

Toward an Irreverent Ecocriticism

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Abstract

I see an irreverent ecocriticism as being indebted to two major developments in and around the field: poststructuralist ecocriticism and queer ecology. Poststructuralist ecocriticism, as many readers no doubt know, can be traced to scholars such as William Cronon, Dana Phillips, and David Mazel. In his American Literary Environmentalism (2000), Mazel stresses that his work is not “about some myth of the environment, as if the environment were an ontologically stable, foundational identity we have a myth about. Rather, the environment is itself a myth, a ‘grand fable’ ... a discursive construction, something whose ‘reality’ derives from the way we write, speak, and think about it” (xii). Similarly, the essays in Cronon’s 1996 collection Uncommon Ground take aim at simple, essentialist ideals of nature and wilderness; N. Katherine Hayles, for instance, argues that “the distinction between simulation and nature ... is a crumbling dike, springing leaks everywhere we press upon it” (411). Some of this work may seem dated to those who engaged with poststructuralism much earlier. But, judging by the negative reactions of many ecocritics and environmentalists, it can also be viewed as quite the opposite: reactionary, overstated, heretical.¹ Indeed, this work could be described as perverse for how it breaks with its forebears, which include not just “classic” ecocriticism but also first-wave or conservationist environmentalism.

My students often ask me if I think there’s hope for the future of the planet. I tell them I think it’s probably going to hell in a handbasket, and all of us with it. And then I laugh.

I laugh in part – I must confess – because it’s hilarious to see so many faces, brimming with expectant hopefulness, droop into despondency. I can’t help myself. But I’m also laughing at myself – at the absurdity of my position, as a person who writes and teaches about environmental ethics and the connectivity of the human and the non-human but is unsure if, in the end, any of that work matters.

Of course, anyone who has ever written a journal article, taught a college course, or tried to do anything, ever, has experienced such a sense of futility. But I suspect that ecocritics experience it

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particularly acutely, and particularly acutely *now*. While people have long laughed at ecocritics because of the esoteric, alarmist, or cabalistic nature of their concerns – as Lawrence Buell observes, “‘ecocriticism’ still invokes in some quarters the cartoon image of a club of intellectually shallow nature worshipers” (viii) – it may now be the case that people laugh at ecocritics for concerning themselves with what might just be a foregone conclusion. And of course, even if one *refuses* to recognize the realities of ecological catastrophe – and recent polls show a healthy percentage of conservatives doing just that – the ridicule aimed at ecocritics may be just as strong, if of a different stripe.

My intent in raising these points is not to propose that we should all just quit, or that ecocriticism should give up its implicit foundational dream of universal ecological well-being. It is to suggest, first, that ecocriticism more deeply consider questions of disposition, feeling, and affect – “what so often passes beneath mention” in critical work, as Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth point out (4) – including our own dispositions, feelings, and affects. It is also to suggest, more specifically, that ecocritics *feel differently* about our current position and moment: that instead of remaining serious in the face of self-doubt, ridicule, and broader ecological crisis, we embrace our sense of our own absurdity, our uncertainty, our humor, even our perversity. (Surely I’m not the only one who has taken sick satisfaction in the idea that going to hell in a handbasket means we get to say “I told you so” to the global-warming deniers as we all drift on down.) We would thereby free ourselves to explore what Judith Halberstam calls “alternative ways of knowing and being that are not unduly optimistic, ... nor ... mired in nihilistic critical dead ends” (24).

All this would entail, in the larger scheme of things, an irreverent turn in ecocriticism, one whose inquiries are absurd, perverse, and humorous in character, and/or focused on the absurd, perverse, and humorous as they arise in relationship to ecology and representations thereof. As I detail below, I believe that such a turn is appropriate to our deeply weird current moment – in which reports of immanent collapse inspire not robust environmentalist action but doomsday fatigue, and in which grotesque machinations such as lab-grown meat may in fact stand to reduce earth’s burden.² In what follows, I sketch out an intellectual genealogy for such a turn, and the work I believe it can accomplish.

Part I: A Genealogy of Irreverent Ecocriticism

I see an irreverent ecocriticism as being indebted to two major developments in and around the field: poststructuralist ecocriticism and queer ecology. Poststructuralist ecocriticism, as many readers no doubt know, can be traced to scholars such as William Cronon, Dana Phillips, and David Mael. In his *American Literary Environmentalism* (2000), Mael stresses that his work is not “about some myth of the environment, as if the environment were an ontologically stable, foundational identity we have a myth *about*. Rather, the environment is *itself* a myth, a ‘grand fable’ ... a discursive construction, something whose ‘reality’ derives from the way we write, speak, and think about it” (xii). Similarly, the essays in Cronon’s 1996 collection *Uncommon Ground* take aim at simple, essentialist ideals of nature and wilderness; N. Katherine Hayles, for instance, argues that “the distinction between simulation and nature ... is a crumbling dike, springing leaks everywhere we press upon it” (411). Some of this work may seem dated to those who engaged with poststructuralism much earlier. But, judging by the negative reactions of many ecocritics and environmentalists, it can also be viewed as quite the opposite: reactionary, overstated, heretical.³ Indeed, this work could be described as perverse for how it breaks with its forebears, which include not just “classic” ecocriticism but also first-wave or conservationist environmentalism.

Similarly, the burgeoning interdisciplinary field of queer ecology interrogates traditional understandings of “nature” and “environment,” but it does so specifically around sexuality and gender identity. As Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson declare in their introduction to the collection *Queer Ecologies* (2010), queer ecology scholars “as[k] important questions at interrelated conjunctures of sex and nature, oriented to probing and challenging the biopolitical knots through which both historical and current relations of sexualities and environments meet and inform one another” (5). Similar to poststructuralist ecocritics, then, queer ecologists ask, “What counts as natural?” in terms of the human, the non-human, and those entities that fall between.

