthodoxy in a relevant way: “even the philosophy of praxis,” Gramsci’s cipher for Marxism, “tends to become an ideology in the worst sense of the word, that is to say a dogmatic system of eternal and absolute truths,” when “it is confused with vulgar materialism, with its metaphysics of ‘matter’ which is necessarily eternal and absolute” (406-7). In the dialectical materialism against which both Gramsci and Kosik, in different ways and by different means, pushed, the living body of nature is reduced to a set of static objects to be swept into the forward march of objective time. Objective time emerges in this view as the inevitable progression of the orthodox Party and the State.

By contrast to this view and the political power that advanced it, Kosik does not construct or preserve a static and idealized (and hence dehistoricized and atemporal) object of the phenomenal world by an equally static and idealized subject (also, hence, dehistoricized and atemporal)<sup>20</sup>. Kosik instead takes subject and object in dialectical relation to each other in historical time, and presents each in itself as an in-process product of historical time, of the ongoing practices and metabolisms of daily life. Ultimately, because subjects are determined by their objective relations, which are acted on by subjective agency (labor and creativity), one can say that *consciousness and conditions are co-constitutive of each other*. Nature natures. Further, this need not be taken as a set of concepts empty of empirical content, like a “castle in the sky.” Objective time can be traced by means of the transformations that are legible in objects and interactions among objects, objective conditions; subjective time, by the legible changes in forms of consciousness. If critical materialists such as Timpanaro insist, correctly in my view, that the seemingly-passive stuff that is matter must be taken seriously, and if ecocriticism and bioregionalism insist, also correctly, that multivalent and local life must be taken seriously, then Kosik points toward a conceptual frame in which both can be done without doing violence to either. It also presents a supple vocabulary with which to discuss objective time, worlds of life coming into being and peaceful futures imagined, without falling into some of the conceptual problems that can characterize such attempts, such as the presentation of a private theology as a form of public knowledge in so-called intelligent design theory or its ally, integral ecology<sup>21</sup>, or the dogmatic refusal to consider material matters of socially produced poverty and scarcity as matters of public concern for everyone, so characteristic of libertarian and corporatist political programs (Nozick, 1974). Further, this way of framing the problem of “organic ecocriticism” following Kosik has direct rhetorical power, as Greg Garrard rightly suggests this work should have: if the romanticism Jonathan Bate evokes is a heartfelt nostalgia *pace* William Wordsworth, I propose instead that ecocritics aim for the gut and describe directly how ecological crises emerge from specific social practices, and how that temporal rhythm can assure future crises impactful on anyone’s ability to survive and on the potential for one to fulfill his or her self-realization<sup>22</sup>. Given the choice between Wordsworthian nostalgia, imagining backward, and the authority of material science in convincing someone of imagining forward a particular kind of Trouble Ahead, of material scarcity and insecurity even in the suburbs, in a way that can be *felt* as much as thought, I will advocate for the latter.

In sum, the temporal approach advanced here has the advantage of avoiding a reliance on an idealism of the subject or reification of Nature so prevalent in ecocritical work prior to Morton’s *Ecology without Nature* and still circulating, and more importantly, the forced homogenization of qualitative biological diversity to the quantitative terms of capitalist social relations. Further, it provides a rationale for both valences of ecocritical work, that of public politics and of critical thought, without putting those terms in contradiction to each other, and does so often from premises that had long before emerged among ecocritics.

