

What is environmental cultural studies.

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My involvement with environmental cultural studies owes a great deal to Alex Wilson, a close friend and colleague who died in 1993. A PhD dropout from U of T, Alex was an accomplished journalist, activist, educator and professional gardener. I was fortunate to work with him in several of these contexts. His book *Culture of Nature* shows that our relationship with nature has been skewed by the degree to which we have come to understand it as something to look at: looking out cars windows to see the marvels of nature clustered along the highway; or appraising domestic gardens for the conventional values they seem to encapsulate about our living spaces, all show that our reciprocal relationship with nature is disturbingly skewed. *The Culture of Nature* confirms one longstanding requirement: It's not cultural studies until you've become reflexive about the ways the looking relationship is embedded in our interaction with nature. In this generously conceived, eloquently argued and well illustrated book, cruising those car-determined scenic highways with a windshield-framed vista on display, you can no longer imagine that looking gives us an adequate entry to understanding it. In my own personal vista, this was the beginning of environmental cultural studies in Canada.

Having said this, I have to admit that it is still an underdeveloped field. When Jennifer Slack and I edited a theme issue on environmental cultural studies in 1994, dedicated incidentally to Alex's memory, we thought we were kick-starting a latently active critical practice into life. In that issue's editorial, Jennifer and I reflected on the term "matter," as in, the environment matters, it is an important subject for cultural studies, AND the environment is not just an idea, not just a cultural construct, not just a human domain, not just a representation. Rain and rocks, robins and rattle snakes are inescapably matter We posed this challenge to the cultural studies scholarly community (it was after all published in the journal *Cultural Studies*) and we thought it would be taken up quickly and creatively by our colleagues who would continue to elaborate the importance of environmental matters in their critical pursuits. We were wrong.

In that essay, we suggested that *cultural environmental* studies were developing in a positive direction. It seemed fairly clear to most environmentalists that culture and representation play an important role in our understanding of and relation to the biosphere. Authors in environmental thought were writing suggestively about the relationship between culture and nature in the construction of natural entities and exploring intellectual border markings between essentialism and constructivism. Having established that culture was productively embraced in environmental studies, we suggested that cultural studies were “rather less prepared to handle the ‘problem’ of the ‘physical substance.’” (B&S 1994: 1). To some extent this is still the case. In order to make this comment I have to distinguish environmental cultural studies from cultural environmental studies. This is not a profound epistemological distinction but rather a recognition of diverse communities of scholarship, pedagogy and mutual engagement which share and discuss their ideas and debates. In making this distinction I note tentatively the fraught question about the extent to which cultural studies is an actual discipline, with its own discursive regimes and professional practices. Ordinarily I would avoid that subject like the plague. But *Topia: the Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*, recently launched an appeal to SSHRC by arguing that it *is* a discipline, and that our journal therefore deserves to be judged by scholars expert in that discipline who otherwise cannot assess our value to the field. Our appeal did not succeed. The issue is a matter of interpretation, SSHRC said, not of fact. Of course that is true of all professional practices and communities, which exist definitively with all their concrete arbitrariness. As an author of a book I just read on the philosophy of musical performance puts it, one is a musician because one says one is, and because one’s colleagues judge one to be so. If you play an instrument with no strings, you can still call yourself a guitarist. Godlovitch is not saying that anyone can say they are anything; he is a philosopher, not a nanny. He is saying that a specific constellation of skills, training, recognition by peers, conventionalized practices and communication with audiences together can produce an active-agency category like the guitarist. It is an interesting challenge as an editor in cultural studies to determine when submissions fall outside that field, but I’m not here to talk about that. I’m here to suggest that cultural studies as a discipline (if it is that) is only beginning to tackle the challenges of environmental politics

and practices. I assume that this is a reasonable obligation for politically committed scholars aware of the legacies of postindustrialism and post modernism that has not been adequately met. For instance, at the 2004 Crossroads in Cultural Studies, a biannual international cultural studies conference held for the first time in the U.S., there was one lonely panel on nature, in which I participated, and none of the major figures in cultural studies attended. More broadly the question of sustainability, now so central to the encounter between environmentalists and culturalists is still elusive, hardly developed at all with the exception of a few inspired projects dealing with waste and biowarfare.

The question that interests me then is not, what is cultural studies? But rather, why has the community of scholars, publishers, pedagogues, granting agencies and so on that defines itself as cultural studies been so slow to take up the complex and delicate conceptual challenges of the environment? More than ten years after that theme issue on “environmental” cultural studies, we who practice it remain on the margin. I am happy to say that *Cultural Studies* will publish another issue on Nature in 2006, and that both Cate and I are in it. So there is gradual progress; perhaps the interval between theme issues will drop from 12 years to 5 or 6 before the next one.