These two emergent fields contribute to ideological and epistemological shifts in ecocriticism – away from modernist materialist epistemology, certainty, idealism, and tradition, and toward skepticism, uncertainty, flexibility, and hybridity. And, arguably, they do important environmentalist work, militating against the binarism and traditional values (Nature-vs.-Culture, humans as superior to animals, etc.) that have authorized ecological devastation in the first place. But for my purposes here, I am more interested in how these fields stand to enact a dispositional and affective shift, from rigid seriousness to irreverent humorousness. To be clear, poststructuralist ecocriticism and queer ecology have yet to explicitly take up those categories with which I am primarily concerned here. And while they have been self-reflexive and -reflective when it comes to, say, definitions of “nature,” scholars in those subfields have for the most part not explored their own disposition or affect. But they have sown the seeds for such moves. I believe that ecocriticism’s job at the current moment, then, is to follow up on this groundwork.

This job will require a great deal of intellectual cross-fertilization. I propose that, first, ecocritics (re)turn to queer theory to mine its playfulness, its delight in irony, and, of course, its perversity. (This is to say, while queer ecology clearly takes from queer theory its skeptical questioning and its interest in probing what counts as “natural,” what it leaves behind is much of its trademark sensibility.) Perhaps it is not too terribly solipsistic – or, if solipsistic, not totally obnoxious – to reflect here on personal experience once more. As a person who often finds displays of emotion, be they positive or negative, embarrassing – even as, or perhaps because, I cried thrice when watching the recent Sandra Bullock-Ryan Reynolds rom-com *The Proposal* – I have always been more attracted to the detached, cool irony of queer theory and queer culture than the self-serious agonizing of ecocriticism and environmentalism. I’d take, for example, the obscene queer teen comedy spoof *Another Gay Movie* (2006) over heartfelt documentaries such as *Queen of the Sun: The Vanishing of the Bees* (2010) any day. (*Queen of the Sun*, I cringe to tell you, features a folk soundtrack inspired by “the wonder evoked by the bees themselves, [that] takes us on a journey deep inside the soul.”⁴) As time has gone on, though, I’ve found myself comparatively more sympathetic to the project of ecocriticism. At some point there started to be, in my mind, an alarming gap between the dissolution of social (and ecological) constructions and the rethinking of our social (and ecological) practices; while queer theory seemed capable of doing the former work, it seemed incapable of doing the latter. And yet, the unself-conscious, self-serious appeals to “nature” and environment that have come out of ecocritical and environmentalist texts do not in contrast seem particularly effective at stirring the average person into action.⁵

But the point of working in interdisciplinary areas such as ecocriticism is that we can learn from other fields, we can avoid becoming too enthralled with our own habits of mind, and we can avoid fetishizing expected outcomes. Thus, we need not prioritize the supposed “real” work of ecocriticism over the “abstractions” of queer theory. And indeed, the recent ecocritical interest in hybridity and flexibility to which I have referred above ideally means that we can learn to assemble eclectic clusters of knowledge, and adapt ourselves to new and emerging priorities, including those of disposition and affect, and of irreverence in particular. Doing so can teach us as much about our own field as it does about others. As

Timothy Morton has argued, “Far from remaining natural, ecocriticism must admit that *it is* contingent and queer” (as quoted in Hogan 231, emphasis mine).

Let us consider one infamous instance of queer theorizing, to see how ecocriticism and queer theory have differed in terms of sensibility. In 1990, D.A. Miller published an essay on Alfred Hitchcock’s film *Rope* titled “Anal *Rope*.” Miller’s interest in play and perversity, as one might imagine, suffuses the work, from its opening epigraph from the classic children’s book *Charlotte’s Web* – “I have nothing at all on my mind, but I’ve too many things under my behind” – to such concluding claims as, “together with a fear of castration, *Rope* braids an oddly incompatible fear of the negation of castration” (138, emphasis mine). While Miller’s essay is just one of countless examples of irreverent queer theorizing that have since emerged from that field, I believe most of us would be hard-pressed to come up with more than a handful of examples from ecocriticism.

Of course, the concerns of Miller, or Elizabeth Freeman, or José Esteban Muñoz, or Tim Dean, or any other queer theorist, seem far afield from those of most ecocritics. But I believe such work can inculcate a sense of the perverse and absurd that would allow us to effectively theorize, and effectively (re)formulate, our positions as ecocritics in a time of ecological disaster – even when our work seems to have nothing to do with sex or sexuality. If nothing else, we might be reinvigorated by how queer theoretical work so often models a self-aware commitment to probing the ways in which language codes human values and actions. This modeling might inspire us to interrogate, and of course, laugh at, our tendency to write such things as “This job will require a great deal of intellectual *cross-fertilization*” – as I just did a few paragraphs ago – or, say, to call an important work of ecocriticism “ground-breaking” or “pioneering.”

If the linguistic interrogations inspired by queer theoretical wordplay still seem random or insignificant – even after poststructuralist ecocritics’ pronouncement that *how we think* is inseparable from *how we interact with environments* – then we might consider how much queer theoretical work over the past 10 years has been invested in “the future;” one of ecocriticism’s predominant concerns, if not *the* most predominant. Consider just a few recent titles from that field: Lee Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005), Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009), Freeman’s *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010), and E.L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen’s *Queer Times, Queer Becomings* (2011). Each of these works teaches us, in various ways, about our orientation to the future: how we hope for the best, or nihilistically welcome the worst; how we imagine (or don’t imagine) change in coming times; how we understand our roles and responsibilities as humans in this time and place, with impact (or not) on future generations. And most of these works do so in a playful or absurdist manner. As we formulate our own agendas for the future-qua-the-environment, then, we might take inspiration from the aforementioned work. After all, one could argue that queer existence itself is, like ecocritical inquiry, defined by a sense of a foreclosed future, whether that foreclosure be voluntary (say, choosing not to replicate the heteronormative family structure) or involuntary (say, the experience of AIDS, or homophobic violence). Just as queers and queer theorists have embraced the inherent humor of *existing nonetheless*, so might environmentalists and ecocritics.

