Deep Breathing Ecocriticism

Stories, Matter, and Spiritual Dimensions

Alessandro Macilenti

PhD Graduate, Victoria University of Wellington

amaci@onenetbeyond.org

Iovino, Serenella, and Serpil Oppermann, eds. 2014. *Material Ecocriticism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 376 pp. $ 40.00 ISBN 978-0-253-01398-9

The relationship between stories and matter has been recently gaining relevancy in ecocritical theory. Edited by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, *Material Ecocriticism* collects a number of essays that invite the reader to take a deep look at at the borders between stories and matter and, in fact, at the narrative potential of things. *Material Ecocriticism* includes contributions from prominent ecocriticists such as Simon C. Estok, Stacy Alaimo, Cheryll Glotfelty, Timothy Morton, Greta Gaard, David Abram, Joni Adamson, Hubert Zapf, Heather Sullivan, as well as from prominent scholars active, for example, in the fields of the new materialisms (Jane Bennett), biosemiotics (Wendy Wheeler, Timo Maran) and disability studies (Eli Clare). As a subfield of ecocriticism, material ecocriticism is as diverse as it is young. This collection of essays reflects the diversity of the insights that converge into it, providing an exciting array of critical ideas, including approaches informed by biosemiotics, ecology of mind, ecological postmodernism, cultural ecology, posthumanism, "thing theory" and object-oriented onthology. This diversity of views creates a mosaic of complementary approaches that enrich the field and demonstrate its vitality and originality.

Material Ecocriticism is organised in five sections plus a closure, each investigating a different aspect of the discipline. The first, "Theories and Relations", is a theorethical introduction to material ecocriticism, comprising essays connecting material ecocriticism with biosemiotics, systems theory and posthumanism. It includes contributions from Serpil Oppermann, Hannes Bergthaller, Hubert Zapf, Wendy Wheeler and Heather Sullivan. By showcasing a few of the theoretical approaches that define material ecocriticism, this section highlights its interpretive potential. The

second section, "Narratives of Matter" unfolds the meanings of matter and illustrates its interaction with human and non-human bodies. This section includes contributions from Serenella Iovino, Lowell Duckert, Simon C. Estok and Timo Maran. In "Narratives of Matter", readers learn how stories can be decoded from matter, and about the relevance of storied matter. The third section is titled "Politics of Matter". Here, Catriona Sandilands, Dana Phillips, Stacy Alaimo and Eli Clare demonstrate how non-human species, disabled bodies, oceans and even excrement constitute political entities: not only does matter tells us stories, but these stories have a definite ethical bent that cannot be ignored. The fourth part focuses on the "Poetics of Matter", where Cheryll Glotfelty, Jane Bennett, Joni Adamson and Timothy Morton discuss the creative potential of matter. Just as matter considered as a political entity expresses meaning, it also creates it in a process of "mutual making" with those that come into contact with it (Iovino and Oppermann 2014, 15). The fifth section is a diptych on material spirituality where Kate Rigby and Greta Gaard examine the possibility of a dialogue between material ecocriticism and non-dualistic practices such as Buddhism and Aboriginal traditions. This section suggests that material ecocriticism is a contemporary unfolding of ancient traditions that preceded the development of dualistic thought. David Abrams concludes *Material Ecocriticism* with a reflection on the roots of the philosophical disconnection between mind and matter in mainstream Western thought, thus bringing together all of the themes so far encountered.

As a subfield of ecocriticism, material ecocriticism attempts to investigate the narrative potential of matter. New materialisms abandon the worldview that perceives non-human beings and matter as passive receptacles of (white and male) human agency. Instead, they outline human agency as just one instance of the "vast network of agency" that determines the phenomenal world (Iovino and Oppermann 2014, 1). According to the new materialisms, it is possible to read in animal, plant, fungal, bacterial and inanimate matter stories that are as valuable and as worth narrating as humans narratives are. Narrative is, inevitably, the way the human mind perceives and organises information, so claiming to understand the narratives of matter is undeniably a form of anthropomorphism. However, new materialisms propose a non-anthropocentric anthropomorphism that recognises the diverse intelligences that saturate the world, intelligences that human intelligence can and should attempt to contact. In doing so new materialisms negate the "centrism" in anthropocentrism, and deny the dichotomy between meaning and matter. Humanity certainly has much to learn from non-human narratives, and academia badly needs to relearn the lessons in observation that come from traditional societies and practices

that have from time immemorial taken for granted what the authors of the essays included in *Material Ecocriticism* assert.

