
Introduction to the Special Issue: Ambiguous Legacies, Contested Futures

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As we move into the third decade of the twenty-first century, there are many good reasons to return to what the editors of this special issue have termed the ‘ambiguous legacies’ and ‘contested futures’ of American environmental classics. U.S. environmentalism arguably made great strides in the twentieth century, moving from Gifford Pinchot’s unabashedly anthropocentric arguments for conserving natural resources for human use to the more biocentric advocacy of Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson, who powerfully illustrated not only the value and beauty of natural systems for their own sake but also the ways that human beings are ecologically interconnected with other species and their environments. With the recognition that these interconnections render human bodies vulnerable to chemicals that pollute the environment came the passage of groundbreaking environmental legislation in the 1960s and 70s, along with the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency and now well-known environmental NGOs like the Natural Resources Defense Council.

And yet, by the end of the century, the critiques were piling up. Activists like the founders of the Earth First! movement rejected the approach of Big Ten environmental organizations as too moderate, pledging instead ‘no compromise in defense of Mother Earth’ and taking direct action through protests, occupations, and even eco-sabotage such as tree-spiking to protect forests from logging. In 1987, the United Church of Christ’s Commission for Racial Justice released its influential report, ‘Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States’, laying bare not only the racial disparities in how Americans are exposed to toxic pollution but also the lack of attention to these issues within mainstream environmentalism. In the decades since, as global greenhouse emissions have soared (with the U.S. as the leading contributor until 2006, when we were outpaced by China), critics have

suggested that environmentalism just isn't working, as a movement or even as a concept, as Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger proclaimed in their 2004 essay 'The Death of Environmentalism' (originally released at a meeting of the Environmental Grantmakers Association and later developed into a book, *Break Through: From the Death of Environmentalism to the Politics of Possibility*, published in 2007).

Just what is wrong? Nordhaus and Shellenberger argued that modern American environmentalism's focus on technical fixes and related policy issues ignores the underlying question of values and that the concept of 'environment' still implies the separation of humanity from nature—a fatal flaw that means, in their view, that environmentalism must die to allow a new, more comprehensive paradigm to emerge. They portrayed environmental leaders as trapped in a 'ghetto' that walled climate change off from other issues, such as the need for jobs, even though 'developing new [clean] energy industries will clearly help working families and increase national security' (Nordhaus and Shellenberger 2004: 29). To move forward, we must address such issues holistically, they insisted. Their voices joined others that criticized environmentalism for a negative perspective that emphasized what individuals and industries would need to give up rather than offering a vision of what could be gained by transforming into an environmentally sustainable society. Concerns about this ideology of limits are especially important when we look globally—as we must in the face of global issues like climate change—and see that it is the product of relatively wealthy, white societies that can afford to cut back on consumption because they already have so much. Societies that have yet to reap the benefits of industrial development may be, and often are, even less open to the notion of self-sacrifice than Americans, and understandably so.

A similar critique of the more literary environmentalists and their predecessors, including some of the authors addressed in this volume, has developed within the field of ecological literary criticism, or ecocriticism. Emerging in the early 1990s, this academic approach initially celebrated a simultaneous renaissance of the nature writing genre, with a wealth of compelling work being published by established writers like Annie Dillard and Barry Lopez and newer ones such as Terry Tempest Williams and Rick Bass. For literary scholars like me, propelled toward ecocriticism out of distress over humanity's increasingly troubled relationship with the nonhuman world, such writing seemed to hold the potential to inspire a needed shift in values and behaviors. In an anthropocentric culture, simply directing 'our attention outward toward the activity of nature', in the words of early ecocritic Thomas Lyon (1989: 7), felt like a powerful move in the right