As I have suggested in my introduction, one of the specific things that ecocritics might feel differently about is the specter of failure – the ideas that our work, for all its urgency and sincerity, will fall on deaf ears; that we will illuminate and transform nothing in the long run; that the very project of environmentalism, not just ecocriticism, will fail on a massive scale. I have proposed, more specifically, that we have a sense of humor about this specter of failure. And here, queer theory proves useful yet

again. In her recent book *The Queer Art of Failure*, Judith Halberstam self-reflexively observes, “[a]ny book that begins with a quote from *SpongeBob SquarePants* ... runs the risk of not being taken seriously. Yet this is my goal. The desire to be taken seriously is precisely what compels people to follow the tried and true paths of knowledge production around which I would like to map a few detours” (6). While Halberstam does not focus on ecological politics, her interest in alternative ways of knowing, affect, and action (specifically, stupidities, failures, and refusals) is nonetheless instructive. She reminds us that

[t]he history of alternative political formations ... contests social relations as given and allows us to access traditions of political action that, while not necessarily successful in the sense of becoming dominant, do offer models of contestation, rupture, and discontinuity for the political present. These histories also identify potent avenues of failure, failures that we might build upon in order to counter the logics of success that have emerged from the triumphs of global capitalism. (19)

Parading around our rhetorical, pedagogical, and political failures, then, might be a means of challenging what has counted as success in capitalist, non-ecocentric, and anthropocentric circles, and of developing alternative definitions of success.

And ecocritical-environmentalist failures are legion. The more obvious range from the unmet predictions of alarmist tomes such as Paul Erlich’s 1968 bestseller *The Population Bomb*; to sustainable living trends that went quickly out of date; to countless ecocritical theories, trends, and terms that never caught on with students, a general public, or even with other ecocritics. Some are less obvious. We might think, for instance, of Frederick Buell’s observation that environmental “crisis has been formulated and denied yet has deepened, diversified, and domesticated itself as a part of ordinary life” (xviii). In making the public aware of environmental crisis, Buell implies, ecocritics and environmentalists have rendered the notion toothless, at least among certain factions. “Does immersion in risk as a way of life require, in effect, closing one’s eyes to attempts to assemble a larger picture?” (199), he asks. We might consider, then, that the political-intellectual Holy Grail of “awareness” might not actually be the measure of success in an ecocritical framework, just as Erlich has suggested that being “right” was not his goal. (What it would even mean to be “right” in this particular political climate, I’m not sure.) But more broadly, we might reflect on how our work can help map out alternative routes of thinking and living, even if those routes are short-lived. Here I’m thinking, for instance, of the queer rural communes that queer ecology scholars such as Mortimer-Sandilands and Scott Herring have studied, which have either long since collapsed, or else toil on in obscurity.⁶ We might consider that the ephemerality and non-dominance of such lifestyles – what mainstream society would call their “failures” – just might embody the ecological ideals of flexibility and anti-hierarchy.

In addition to poststructuralist ecocriticism, queer ecology, and queer theory, the irreverent ecocriticism I propose would, finally, be informed by the recent (re)turn to affect in critical theory and cultural studies.⁷ Consider, for instance, how Gregg and Seigworth describe one of the general routes for exploring affect: Gilles Deleuze’s “Spinozan route,” which “locates affect in the midst of things and relations (in immanence) and, then, in the complex assemblages that come to compose bodies and worlds simultaneously ... affect as an entire, vital, and modulating field of myriad becomings across human and nonhuman” (6). Though Gregg and Seigworth’s collection does not include any ecologically-oriented pieces – which may reflect my overarching point, that ecocriticism has had relatively little to say about feeling thus far – we must note that their description sounds quintessentially ecological. And in fact, when we turn to other recent work in the field, such as that of Teresa Brennan (2004), we find conclusions that sound markedly ecological in character: “the transmission of affect” – a concept

perhaps best exemplified by Brennan's example of being able to sense the "mood" when one enters a room – "means ... that we are not self-contained in terms of our energies. There is no secure distinction between the 'individual' and the 'environment'" (6). Thus, an ecocritical turn toward disposition and affect, and toward irreverence in particular, might be less of a departure than it may seem on its face.

It's worth taking a moment here to talk about what I mean by "affect." What must first be admitted is the slipperiness of the term, a term defined variously, and often quite vaguely, across scholarly and popular contexts. The anthropologist Kathleen Stewart, for one, thinks of affect as the "force" or "pull" that object, people, or memories "exert ... on us" (4), while queer theorist and cultural studies scholar Lauren Berlant understands it as what is "released around" an object or person (33), or what "imbues the atmosphere" (35). Meanwhile, philosopher and social-political theorist Brennan defines affect as "the physiological shift accompanying a judgment" (5). While queer theorist Eve Sedgwick does not distinguish between affects and feelings or emotions (18, 19), Brennan insists on a difference: "[t]he things that one feels are affects. The things that one feels with are feelings" (23). Social critic Barbara Ehrenreich, meanwhile, speaks of affect as "[c]ondition" (4), or as "the mood we display to others" (2). In this brief catalog, affect is located variously – in the subject, outside the subject, between the subject and an object – and is variously assumed to be genuine (what one feels, as in "the melodrama affected me") and a possible put-on (what one displays, as in, "I affected a British accent").

It would certainly be beyond the scope of this essay to adjudicate among the various understandings and connotations of affect. But for my purposes here, it is worth highlighting Stewart's notion of "pull" and Brennan's citation of affect as a phenomenon with emotional/physical *and* intellectual dimensions. To begin with, it is clear that the object in question, the object of our study – broadly speaking, life on Earth and the representation thereof – is affective in that it exerts "pull[s]." It makes multiple, sometimes conflicting, emotional demands, inciting us variously to fear and to hope, to pessimism and to optimism, to anger and to love, to care and to apathy. And, as I have suggested at the outset, that object exerts pulls that we may perversely resist, or that we may experience in unexpected ways. But Brennan reminds us that these pulls involve not just feeling, but thinking. A turn to affect in ecocriticism, then, would have us ask how we really feel about what we know, and what we really know about how we feel. Such explorations matter because, as I have suggested, the ecocritic at this particular point in time faces unique emotional and conceptual pressures: to be teacherly, to be somber, to be ecologically correct, to be useful; all at a time at which we particularly fear being useless.

