
Book Reviews

Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 249pp., \$49.95, ISBN: 978-0-674-02434-2. Review doi:10.1558/jsrnc.v2i4.528.

What if the idea of 'nature' is precisely the idea environmentalists need to dispense with if they are to promote genuinely ecological forms of culture, philosophy, politics, and art? This is the arresting thesis of Timothy Morton's *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. According to Morton, Professor of Literature and Environment at the University of California, Davis, we have barely begun to appreciate how our ways of construing nature prevent us from developing the sort of eco-critical thinking that will promote a more engaged citizenry and a healthy world.

Paradoxically, the more we venerate nature as the place we need to appreciate, respect, and inhabit, the more we set it up as a distant, indistinct, transcendental principle that keeps us separated from it. Nature becomes a commodity, another product on the capitalist shelf, or it becomes an aesthetic object that functions like an anesthetic. This is because our thinking about nature is so much the effect of a modern Romantic sensibility, the same sensibility that gave us an aesthetic consciousness. Cut off from the real and dark complexity of embodied human life, nature becomes a free-floating idea that drifts among conflicting and confusing uses: nature as a norm or authority, nature as a metaphor, nature as material, nature as wilderness, nature as divine, nature as evil, nature as freedom...the list goes on.

Morton's point is not simply that nature is a socially constructed idea. Using the tools of postmodern theorists like Heidegger, Derrida, Latour, and Žižek (and their forebears), and reading the poets of the English Romantic tradition, Morton details how our thinking about nature is caught within a style he calls 'ecomimesis'. Ecomimetic writers strive to bring us into immediate contact with nature. To do so, however, they employ forms of writing that inevitably make contact slippery and ambiguous and imagined, in other words, highly literary. Nature writing tries to create an ambient world, an environment that we are supposed to enter into and experience. But in attending to the writing, what we encounter is a 'rendered' world, a world in which 'presence', and thus also nature, remain forever beyond reach. The problem is that 'nature' is not the simple thing out there that we can grasp or appropriate. 'The more nature we have, and therefore the more "lively expression," the more writing we have. The paradox is present in the very phrase "nature writing." Is nature to be thought of as writing?' (p. 70)

The problem with so much nature writing, and the environmentalism that flows alongside it, is that it presents a natural environment as some 'thing' out there that we then need to connect with because it is not really us. Nature is an object that we are to

relate to as subjects. Can this subject/object dualism be overcome? Morton proposes that our best strategy is not to seek some elemental wholeness, unity, or monism, since these invariably fail. Rather, we should acknowledge the gap by exploring rigorously and patiently the otherness that is within our engagement with the world. 'Dark ecology', of the sort Morton proposes, admits that we live in 'places' that are far less coherent and discrete than we ever thought. Indeed, place exists for us not as a thing, but as a question, as a site in which every 'here' is always already infected by multiple (often unknown) 'theres'. The more attentive and hospitable we become in our bearing, the more we will see that we do not really know who and where we are. 'Dark ecology undermines the naturalness of the stories we tell about how we are involved in nature' (p. 187).

Morton's hope is that by destabilizing the many ideas we have about nature, a more radical and merciful being-with others in the world will become possible. There is much to commend this hope, since it is clear that our ideas about nature, particularly as they have developed in modernity, have contributed greatly to Earth's and humanity's destruction. We should wonder, however, if Morton's rich and wide-ranging account of the literary and theoretical articulations of nature would not have benefited from a more explicit treatment of the world's sanctity. Can we as postmoderns fully sense the alterity of life and our need to be responsible for it apart from an appreciation of its sacred character? For those who want to pursue this question, *Ecology without Nature* should be required reading.

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