direction. However, concerns quickly sprang up, often related to ecocriticism's bias toward the nonfiction genre of nature writing. Such a bias limited the questions ecocritics could ask, Patrick D. Murphy suggested, and he proposed instead the study of 'nature-oriented literature', a broader category that also encompasses poetry, fiction, and nonliterary works (2000: xii). A number of ecocritics, recognizing even earlier than Nordhaus and Shellenberger that the perception of nature and culture as dualistically opposed lay at the root of many of our environmental challenges,¹ identified tendencies within nature writing that reinforced this opposition, including the genre's gender, race, and class biases and predisposition to romanticize the (white, male) individual escaping the constraints of civilization by taking off into the wilderness. By the early twentieth century, ecocritics were enthusiastically responding to calls to expand their attention 'beyond nature writing' to a wide range of other texts, including canonical literature, works by marginalized people who often experience environmental injustice, and writing set in the urban and suburban environments where most of us live and work (see Armbruster and Wallace 2001). It is against a backdrop of similar concerns that the scholars included in this special issue of *JSRNC* revisit some of the classic writers of the American environmental tradition.

Perhaps no writer illustrates the dilemma of those of us who value the tradition of American environmental writing better than Edward Abbey, a cranky, critical, self-deprecating, and deliberately provocative literary voice associated with the desert Southwest, wilderness preservation, and an anti-authoritarian taste for anarchy. I first read Abbey's 1968 *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness* as a graduate student in the 1990s. In this memoir, Abbey collapses three summers working as a park ranger at Arches National Monument in Utah into one (as Thoreau collapsed two years at Walden into one, though Abbey elsewhere explicitly denies any emulation of Thoreau, refusing to accept his 'mantle and britches' and suggesting instead that 'Annie Dillard wear them now' (1977: xiii)). It was a revelation. Abbey's biting humor (rare in nature writing!), his deep knowledge of the desert places that he loved, often expressed in lyrical, poetic language at odds with his gruff, irascible persona, and—perhaps most of all—his unapologetic proclamations of allegiance to wild places and creatures captured my heart and my imagination. His willingness to

1. While various scholars have developed detailed versions of this argument, perhaps the most powerful and widely known is environmental historian William Cronon's 1995 essay 'The Trouble with Wilderness; Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature'.

dethrone humanity from a position of unexamined superiority (writing, for example, that he would rather kill a man than a snake) struck the same chord in me as the poet Robinson Jeffers had when I first read his work in an undergraduate literature class. While some critics considered Jeffers' inhumanist philosophy misanthropic, in my view it simply put humans into a grand perspective, valuing them as no more or less important than any other part of the universe. His line from 'Hurt Hawks'—'I'd sooner, except the penalties, kill a man than a hawk'—no doubt inspired Abbey, but the one I loved best was from 'The Answer': 'Integrity is wholeness, the greatest beauty is/ Organic wholeness, the wholeness of life and things, the divine beauty of/ the universe. Love that, not man' (2001: 165–66, 522).

Growing up with (I now realize) anxiety, spending inordinate amounts of time reading (often outside), and feeling more comfortable with the company of my dog than with that of most people, I harbored similar feelings. These sentiments were exacerbated by my growing awareness of how humanity (at least, I now understand, the segment of it dominated by a white, patriarchal, colonialist, capitalist mindset) devalued and damaged the nonhuman. I had always kept those thoughts to myself, knowing how radically they contradicted the values of my culture. And yet, here was an adult man who had actually published ideas more radical than mine (and been featured on a postage stamp for his efforts!). I was not alone. Finding writers like Abbey and Jeffers was transformative for me and studying them eventually guided me to a more diverse set of writers who nevertheless similarly saw the inherent value of the nonhuman. Eventually, I was even fortunate enough to find a career that has allowed me to introduce students to writers and thinkers who sometimes open their minds or reaffirm what they already know and believe, giving them that same powerful feeling of not-aloneness that meant so much to me.