Part II: How to Do Things with an Irreverent Ecocriticism

It is for these reasons that I propose irreverence, and the specific qualities of humorousness, absurdism, irony, and perversity, as a "form of attunement and attachment" (Stewart 16) to our object. This form is appropriate to, and would allow us to address and grapple with, those emotional and conceptual pressures we face. But again, I want to insist that such a turn has real weight, beyond just self-interest. (And herein, the perversity: the insistence on the "real weight," while openly suspecting that soon, nothing will hold weight.) Consider, for instance, how activists Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus have identified serious-minded literalness and a paucity of playful imagination as the primary reason why the environmental movement has met with crushing disappointment in the past decade, from CAFE to Kyoto. After interviewing dozens of the top environmentalists in the United States, Shellenberger and Nordhaus concluded that

Most environmentalists don't think of "the environment" as a mental category at all — they think of it as a real "thing" to be protected and defended. ... Environmentalists do

their work as though these are literal rather than figurative truths. They tend to see language in general as representative rather than constitutive of reality. This is typical of liberals who are, at their core, children of the enlightenment who believe that they arrived at their identity and politics through a rational and considered process. They expect others in politics should do the same and are constantly surprised and disappointed when they don't. The effect of this orientation is a ... belief that social change happens only when people speak a literal "truth to power." [This belief] can be seen in the assumption that to win action on global warming one must talk about global warming instead of, say, the economy, industrial policy, or health care.

Implicit in Shellenberger and Nordhaus's controversial diagnosis of excessive rationality and literalness is a call for irreverence: to be *unsure* of ourselves, to be irreverent toward, though not necessarily dismissive of, our constitutive ideals and foundational traditions. After all, as they tell us, "Kevin Phillips recently argued in *Harper's Magazine* that the decline of liberalism began because 'liberal intellectuals and policy makers had become too sure of themselves, so lazy and complacent that they failed to pay attention to people who didn't share their opinions'" (33). At a time at which a significant portion of U.S. citizens do not share ecocritics' and environmentalists' opinions on issues such as global warming and the need for continued environmental regulation during the economic crisis, it would seem that a different dispositional and epistemological stance is certainly in order. If we can laugh at ourselves, be less sure of ourselves, we might be able to approach our object differently, and invite others to approach our object differently. We might be able to understand why we can't make *others* understand.

While Shellenberger and Nordhaus's call has stirred up much useful discussion, it has also brought compelling critiques from quarters that it seems not to have anticipated. And it is here, I believe, that we can further see the importance of a deeply irreverent attitude in ecocriticism as well as in environmentalism. In a series titled "Don't Fear the Reaper: On the Alleged 'Death' of Environmentalism," the environmentally-oriented blog Grist.org featured rebuttals such as Michel Gelobter et al's "Why Race and Class Matter to the Environmental Movement;"⁸ the essay takes exception with Shellenberger and Nordhaus's framing of "The Death of Environmentalism" as a transmission from "those of *us* who are children of the environmental movement [, who] must never forget that we are standing on the shoulders of all those who came before *us*" (emphasis mine) – which seems to include, among others namechecked, John Muir and David Brower. As Gelobter et al point out, "many environmentalists would rather not stand on the shoulders of certain early conservation heroes" such as Muir, whose indifference to Native American cultures and histories has been well-documented. (Gelobter et al's choice of an epigraph, a lyric from Public Enemy, is a fine example of irreverence: "Elvis was a hero to most, but he don't mean shit to me.") In another response from the Grist.org series, Adrienne Maree Brown critiques Shellenberger and Nordhaus's overly dramatic tone, while offering an alternative account of the environmental movement's shortcomings: "I'm young, I'm colored, I'm female, I'm urban – and environmentalism isn't reaching me like it needs to." Brown follows up her declaration with a list of action points, including calls for the movement to be more "appealing" and less "evangel[ical]." The problem Gelobter et al and Brown identify in Shellenberger and Nordhaus, then, is not that they are irreverent, but that they are not irreverent *enough*. They do not truly take aim at the constitutive ideals and foundational traditions of environmentalism, even as they call for change. Ecocriticism, as a *critical* enterprise, should certainly be up to such a task.

The Comedy of Living Post-Naturally

As much as I believe that ecocritics need the insights of queer theory, among other paradigms, there are

a few places where I believe queer theorists have it wrong. It's not just in quitting, failure, or refusal that real comedy is found. And those modes are not the only alternatives to "succeeding," being "right," or acquiescence. I propose, instead, that we think in terms of adaptation. It is worth considering at length here Joseph Meeker's classic work on comedy and literary ecology. As he argues, "comedy and ecology are systems designed to accommodate necessity and to encourage acceptance of it, while tragedy is concerned with avoiding or transcending the necessary in order to accomplish the impossible" (30-1). Writing of evolution, he claims,

successful participants in it are those who remain alive when circumstances change, not those who are best able to destroy competitors and enemies. Its ground rules for participants (including man) are those which also govern literary comedy: organisms must adapt themselves to their circumstances in every possible way ... must prefer any alternative to death, must accept and encourage maximum diversity, ... and must always prefer love to war. (35)

In other words, a comedic stance might just be an ecological one, and vice versa. A comedic stance entails flexibility and humility, those qualities required for humans to coexist with non-humans, or maybe even for us to contemplate our possible demise. And it might be the best stance at a point when humans suffer from doomsday fatigue, or an overload of "tragedy." A comedic, irreverent stance would thus entail adaptation on the part of ecocritics and "regular" humans alike.