In particular, the insights of Timothy Morton, Greta Gaard and David Abrams, implicitly or explicitly inspired and informed by Buddhist practice, highlight the fundamental oneness of material and spiritual experience. In this way, material ecocriticism returns to the practice of *prajna*, that allows, through an attention unadulterated by intellectual activity, to experience no definite separation between the so-called spiritual, intellectual, emotive and material spheres [1]. Timothy Morton's essay, *The Liminal Space between Things* invites us to explore the idea of "interbeing" (or, "the mesh" in Morton's words), that is, everything exists only insofar as it interacts with everything else [2]. Things in themselves are "made of nothingness" (Iovino and Oppermann 2014, 278). Coming to terms with the fundamental emptiness of reality, overcoming the *horror vacui* that has plagued Western philosophy since Plato, Morton argues, should be the ultimate goal of material ecocriticism. Similarly, Greta Gaard eloquently explores the similarities between Buddhism and new materialisms in her essay, *Mindful New Materialisms*. With the premise that a scholarly approach to Buddhism is necessarily unsatisfactory because its insights cannot be grasped through intellect alone, Gaard's comparison of the philosophical framework of Buddhism – and in particular the concepts of emptiness, impermanence and codependent origination – with those of the new materialisms enables an enhanced understanding of new materialist ideas. Both new materialisms and the more "engaged" varieties of Buddhism encourage practitioners to become involved with society in order to contribute to its compassionate development. In particular, material ecocriticism invites a scholarly discussion within the humanities and beyond about the current ecological unbalance. However, I take issue with Gaard's claim that Buddhism is a spiritual practice, because doing so propagates the view that the spiritual and material dimensions are somehow separated and independent: as the Zen priest Brad Warner argues in his book *Sit Down and Shut Up*, "Buddhism is not spirituality […] Buddha's solution wasn't to deny the materialistic view in favor of a spiritual one" (2007, 207). Likewise, *Material Ecocriticism* illustrates that new materialistic approaches strive to

[1] In Buddhism, *prajna* is the insight into the impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and emptiness of reality.

[2] The concept of "interbeing" was developed by the Vietnamese Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh to express the impossibility of finding discrete borders between objects. "Interbeing" condenses the Buddhist teachings of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and codependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*).

deconstruct the perceived borders between meaning and matter, culture and nature, human and non-human, self and other, for none of these can be conceivable absent the other. Like engaged Buddhism, eco-materialisms conceive nature and ecology as "inclusive of everything, especially ourselves", and therefore talking about degraded environments means talking about degraded humanity (Iovino and Oppermann 2014, 296). The essay that concludes *Material Ecocriticism* is David Abram's *The Commonwealth of Breath*, a title which refers to the interdependence of all things. In his contribution, Abram reflects on the significance of breath, wind and air in Judaism, Buddhism and North American shamanic traditions: although diverse, these practices all sacralise the air that sustains life. In Judaism, Abram writes, God's name is "the four-letter name that – rightly spoken – is not other than the inhale and the exhale, the living breath of awareness" (Iovino and Oppermann 2014, 307). Likewise, the Buddha promoted *ānā pānasati* – mindfulness of breathing – as the main meditation technique that leads to the development of the factors of Awakening (Bodhi Bhikku 1995, 941-8). As well as Judaism and Buddhism, many North American traditional societies, Abram argues, also identify the air as the root of mind and wisdom, the breath-soul. But although air and breath connect all sentient beings, Abram notes that Western philosophy and society seem to have forgotten the power of breath and the unity of matter and spirit, a split that he traces back to the development of the phonetic alphabet, which allowed the Ancient Greeks to represent and, consequently, desacralise the invisible (Iovino and Oppermann 2014, 309). Abram suggests that returning to an oral story-telling reconnects humans to breath and spoken traditions allowing a renewed "participation in the more-than-human community" (Iovino and Oppermann 2014, 311). In addition, Abram advises that ecocritics should be particularly aware of the fact that, unlike orality, the written word excludes non-human beings from our conversations, and thus invites academics (in a somewhat Socratic turn) to engage in face-to-face conversations with humans, non-humans and elements and to reconnect our mind with the "broad intelligence of the biosphere" (Iovino and Oppermann 2014, 313). For some of us, it is indeed a radical suggestion that our quest for insight would be better served if we reconnected with our breath, closed our word processors, turned off our computers, and went out for a walk to feel the cool wind and the acid rain, smell the wet earth and the city's smog, and cheer up to the chirrup of birds within the din of traffic.

Humans have now exceeded the carrying capacity of the Earth, thus damaging its life support systems, a situation brought about in part by the positivist belief in a Cartesian understanding of mind as an active principle

which dominates the passive principle of matter. In this backdrop, *Material Ecocriticism* performs a much-needed balancing act. It demonstrates a middle way between the frustrating extremes of a materialism that denies meaning and a spirituality that derogates matter. Instead, through restoring our capacity to listen to the stories that matter tells us, *Material Ecocriticism* (as a book as much as as an academic movement) allows us to notice the subtle ways through which matter asserts its own agency, bringing about the realisation that we belong to a world more alive than we thought possible.

References

Bodhi Bhikku, ed. 1995. *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: a Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya*. Somerville: Wisdom Publications.

Iovino, Serenella, and Serpil Oppermann, eds. 2014. *Material Ecocriticism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Warner, Brad. 2007. *Sit Down and Shut Up: Punk Rock Commentaries on Buddha, God, Truth, Sex, Death & Dogen's Treasury of the Right Dharma Eye*. Novato, CA: New World Library.