This is not to say that there hasn't been any work in the area. I don't want to embark on a discussion of Haraway's work on the grounds that it indexes a kind of scholarship that should not be confined to a single name. Her work also exemplifies that degree to which environmental literatures have snuck in the back door in cultural studies because of popular interest in identity, posthumanism and the body, all of which invite interdisciplinary analysis drawing on both naturalist and constructivist approaches.

I'd like to say a few words about this area of study and then turn to environmentalist cultural studies and the challenges we need to pose to the humanities and social sciences to elaborate the comprehension of the environment in studies of culture.

If a strong commitment to issues of identity, subject-formation and postmodernism promised to create a space for discussions of an environmental nature, it has also tended to foreclose it. At least in earlier manifestations, environmentalism was often seen as a totalizing discourse, one which threatened to elide social or cultural

differences based on race, sex and gender. The suggestion that geography, nature, biology or even the weather were theorizable in terms of their meanings or effects risked inviting hostility or indifference. More successful within the institutional parameters of cultural studies, scholars of identity critique and postcolonial theory could and did challenge this work for its universalizing assumptions, its homogeneous social base, and its apparently naive commitment to the preservation of something called nature. Secondly, and related to this, the concept of nature itself was problematic, and seemed to cling to some vestigial modern epistemology to which cultural studies considered itself energetically opposed. Thirdly, the nature agenda threatened to diminish the programmatic scope of social agency that Anglo-American cultural studies was so determined to place at the centre. In the activist cultural studies of the 80s and 90s, one reached for empowerment by rejecting social totality and emphasizing the particularism of specific discourses, identities and communities. Introducing the environment to this landscape risked exposing its underlying liberal pluralism. If identity is constructed through othering, the best nature could be was some more inchoate other, hardly interesting to sophisticated thinkers as that relationship would tend to create bonds, not differences, between human subjects.

And finally, Anglo-American cultural studies was preoccupied with the study of representation, an emphasis that has tended to demarcate American from Canadian cultural studies. This theme has been usefully explored in *Topia* .. Even Haraway, whose work so beautifully resists these categories in so many respects, could be said to rely on a strong emphasis on visibility and representation, even while she critiques these. In these critiques she has challenged our concepts of the relationship between life, signification and meaning. But practitioners of cultural studies have not been ready to assess the limits of culture. When the challenge to do so started to make a difference, it was not coming from the direction of biology or environmental thought, but from the political challenges of cultural studies itself. (globalization, the politics of culture vis-à-vis economy, Eagleton etc). I can't do justice to this theme here.

Final thoughts on cultural studies, in point form:

- Emphasis on representation, still predicated on fundamental dualism between nature and culture. Whiteside: argues that this duality is stronger in American environmental thought, which seeks to reposition nature but maintains its basic otherness, than in European thought.
- Resistance to critiques of consumerism, particularly in the U.S. context, as this is seen as the moralism of a bygone era. Influence of Fiske: consumption as social empowerment, site of creativity and identity formation. It is difficult to integrate the defence of cultural consumption with a critique of unsustainable culture. On the other side a strongly moral but not always adequately nuanced critique of consumer culture that lets other geopolitical zones experiencing terribly environmental degradation off the hook.
- NF: metaphor; problematic nature of metaphorical appropriations of biology, physics, chaos theory etc. in cultural theory, all forced into crisis with the Sokal scandal and the “science wars,” making cultural studies scholars nervous about undertaking border crossings; metaphor works here as a kind of homeopathic defense; if I say that culture is LIKE chaos, or technological change is LIKE evolution, I don’t have to be accused of confusing culture the materiality of gravity.

This concludes my speculations about limits in cultural studies that have tended to discourage and/or marginalize critical engagements with environmentalist politics and theory. From this we can conclude that we face social-disciplinary challenges and more intrinsic intellectual challenges involving the confrontation of material and immaterial life forms and beyond this the limits of our conventional understandings of representation, mediation, animal life, and the limits of culture.