## Endnotes

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- 1 The recent verdict of an *Orion Magazine* editor that “nature writing is dead” is but one example of this. The present essay argues that neither nature writing nor the beyond of nature writing are dead and that neither need to die.
- 2 David Landis Barnhill's contribution to *The Bioregional Imagination* is a particularly strong specimen of this species.
- 3 Both of these alternatives emerge from nineteenth century natural philosophy, a cultural matrix that has been productively developed for ecocritical purposes; see Alice Jenkins' work on Alexander von Humboldt (2007), and Michael Cohen's (2007) proposal for “Darwinian” reading. A detailed assessment of the engagement between the ecological humanities and such discourses is warranted.
- 4 By contrast to the idealism of such writers as Sivaramakrishnan, one of the virtues of Gary Snyder's explicitly contemplative *Practice of the Wild* is its insistence on locating the present in a matrix of historical determinations, which he summarizes as “the spirit of the place” (41).
- 5 It is also hoped that an article on a book called *Dialectics of the Concrete* may make a point of introduction between recent work in Object Studies and the environmental humanities generally. Arjun Appadurai, Fiona Candlin and Raiford Guins, Jane Bennett, and Ian Hodder make particularly relevant contributions in this context.
- 6 Jonathan Bate's *The Song of the Earth* and Glen Love's *Practical Ecocriticism* represent two strong examples of this problem, particularly in their repudiation of the work of Raymond Williams. On the question of the overdetermination of discipline in ecocriticism, see my essay “Accumulating-Capital, Accumulating-Carbon.”
- 7 Peter Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid* offers useful another example, well outside the Marxist canon.
- 8 As Douglas Brownlow Winslow shows, *natura naturans* and related concepts are integral to understanding Coleridge's poetics, which are integrated seamlessly with his attitude toward nature.
- 9 Rigby complicates the description of *natura naturans* in the present essay, claiming *natura naturata* is Spinoza's concept of a “self-generative” nature, and *natura naturans* is “nature natured, which is nature as it presents itself to us as a world of things” (41).
- 10 Lucio Colletti argues that dialectical materialism predicated on the “dialectic of matter,” which is to say the Marxist philosophical tradition following from Friedrich Engels, is predicated on a *misreading* of Hegel (14). If Colletti's argument is accepted, then the present essay must be understood as an exercise in sorting through such misinterpretations. I suggest that insofar as Kosik pushes against the idealism of the Party and State as the engines of history in *diamat* in his philosophical work and in his activism against the hegemony of the U.S.S.R., then he produces a dialectic of matter that is neither Hegelian-idealistic nor State-mystical.
- 11 Hall had retreated from this position by 1992, after the “linguistic turn” in Cultural Studies. However, I find much value in his original insight, which predicates much of my work in the field of integral theory, including the essays “Such a Body” and “Sweet Science.” These treatise-length texts propose, through a rather elaborate kind of performance, an alternative ontology to that proposed by Ken Wilber in *Sex, Ecology, and Spirituality*, and, more recently, Sean Esbjorn-Hargens and Michael Zimmerman in *Integral Ecology*. They also inform the dialectical frame I propose in this paragraph.
- 12 Kosik's significance here is also seen in his concept of concrete totality, which, as L. Roland Irons suggests, shows that Marxian analysis (and by extension critical theory) emerges not through dichotomized scientific and philosophical bodies of thought, but instead in an integration of scientific and philosophical practices (167), corresponding to the integration of “eco” and “critical” discussed here.
- 13 See Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*. The work of Guy Debord and the Situationist International on the spectacle as false consciousness is also of particular relevance.
- 14 Here the work of David Harvey, Ted Benton, James O'Connor, Paul Burkett, John Bellamy Foster, and Kate Soper are of particular significance.
- 15 The reception of Heidegger in ecocriticism is complex and the question of Heidegger's value for ecocritics is presently debated, as in the recent exchange in *ISLE* between Greg Garrard and John Claborn. While working through the unresolved issues in this exchange is beyond the scope of this paper, such a task may offer a fruitful point of departure for future work.
- 16 In this paragraph especially, I am attempting to flesh out the utopian content of Kosik's thought along the lines suggested in Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope*, an admittedly problematic and demanding work which yet has significant value for future ecocritical projects.

- 17 This is, in summary, an ecological Marxist argument for the need for regime change, synthesizing the theoretical claims of David Harvey and James O'Connor.
- 18 In *The Dialectic of Seeing*, Susan Buck-Morss gives an exemplary approach to reading historical (cultural and ecological) objects through her reading of Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*. The present essay could be extended to consider how temporality as produced by objectification can be expressed in the scales of time Buck-Morss lays out.
- 19 Following Benjamin and Buck-Morss, I suggest that the image of an out-of-gas SUV in the driveway of a foreclosed and abandoned McMansion may be the "dialectical image" of contemporary capitalism: the mismatch between the false consciousness of the George Bush years meets the reality of resource scarcity.
- 20 It is significant that, while *Dialectics of the Concrete* was written some five years before the Prague Spring of 1968, the thrust of that document is an analogous expression of political resistance in philosophical form.
- 21 Wilber's *Sex, Ecology, and Spirituality* and *Integral Ecology* by Esbjorn-Hargens and Zimmerman follow this pattern to the letter. Sam Mickey's (2010) exploration of this material in Deleuzian terms seems to recall themes in my 2006 article, "Of Syntheses and Surprises," but with an emphasis much more in line with Wilber.
- 22 The work of Mike Davis is particularly helpful in this respect; in forthcoming work I intend to show how Davis' practice can offer a model for historically-oriented ecocritics and bioregional thinkers.

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