I would insist, then, that there is a clear difference between comedy and absurdism (and the recognition thereof) on the one hand, and cynicism on the other, and that the former are the most appropriate stances for our age. Consider for a moment the example of the atheist – who, as I have been known to argue, is noble for acting ethically without any confidence of reward in the afterlife. Or consider, again, queerness. I have suggested, above and elsewhere, that there is something both admirable and thrillingly ironic about queer environmentalism: that those with a foreclosed relationship to "the future" in heteronormative terms would be deeply concerned about the future in ecological terms.⁹ All this is to say, if our job as ecocritics and environmentalists has become to keep keeping on even if there is no point, then comedy and absurdism are both the inevitable outcome as well as the logical posture. I want us, all of us, to keep acting as if what we do matters, even as we suspect that there is no point to what we do – and then to laugh at this state of affairs, as a way to both acknowledge and mitigate that difficulty.

One major task of an irreverent ecocriticism, then, would be to foster, and document, a sensibility for our current critical-*and*-ecological moment. Let us turn again to Meeker, who argues that, "[m]ore appropriate to our time" – that of ecological destruction, which has only advanced in the 40 years after his writing – "are the relatively modest assumptions made by the comedic spirit. Man is a part of nature and subject to all natural limitations and flaws" (37). Similarly, Gregg and Seigworth claim that "affect theories ... must persistently work to invent or invite such a 'patho-logy' into their own singular instantiations – not only as inventory ... but also as a generative, pedagogic nod toward a style of being present to the struggles of our time." They imagine "[a]ffect as promise: increases in capacities to act (expansions in affectability: both to affect and to be affected), the start of 'being-capable' (Uexküll, quoted in Agamben 2004, 51), resonant affinities of body and world, being open to more life or more to life" (12). We should note that, again, though they do not think of affect as "ecological," Gregg and Seigworth draw on such figures as Uexküll, the preeminent biologist who popularized the term "*umwelt*," meaning "environment," or, more properly, the "surrounding world" of a given organism.

Again, we see that dispositional conditioning, and irreverent dispositional conditioning in particular, is an ecological pursuit in its own right. It need not be a means to an end but, rather, an end in itself.

Of course, it may sound nothing short of blasphemous to suggest that at this moment, of all moments, we should laugh – rather than cry, or panic, or hope, or fear. But I should clarify that neither I nor, I think, Meeker mean to say that we should embrace negative ecological changes, as a kind of perverse counter-response to environmentalist lamentation. But I *do* mean to suggest that, first, we might spend more time considering what counts as a negative change and what counts as a positive change, and for whom; and, second, that we learn to balance realism and responsiveness when it comes to ecological problems. We might, for instance, respond to the call of queer ecologists Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson to “[d]well on what has been lost” and “recognize the value of devastated landscapes instead of fetishizing the about-to-be-absences of more ‘pristine’ nature” (39). We might also build on Jennifer K. Ladino’s recent assessment of the role of love in nature films – but ask what it would mean to *not* love nature, or to love something that is *unnatural*.¹⁰ Doing so would be undeniably perverse, but not necessarily anti-ecological. And we might also be willing to explore new developments and innovations, even if they are “unnatural,” should they prove efficient and ethical. We might consider, for instance, the possibility that in vitro meat should not be lumped along with so-called “Frankenfoods,” or that what Naomi Klein has termed “disaster capitalism” might be separated from the interests of what Alex Steffen has termed “bright-green” environmentalists, those who see technological innovation and sustainable entrepreneurship as the solution to ecological problems. An irreverent ecocriticism, in short, would mean not just reaching different conclusions, but asking different questions.

Rethinking Environmental Genres

While I have largely focused thus far on the relationship of disposition and affect to political commitments, we cannot forget that ecocriticism has, historically, been a literary field, albeit an interdisciplinary one. And here is where I believe an irreverent ecocriticism can have its most direct impact. It can allow us to read or reread texts that do not seem to take ecological issues “seriously.” A handful of ecocritics have already started to do this kind of work. For instance, in *Ecology and Popular Film*, Joe K. Heumann and Robin L. Murray track the rise of “ecocomedy,” including such films as *Eight Legged Freaks!* They claim that ecocomedy is as much a phenomenon of shifts in the film industry – “the eco-disaster genre has come of age and [thus,] can now be satirized” (110) – as it is one of ecological consciousness – which has allowed for a move “away from a ‘nature attacks’ vision to one in which humans attack the natural world” (111). In addition to ecocomedy, Heumann and Murray have turned to children’s animation in their most recent book, *That’s All Folks? Ecocritical Readings of American Animated Features*. Likewise, scholars such as David Whitley and Ursula Heise have turned to representations of nature in children’s animation.¹¹

Whitley indicates that the absurdity and “unseriousness” of certain animated children’s films may be particularly suited to asking serious ecological questions. Of *Happy Feet*, he observes, “The film captures the multiple ironies of the human need to stage nature as spectacle here with some deft satire, imbued with touches of bizarre surrealism” (7). But, perhaps more relevant to the question guiding this particular journal issue, Whitley suggests that an ecocritical turn to “unserious” genres necessarily entails a reevaluation of ecocriticism itself:

My exploration of the relationship between [*March of the Penguins* and *Happy Feet*] ...
focuse[s] on the way genres shape narratives to do distinctive kinds of work for us and
raises questions about the value of film genres with a non-realist aesthetic – particularly

for the young – in developing ecocritical perspectives. Do we need to develop a different critical vocabulary and set of theories to appreciate the kinds of work that films in a non-realistic idiom may perform? And how do we make judgments about film narratives where realistic and fantasy elements are mixed? Is ecocriticism in general too enthralled to realism anyway? (9)

In other words, it's not just that an ecocritical turn to absurd, perverse or otherwise "unserious" texts *is itself* absurd and perverse, but that such a turn can force us to critically reexamine our own investments and strategies, in addition to those of the texts we read.