And yet, as the years have passed, I've learned so much about my own privilege and blindness to the experiences of people different from me (in particular, people with less privilege), and this has changed how I read Abbey. And my students have also changed. As a TA and young professor in the late 1990s, I relied on Abbey (among others) to provoke and entice students into thinking critically about our culture's overriding anthropocentrism. Today, students are less likely to be surprised by Abbey's biocentric proclamations than to object to what feel like tired, unnecessary clichés (such as his blatantly sexist comparisons of the land or water to a woman's body) or his self-indulgent immaturity (as when he kills a rabbit to see what it feels like to be a predator but then abandons the corpse, claiming that it might carry tularemia—which he certainly knew from the beginning).

His self-described polemic against the ‘industrial tourism’ he saw encroaching on Arches and other national parks can strike today’s readers as ableist, with his tirades against automobiles and insistence that the magic of these places can be experienced only by those who hike out into wild, isolated areas (though he does grudgingly allow that there should be shuttle buses to transport anyone who can’t walk throughout the park). Though not directly expressed in *Desert Solitaire*, his casual racism and anti-immigration sentiments (including fears that immigrants from the Global South would overrun American society) further typify the dark side of the American nature writing tradition that constructs the American wilderness—and America itself—as the rightful realm of white, physically rugged men.

However, Abbey knows he’s a jerk sometimes (he tells us). He knows he can’t win people over just by ranting (he shows us by describing himself engaging with tourists in other ways). His narrative of a deeply imperfect and possibly troubled person developing a reciprocal sense of loyalty to the nonhuman by falling in love with a specific place still compels some students—and always leads to stimulating conversation. As the editors and contributors to this volume demonstrate, simply dismissing or even ‘canceling’ writers because some of their words or actions are legitimately troubling is too easy. Not only do many touchstone environmental thinkers still offer insights that are fresh and provocative to many readers, but the more problematic among them also provide the opportunity to practice the difficult task of wrestling with ambiguity—of practicing critical, careful, compassionate interpretation in the face of disappointing and even disturbing aspects of their lives or writing. The very act of learning about and taking seriously these writers’ biases and myopia, without dismissing their insights, can help to develop a capacity that we all very much need today—the skill of ‘staying with the trouble’, as posthuman theorist Donna Haraway has described the practice of embracing the challenges of messy relationships and complex problems rather than trying to avoid or simplify them (Haraway 2016).² And of course, those of us who know the classic American environmental writers well can re-read with new eyes, informed by groundbreaking scholarship like that of Laura Dassow Walls, whose 2017 biography of Thoreau works against his popular reputation as a preachy hermit by positioning this ur-figure of American environmentalism as active in the abolitionist

2. In *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016), Haraway puts forward an urgent case for recognizing, accepting, and even celebrating our conflicted and complex kinship with other lifeforms as well as the challenges of imagining and working for a livable future for all species on this damaged earth.

movement and genuinely engaged with the history of Indigenous people in his region. In fact, it is exactly this sort of refreshed and renewed vision that the contributors to this volume offer its readers.