I noted earlier that environmental cultural studies and cultural environmental studies have encountered one another in some specific arenas of engagement. Rather than continuing with the larger mapping exercise I want to sketch some of the challenges encountered in my own research. The weather was a foxy way to bring the environment into cultural studies, and I was not the only person in the late 1980s to do so. The simultaneity of studies by Andrew Ross and myself, among others, probably had as much

to do with the emergence of weather channels on television than any ordinary environmental concerns. Nevertheless they did provocatively present environmental issues in a cultural studies context. While Ross and I were both fascinated by the audiovisual entertainment complex's fascination with weather, we parted company because of his purely constructivist approach to weather and climate. I began to write about weather because I had to write something about postcolonial culture in Canada and I had post-dissertation fatigue on the subject of music. Weather seemed to defy and yet reflect off of tired debates about Canadian content. Yet weather has something in common with music, as well; both mediate between our individual bodies and our environments; both create diverse common bonds between people sharing the experience; both are mediated by historically specific technologies. In contrast to Ross, I didn't think that the concept of representation was adequate to sum up the weather. The subject demands thinking opposite ideas simultaneously, which I always like. Weather exceeds representation and yet is mediated by technologies of representation through which we encounter it, so much so that a temperature or precipitation level can create different meanings, different physical responses and different risks depending on their context. Yet they are also objective physical entities with physical effects. At the same time, such physical manifestations may arise in part from human intervention. All this matter seems to make it knowable. Yet the failure of scientists to defeat or even accurately predict the weather creates a sense of romance, a chance for cultural studies scholars to take their revenge against the telegenic pretensions of American science. This affection for the trickster element in nature was probably also behind some of the cannibalization of chaos theory that appeared in literary and cultural studies of the 80s and 90s, taking their own revenge against the linear expectations of narrative and history.

I'd love to talk about the water in Walkerton as product of a complex network of events involving local weather, meat farming and the cross-species hybridity of viruses, but I don't have time. I will conclude with my more recent research in a field that has experienced a positive explosion of popularity. This is the subject of animals, more specifically relations between human and non-human animals. Yesterday I discovered that a colleague at WLU is organizing a panel for the forthcoming conference of the Canadian Association of Cultural Studies (October, in Edmonton, in case you want to

participate) on the question: why animals, why now? It is important for those of us interested in the area to think about answers to her question. My own research is on cats; originally I was supposed to prepare a talk on landscape and the national imaginary, but I was distracted by the mobilization of cat imagery on the internet. Madly collecting images and stories, I proceeded to analyse cats in history, mainly but not only western history, with reference to intriguing themes of domestication, gendering, persecution, aestheticization, and urbanization. I wrote in explicit dissent from the philosophers of “becoming-animal” and tried to keep the door open to the ways that cats as animal others exceed these same social and representational contexts. I have cats, needless to say, and bravely flirt with the risk of being known as “the cat lady,” concerning which Haraway’s work on dogs and our recent conversation in Hamilton (along with the solidarity of some of my cat-lady friends) have provided great consolation. I will need to draw on these when my “Cat and Mouse” appears in the second ever issue of *Cultural Studies* on the environment .

What this project is teaching me is that the open question of cats as domesticated others is itself a doorway to considering how we ourselves, through our work and our aspirations, mediate the mediation between ourselves and other animals. And yet we are not the subject of our research, at least not more so than the cats. This provokes the kind of conceptual amphibology that so attracted me in the weather, which asks us to hold on to the materiality of the natural entity together with a recognition of the elusiveness of the topic and the interestedness of our interest in it . This inquiry inspired me to co-organize two panels being held jointly with ESAC and the CCA, coming up June 3 in London, on the subject of “Mediating Environments.” Our understanding of the panel’s purpose was elaborated through discussion among the panelists and (if there is time) I will conclude by reading the panel description to you.

This panel explores popular representations of the natural world and considers how such representations play a role in mediating relations between nature and culture in particular sites. Presentations explore the constitution of specific “environments” mediated by natural and cultural components. Building on the rich critical interrogation of the nature/culture construct enlivening critical environmental and cultural studies, these papers expand the analysis of representation and discourse to reflect explicitly on the characteristics of different forms of mediation, including our own. Undertaking studies of diverse media in relation to a range of physical sites, panel participants embrace the methodological challenges of doing work on “the ecological object” without reducing it

to data. The panel is an opportunity to grapple with the complexity of contemporary cultural/natural ecologies, to reflect substantively and reflectively about the question of mediation and to explore how these specific sites of mediation can be understood within the environment that we are each trying to describe and better apprehend.

This gives a sense of one conversation taking place about the challenges inspiring environmental work in cultural studies. Another interesting site is the annual TOPIA column by media theorist Robert Babe; while it thoughtfully explores intersections between cultural studies and political economy, its thematics are increasingly environmental in scope. I would like to say that these are among many undertakings to bring environmental issues and methods into cultural studies, to which I have done little enough justice, and hopefully after today, they will be.