I want to now offer a reading of the recent MTV program *Wildboyz*, to indicate how an irreverent ecocriticism can allow us to recognize, and possibly learn from, texts that take up ecological stances in perverse, absurd, or otherwise unexpected manners. In the first episode of this show, which aired from 2003-06, we see hosts Chris Pontius and "Steve-O" (both of *Jackass* fame) frolicking naked in a South African field alongside a baboon. Pontius tells the camera, "I was looking at the baboon's weiner and I was like, 'God that's an ugly weiner.' And then I looked down and I was like, 'that looks kind of like mine.'" At the end of the episode, we see the pair naked, astride a donkey, with a monkey perched on their shoulders. "Nobody's wilder than the Wildboyz. But the truth is, we love animals, and we would never hurt one," Steve-O declares. After Pontius adds, "And please, don't try any of the things you see on this show at home," the monkey gives him a loud smack.

This "weiner" segment warrants explication. (Sigh.) On the one hand, Pontius is making a now-classic ecocritical argument in suggesting that he and the baboon are not as far removed from one another as the nature-culture divide would have it ("that kind of looks like mine"). In ridiculing his body in a relativistic manner, moreover, he calls into question his own privilege not just as a human, but as a white heterosexual male; his confession, while obviously comical, is aimed at dethroning and demystifying his manhood.¹² Similarly, in the same episode, the two stars go diving naked to catch a glimpse of a Great White shark. The boat captain, who clearly finds the men's spirit infectious, tells them later, "That was a female shark. She took one little look at your weiner and she was off." (While Pontius and Steve-O are naked much of the time, MTV blurs out their genitals. Therefore, we must rely on the humans to tell us that their "weiners" are small and ugly.) However, at the same time that we could construe this commentary as ecocritically-minded, and even, dare I suggest, quasi-ecofeminist in spirit, I would venture to guess that the average ecocritic or ecofeminist would be horrified by the irreverent treatment of animals to be found here.

But why? One could surely debate whether comparing penises with a baboon is the best way to honor the creature. But I think it's clear that the mock reverence with which the show treats its animal figures has the effect of mocking and questioning not animals but human behavior. For one thing, in addition to lampooning human (male) dominance, the show also lampoons human ignorance about animals. For example, when the two men are sitting in the crew's van and a baboon begins attacking him, Pontius reports to the camera, "I'm being mugged by this gentleman." Moreover, the thoroughgoing, wacky interactivity of the show differentiates it from the countless nature documentaries that are reverent and staid, but not necessarily any more ecologically- or environmentally-committed. In fact, such documentaries threaten to problematically *uphold* the nature-culture divide: they tend to be affectively detached, while simultaneously dissimulating their own framing by absenting the filmmakers – as opposed to the MTV-patented elements of *Wildboyz* such as fast-paced editing, extreme close-ups, and rock music soundtracks. Indeed, while I suspect that the Wildboyz enjoy any excuse for getting naked, their nudity represents a disdain for the kind of social propriety that marks us off from animals. (We

might think here of Mark Twain's famous pronouncement that "Man is the only animal that blushes. Or needs to;" the Wildboyz mug and vomit freely, but never blush.)

If I have yet to convince my readers that the Wildboyz are sincere in their absurdity, and serious in their unseriousness, or of the larger idea that their raw effusiveness toward the non-human has ecological lessons to teach us, consider the fact that Pontius is a vegetarian and Steve-O a vegan – which is more than many of us ecocritics can say for ourselves. When asked by an interviewer about his decision to go vegan, Steve-O responded rather eloquently, "As far as a compassionate lifestyle and [it being] healthy for me, for the planet and all the life on it, vegan is really the best way to go. ... I really believe that I'm doing something good for me and for everyone else every time I eat." When the same interviewer pressed him on a *Jackass* stunt in which he allowed a ram – who was left unharmed – to crash into his fist, Steve-O responded, "I don't think my hand is ever going to get better and I have that as a permanent reminder not to be cruel to animals." He then expressed his reluctance to perform any future stunt that "mess with animals" in any way.

Before this reading begins to appear overly effusive, we must acknowledge that there is much in the show to find objectionable. Cynthia Chris has noted, for instance, its politically incorrect treatment of the "exotic" peoples the pair encounter. But this treatment demands a careful assessment. Consider, for instance, this exchange from an early episode: Steve-O reports to the camera, "Today we're on our way to visit a witch doctor," to which Pontius replies, "He's not a witch doctor, Steve-O; I hear he's a traditional healer." Steve-O then quips, "Well, I hear he has some traditional drugs!" Here, it is not the healer himself, but the dry properness of the nature program or ethnographic program – forms that many would agree have racist, colonialist roots – that are being ridiculed. Later, we see the two men sitting with the "witch doctor," who speaks competent English; the comedy arises not from his practices, but from Steve-O's apparent intoxication from his remedies, an intoxication that would seem to validate the healer's work. Moreover, while Pontius's correction here seems disingenuous, the fact remains that the two demonstrate a clear awareness of the more P.C. terminology.

Many a shrewd critic would point out that, in such moments, *Wildboyz* still gets away with classic white bad-boy behavior, just in a different guise. But my ultimate interest is not in celebrating, or, for that matter, condemning, *Wildboyz* as a specific cultural object. Rather, I am interested in the kinds of environmental dispositions and affects that it and its stars make visible, and in assessing how those dispositions and affects might animate ecocritical work. Without going too far over the top, then, I want to argue that the Wildboyz's sense of karmic masochism and their almost pathologically playful nature represents the kind of irreverence that ecocriticism needs most right now. Steve-O and Pontius don't fear or revere social propriety, tradition, or their own animal natures, not to mention death. And not unlike the gay men of which queer theorist Bersani has written elsewhere, they don't fear "self-shattering."¹³ (While she stops short of reading the show as queer, Cynthia Chris observes that the stars are "constantly testing their own abject *perviousness* ... Their bodies, often nearly naked, come into intimate contact with one another. They are scrutinized in extreme close-up by the camera, and penetrated by objects" [119.]) They don't, as Steve-O says in footage from MTV's eponymous documentary about him, "give a fuck." And yet underneath their talk of "weiners" is an explicitly-stated commitment to the non-human world. They show us that "not giving a fuck" might be not the opposite of environmentalist action, but a particular form thereof.