The first group of essays addresses two literary writers of the nineteenth century, Margaret Fuller and Walt Whitman, and a trio of twentieth-century women environmentalists: Rachel Carson, Marjory Stoneman Douglas, and Sylvia Earle. In 'The Redemption of Matter: Margaret Fuller's Fluid Ethics', Michael Putnam recovers Fuller for the tradition of American environmental writing, arguing that her approach to the relationship between spirit and matter avoids typical Transcendentalist privileging of spirit, instead representing the two as interwoven in a fluid ethics that grants agency to the material in ways that anticipate the insights of today's materialist feminists and ecocritics. In a fitting act of attention to the material, Putnam develops this analysis of Fuller's travel writing with particular attention to her experiences with water. Similarly arguing that what might appear as binaries can instead be read as more fluid and co-constituting, Caleb Murray examines oppositions such as body/soul, male/female, and human/nature in the poetry of Walt Whitman in "'Dash me with amorous wet, I can repay you": Relational Ethics, Queer Ecology, and Walt Whitman's Poetics of Trans-human Kinship'. Based on this analysis, he contends that Whitman offers readers a 'queerly relational nature ethics' in which humans share a condition of 'compostable co-becoming' with the rest of nature, a realization that might take us beyond the safety of binary thinking into the riskier realm of a relational ecological ethic. Taking the notion of fluidity to its literal source, in 'The Watery Depths of American Environmentalism: Marjory Stoneman Douglas, Rachel Carson, and Sylvia Earle', Amanda Nichols and Whitney Bauman explore the water ethic that they find in the work of three female American environmentalists who advocated for ocean and wetland ecosystems. Describing the ways these women's work was institutionally hampered by gender discrimination, they make the case that their view of humans as embedded in the natural world counters the more dualistic thinking of mainstream, male environmental writers and emerges from their outsider position, and thus that highlighting their 'water ethic' queers the history of American environmentalism. Indeed, as a group, these essays shift the shape of the American environmental tradition not only by adding Fuller, more firmly claiming Whitman, and extending Carson's legacy to Douglas and Earle but also by reading against binaries in ways that emphasize the fluid, interconnected aspects of the term 'environmental'.

The essays that make up the second issue directly confront problematic aspects of three white male writers central to the American

tradition of environmental thought and action: John Muir, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau. In 'Rejecting Racism, Restoring Intuition: John Muir, Sacred Value, And Romanticism', Russell Powell offers a Hegelian analysis of Muir's Romantic reliance on intuition to explain both the tremendous impact of his writing on the popular perception of nature's sacred value and his racism towards Indigenous Americans. Noting that Muir's racism diminished as he interacted with Indigenous people, Powell offers this development as an example of the way intuitions can and must be tested by practical reason in diverse discursive spaces. The chief concern that Emily Dumler-Winckler raises regarding Emerson in 'Ralph Waldo Emerson's Anthropology: From Foil to Fertile Soil for Eco-Justice' is the anthropocentrism some might find in his passionate statements about human self-reliance and the power over nature that it can imply. However, such statements are more properly read as part of a dialectical rhetorical strategy, Dumler-Winckler suggests, finding that Emerson actually refuses the false choice between prioritizing humanity or nature, instead advancing a perfectionist 'anthropology of self-cultivation' that is predicated on love and justice—including right relationships between humanity and nature—and thus provides the resources for an environmental ethic. With Rebecca Kneale Gould's 'Reading Thoreau in the 21st Century: Wither and Why', we come to the heart of the matter, since Thoreau is so often (though not always) considered the first great American nature writer and environmental philosopher. Gould addresses Thoreau's race, class, and gender privilege head on without devaluing his accomplishments, including both his critique of social priorities that have fueled the climate emergency we now face and the significant abolitionist activity that is often overlooked in accounts of his passion for nature. Ultimately, she suggests reading his work in tandem with that of writers of color to do full justice to both its power and its more problematic aspects.

Gould's essay beautifully illustrates what all of the contributions to this special issue, taken as a whole, suggest: We can best read these writers (and perhaps any writers) carefully, with equal attention to their words, their lives and historical contexts, and the concerns of the moment in which we read them, including our current urgent need for environmental and climate justice. Given that need, it is also crucial (as Powell illustrates in his discussion of Muir) to put these writers and their works into conversation with a diverse community of other writers and readers to test their (and our) intuitions, to compare experiences, and to share ideas. One of the most important and powerful insights that has emerged from the American environmental tradition is the artificiality and danger of the culture/nature binary, which

obscures the ways that humans and their societies are always embedded in natural systems. Despite wake-up calls from numerous critics, writers, and activists, the ideological hold of this binary thinking persists, but it may yet crumble in the face of continued challenges and tests as the diversity of human experiences is brought to bear on our ideas about and relationships with what we call nature. The scholars contributing to this special issue play an important part in this effort.

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