

Activist Ecocriticism: An Introduction

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What good is interpreting the world if we are not changing it in material ways?

— Nicholas Hengen Fox

We're still trying to figure out what academic activism means. In a recent *PMLA* article, Randy Martin begins with the diametrically opposed, if tendentious, *OED* definitions of “academic” and “activism,” the former defined as “unpractical” and the latter as “practical.” Positioned as “not leading to a decision,” what is “academic” stands “opposed” to “activism,” defined as tending “to outward action” (Martin 838). Yet, it is academia out of which much activist involvement in contemporary affairs grows, as Martin explains: “There is a long history of universities as sites of student activism and political ferment” (841). Moreover, that the reactions to voices from academia “are so strident” (844) strongly suggests that “activist voices” from academia require a re-thinking of what is meant by the term “activism.” The four articles in this Special Issue address the matter of activist intervention, a topic that has been both a key motivation and one of the most enduring issues for ecocriticism from the beginning. In very different ways, these four authors address what it means have measureable material effects on the environmental problems we are increasingly creating.

All of the articles included in this Special Issue share several things. Among these is a commitment to feminist principles. Discussing climate change narratives, Greta Gaard asks “what impetus toward increased understanding and action can ecocriticism — and specifically, feminist ecocriticism — contribute?” In part, her answer is that

A feminist environmental justice perspective can restore analysis of . . . climate change root causes and effects by expanding the genres and geographies of ecocritical analysis to include artists of color and of diverse sexualities, as well as by including the practices of animal food production and consumption that are

exacerbating climate change. A feminist restor(y)ing of climate change narratives is one of ecocriticism's best strategies for confronting the root causes of climate change and suggesting solutions with real potential for enacting climate justice.

Gaard's position is consonant with Patrick Murphy's "calls for more comprehensive intersectional analysis, including ecofeminist, postcolonial, and comparatist approaches," with Serpil Oppermann's emphasis on "feminists, queers, and mothers from all walks of life," and with Iris Ralph's understanding that environmental derogation is "ideologically linked to the subordination and oppression of women and violence against women under patriarchal conceptual frameworks and institutions." Each of these articles and their respective emphases on the feminist principles underlying ecocritical theory and activism reiterate the importance both of remembering ecocritical roots and of recognizing, supporting, and exploiting ecocritical solidarities. Feminist activism and environmental activism have overlapping goals. They also have overlapping dangers.

A veteran of the struggle to articulate (and, as importantly, to keep included) feminist voices in ecocritical discourse, Gaard is well aware of the dangers of such work, the constant threats of marginalization, trivialization, and even violence. While there are obvious physical dangers to environmental activism (as poignantly captured by Oppermann's inclusion of the image of "the woman in red" from the Gezi Park Resistance Movement), there are also less immediate material dangers. Among these is simply exclusion.

In the CFP for the panel entitled "Relocating the Limits of Activist and Academic Coexistence" at the 2013 ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and Environment) Tenth Biennial Conference, Chris Lawrence wonders

. . . what of the fundamental activist sensibilities that served as the impetus for a community of philosophically-oriented scholars to seek outreach-oriented endpoints within the realm of the humanities classroom? (Lawrence <http://intersivity.org/lists/asle/archives/Sep2012/msg00087.html>)

That panel and this Special Issue confront the daunting task of persisting in something that sometimes seems passé and perhaps even just plain irritating. While a Special Issue such as this one, and the several panels on activism at the 2013 ASLE meeting in Kansas, each in their own ways suggest that we are ready to discuss the frustratingly elusive topic of what activism means or can mean, it was not so long ago when people who insisted on the importance of recognizing the activist roots of ecocriticism were accused of "hectoring" (a word used by Greg Garrard just a few years ago). It is not