Irreverence as Accessibility?

As my intentionally provocative reading of *Wildboyz* might indicate, I believe that an irreverent ecocriticism would allow us to make ecocritical, and, thus, ecological, inquiries more widely accessible. Perhaps it goes without saying that one of the first groups to, for, and by whom such an ecocriticism might speak would be queers (as well as queer theorists). To begin with, several queer ecologists have shown us that queers have largely been shut out of environmental scholarship and activism, not to mention mainstream society. As Katie Hogan explains, “the denunciation of queers as ‘unnatural’ and as ‘crimes against nature’ has a long history that continues to endanger queer lives and complicate” – even, I would say, foreclose – “queer environmental desires” (231). An irreverent ecocriticism, in skeptically treating calcified categories of the natural and unnatural; in probing what Hogan calls “uncritical nature-based arguments” (232), be they leftist or conservative in character; and in making fun of a narrow focus on pristine wilderness spaces, would thus avail itself to those for whom “nature” has always looked like a weapon, not an idyllic respite or an entity to be defended.

Elsewhere, I argue that “the political project of ecocinema *demands* ‘unserious’ ... modes such as irony, sarcasm, self-parody, and playfulness” (Seymour, “Irony and Contemporary Ecocinema”), because it can make ecocritical and environmentalist critique relevant to a wider audience. An irreverent ecocriticism might do the same work. It could speak to those who feel shut out from ecological thinking not necessarily for ideological reasons, but because of the tenor of much ecocriticism and environmentalism over the years. This might include audience members such as Adrienne Maree Brown, who find themselves alienated or otherwise turned off by sanctimony, hand-wringing, and preaching. It might include those who suffer from doomsday fatigue, as well as those who suffer from the fatigues of everyday life.¹⁴ And it might include the *Wildboyz* demographic: a younger, media-savvy generation that disdains political sermonizing.

But an irreverent ecocriticism could also militate against elitism, or, more pointedly, the alienating tendencies of the smug, the self-congratulatory, and the conspicuously educated in environmental scholarship and activism. As I have argued elsewhere, ecocritics and environmentalists have tended to dismiss those who do not agree with them – laughing, for instance, at those who do not believe in global warming, but never laughing at themselves.¹⁵ An irreverent ecocriticism could, instead, turn its eye on itself, both recognizing the absurdity of, say, trying to argue with facts to those who do not care about facts, and asking where we have gone wrong in trying to reach such audiences.

This is not to say that ecocritics should be ashamed of their institutional positions or their education. To do so would be to buy into the disturbing anti-intellectualism that those of us in the U.S. have seen in the past few years. And nor is it to say that we should “dumb down” our work; despite the inherent links I see between the two, ecocriticism is by definition an intellectual pursuit, unlike environmentalism. But let us consider for a moment the prospect that an irreverent ecocriticism could avail itself more, for instance, to working-class lay audiences, for whom a political and/or scholarly commitment to the environment may seem exhausting, if not impossible. As Richard White observes, “Environmentalists so often seem self-righteous, privileged, and arrogant because they [identify] nature with play [as in leisure] and mak[e] it by definition a place where leisured humans come only to visit and not work, stay, or live. Thus environmentalists have much to say about nature and play and little to say about humans and work” (173). Indeed, there has been relatively little ecocritical work done on class and environmentalism, or voiced from a working-class position, while mainstream environmentalists have largely failed to articulate those viewpoints.¹⁶ For example, as Shellenberg and Nordhaus tell us,

By thinking only of their own narrowly defined interests, environmental groups don't concern themselves with the needs of either unions or the industry. As a consequence, we miss major opportunities for alliance building. Consider the fact that the biggest threat to the American auto industry appears to have nothing to do with "the environment." The high cost of health care for its retired employees [prompted by the lack of national health care] is a big part of what hurts the competitiveness of American companies (19)

– and, in turn, produces a scenario in which those companies are slow to adopt energy-efficient technologies. An irreverent ecocriticism would therefore be more accessible, and capable of giving a voice, to working-class and otherwise marginalized persons on two counts: by fostering a self-critical attitude toward our own obsession with "nature and play" as opposed to "humans and work," and by shifting emphasis away from rational and institutionalized forms of ecological knowledge.

And in fact, many would say that the true purpose of ecocriticism lies not in its intellectualism, per se, but in that core of its name – "criticism," or "critical," meaning thoughtful discernment. That is, criticism emerges from, and encourages, not rote consumption, but inquiry, not acceptance but exploration. It asks not simply to know, but to know *how* we know. And it is there that we see what an irreverent ecocriticism has to offer; how it might be kept, or might keep others, especially that media-savvy younger generation, from tilting from arch political commitment into celebratory cynicism: it makes laughing at the joke inextricable from asking why the joke is funny. But of course, I am proposing not just an ecocriticism that is truly *critical*, but one that is *irreverent*. And the interplay of the two is crucial. The "irreverence" in irreverent ecocriticism keeps us from, say, dismissing *Wildboyz* altogether – because it doesn't seem like something worthy of criticism, because it's not P.C., because we think it's funny, because we don't want to *admit* that we think it's funny, because we *don't* think it's funny, or for any other number of reasons – while the "criticism" in "irreverent ecocriticism" allows us to interrogate it mindfully. Of course, there's no telling where one may go from there – whether one will, say, conclude that there's an important difference between politically incorrect satire and gross cultural stereotyping, or conclude that there is not – which is why this essay is ultimately about possibilities, not proscriptions.

Conclusion

If it weren't clear already, I have long thought that being an ecocritic was pretty absurd. You could argue that that's just me – and not just because this piece is self-reflexive, and, thus, in no small part *about* me. After all, I'm the person who told one of my cohorts in graduate school that I was thinking of concentrating in ecocriticism, only to hear her respond, "But you hate being outside." (I'm also a feminist whose favorite joke is, "How many feminists does it take to change a lightbulb?" "That's not funny.") But I believe that it *isn't* just me, and that there is something laughable, even hilarious, about the collective position of the ecocritic in the face of ongoing environmental devastation. Rather than ignore or repress that hilarity, I want us to talk about it.

As I have suggested above, talking about it would both require, and produce, an irreverent ecocriticism. But again, I want to stress that an irreverent ecocriticism is not a cynical attempt to make ecocriticism more trendy – "let's be wry and hip instead of furrowing our brows and rending our garments!" – nor a fatuous apoliticism – "the world might end, so let's learn to stop worrying and love the population bomb." And nor is irreverent ecocriticism just another excuse for not addressing the very serious social problems that intersect ecological problems, including colonialism, class inequality, and racism. Rather, in fostering both cultural and self-critique, it ideally better enables us to address the former. I hope to have highlighted irreverence not as a refusal of political ideals, then, but rather as a unique means of

committing to a political ideal. This article thus presumes that responsible ecological behavior is both an ethical mandate for the ecocritic, and for the average person, and a possible exercise in futility. Because it is both, it, and we, are fundamentally, undeniably, absurd.

In focusing on disposition and affect, I have assumed that one of the broader functions of ecocriticism is to condition, and to study the conditioning of, our sensibilities. Arguably, this has always been the case; ecocritical work, regardless of authorial intent, has always hinged implicitly on our feelings and attitudes, or the feelings and attitudes of others, about the non-human world. But rarely have ecocritics taken on the aforementioned tasks explicitly, deeply, or self-reflectively. Moreover, the affective and dispositional range of ecocritical work has historically been extremely narrow – favoring decisive sentiments, be they positive (reverence and hope) or negative (fear, despair, gloom, and doom). I ask, instead, that we open ourselves up to complex combinations of sentiment, that we take on the projects of feeling and caring with a strong sense of absurdity and perversity, and that we allow ourselves to feel uncertain in these uncertain times. I ask, in short, that we feel differently at the present moment, whether or not it matters – and perhaps especially if it doesn't.

Endnotes

¹ See, for instance, S.K. Robisch's "The Woodshed: A Response to 'Ecocriticism and Ecophobia.'" *ISLE* 16.4 (Autumn 2009): 697-708.

² In her recent book, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*, Ursula Heise discusses the notion of doomsday fatigue.

³ See, for instance, S.K. Robisch's "The Woodshed: A Response to 'Ecocriticism and Ecophobia.'" *ISLE* 16.4 (Autumn 2009): 697-708.

⁴ <http://www.queenofthesun.com/store/soundtrack/>

⁵ For commentary on the alienating effects of ecocinematic seriousness and sanctimony, see Catherine Shoard, "The Eco-Documentary: An Endangered Species?", *The Guardian*, October 15, 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2009/oct/15/eco-documentaries-cove-vanishing-bees>.

⁶ See Herring's work on the Radical Faeries, for instance.

⁷ In addition to Gregg and Seigworth's *The Affect Theory Reader*, the past ten years have seen many works on affect and/or "feeling," more generally, including Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Routledge, 2004), Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (Duke UP, 2011), Brennan's *The Transmission of Affect* (Cornell UP, 2004), Sedgwick's *Touching Feeling* (Duke UP, 2003), and Stewart's *Ordinary Affects* (Duke UP, 2007). These texts have joined more popular-oriented works such as Ehrenreich's *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America* (Metropolitan Books, 2009). Groups and conferences such as the Public Feelings working group at the University of Texas and the Public Feelings salon at Barnard College have both produced and further publicized much of this work.

These publications and events have coincided – not randomly, I think – with a growing engagement with cognitive science in the humanities. Indeed, at a workshop on affect and ecocinema that I attended at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society this past summer, much of our discussion centered on the possibilities of research into the cognitive aspects of filmic/emotional experience.

⁸ This essay was drawn from a longer piece titled "The Soul of Environmentalism," co-authored with Michael Dorsey, Leslie Fields, Tom Goldtooth, Anuja Mendiratta, Richard Moore, Rachel Morello-Frosch, Peggy M. Shepard, and Gerald Torres.

⁹ I make this argument in my forthcoming book, *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination* (U of Illinois P).

¹⁰ See Ladino's "For the Love of Nature: Documenting Life, Death, and Animality in *Grizzly Man* and *March of the Penguins*," in *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 16.1 (2009): 53-90.

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- ¹¹ Heise gave a presentation on “Ecocriticism and Animation” at the 2012 MLA. It should also be noted that Halberstam’s recent book features readings of children’s films such as *Finding Nemo*, *Chicken Run*, and *Madagascar*.
- ¹² While elsewhere I agree with Cynthia Chris, I would want to complicate her conclusion that “the wild” in *Wildboyz* becomes a “disposable backdrop for the exhibition of white, masculine physical prowess” (120).
- ¹³ See Bersani’s 1987 essay, “Is the Rectum a Grave?”
- ¹⁴ Here, I am inspired by recent work such as Alex Loftus’s *Everyday Environmentalism: Creating an Urban Political Ecology* (U of Minnesota P, 2012). Loftus links Marxist theory to “real” struggles such as those to obtain safe water in Durban, South Africa.
- ¹⁵ See, again, my forthcoming chapter in *Moving Environments: Affect, Emotion, Ecology and Film* (Wilfred Laurier UP).
- ¹⁶ This is not to discount the important work that social justice advocates, including many ecocritics, have done around class and the environment. Here, I am attempting to draw attention to how irreverence in particular may allow more ecocritics, including those *not* specifically focused on environmental justice, to speak to concerns of class.

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