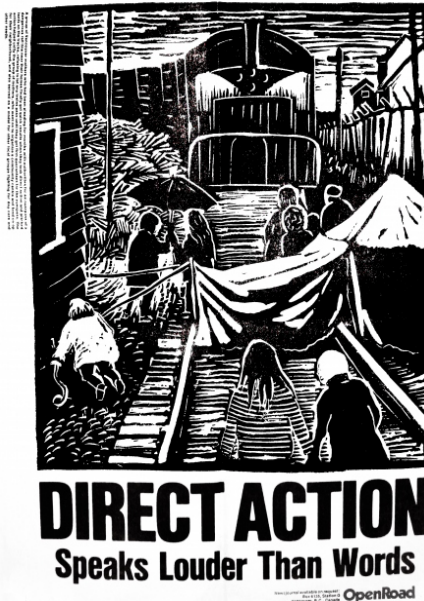
just the irritation that people like Garrard feel with people like us who hector on about activism; there are people out there threatening to take theorists out to the woodshed, to douse them, and to hit them with a big stick (see Robisch). Indeed, doing activism, as Iris Ralph usefully notes in her contribution to this Special Issue, can mean having “to face very real and serious risks.” Karen Kilcup similarly notes in a *PMLA* article that “activism presents formidable difficulties for many students today [and] . . . often seems infeasible or dangerous” (848). Marc Bekoff, meanwhile, has stressed the importance of resisting fears of these dangers and argues that it is important “to appeal to people who don’t agree with me, rather than to preach to the converted, because this is where change occurs” (Bekoff 11). Perhaps this is at least one place where activism is to be found. One thing is certain: with all of the discussion about theory and activism in ecocriticism these days, we are not stagnating. While even a few ASLE Biennials ago, it was (or seemed, at any rate) still necessary to argue about the need for recognizing the activist roots (and growing them), sometimes in the face of resistance and professional ridicule, there is increasingly less doubt that the work in which we toil as ecocritics is politically engaged.

This said, however, “‘engagement’ is a vague term that does not in itself earn the label ‘activism’” (6), contend Linda Dittmar and Joseph Entin in the 2007 issue of *Radical Teacher*. Dittmar and Entin’s accusation of vagueness is well-taken, and part of what we are attempting to do here in this Special Issue as theorists and scholars is to get rid of at least some vagueness. Theory is about defining, and part of the now famous resistance to *theory* that characterized early ecocriticism was less a resistance to theory than a resistance to abstraction. Abstraction is inconsonant with the kinds of material embodiment perceived as integral to activist engagement (which ecocriticism has always sought). Carolyn Dever’s book *Skeptical Feminism: Activist Theory, Activist Practice* makes precisely such a point about how “abstraction concerns a detachment from the material sphere” (6) — and her larger argument is that feminist theory has, by and large, been skeptical toward abstraction. I like the word skepticism, but I also like the word ambivalence: it is rather an odd and ambivalent position that we are in, here, *theorizing* about activism (which is one of the points Randy Martin makes in his discussion of “academic activism”).

Defining “activism” is a key issue in the articles that follow. Patrick Murphy takes up the matter very directly in his discussion about the differences between “propaganda” and “agitation” and argues that while the actions of Greenpeace or Earthfirst! are certainly direct in their activist roles, “more indirect efforts at persuasion and the effecting of change” are obviously vitally important in how change happens. Murphy goes on to note that

the direct-action American organization EarthFirst! was deeply inspired by Edward Abbey's novel, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, which romantically and comically chronicles environmentalist sabotage by a small group of individuals, and which gave rise to the term "monkey wrenching" for various forms of protest, such as destroying logging machinery or tree spiking.

For literary works to have the effect of direct action is possible, as when "President [Clinton] held up a copy of [Terry Tempest Williams's] *Testimony* and said, 'This made a difference'" (Satterfield and Slovic 14), but physical action is more often more direct than the less physically interventionist written word. As Murphy explains in this volume, "literary works, cultural products, and criticism, then, cannot be considered activism in [the] . . . narrow sense [of a Greenpeace or an EarthFirst!], even when they narrate a story of activism that includes in that plot line a call to action." A spread in a 1984 issue of the British Columbia underground newspaper *Open Road* captures this sentiment well (see below). The paper was reporting on direct actions of a group of five Vancouver men and women that had become a very topical issue in British Columbia.



In 1981 and 1982, the five Vancouver activists carried out a series of direct material campaigns aimed at shutting down several operations: a Litton factory in Toronto that produced guidance systems for American cruise missiles, the environmentally destructive Dunsmuir BC Hydro Substation (on Vancouver Island), and a string of video stores in the Lower Mainland that distributed pornographic snuff films (snuff films are motion pictures in which a person or persons are actually killed). In

January 1983, these five activists were arrested. Support for the Vancouver Five was immense. So was the opposition. It was an unprecedented event in Canada, and the media coverage was also unprecedented. There was outrage on the streets — from both sides. The issues had become a material reality in the lives of average people who hadn't previously cared. It was a moment that could, like the Arab Spring, have caused change.

At the same time, though, the issues (the environment, the peace, and the women for whom these men and women had raised their voices) became lost in the crowd of words that filled the media — words manufacturing consent, stifling resistance, and telling lies. The material implications of stories are powerful and suggest, as materialist ecocriticism has recently been showing, that our ethical positions toward matter register strongly in and are reproduced by how we represent matter. Some may even argue, as indeed Judith Butler has suggested, that a question residing at the very centre of representation is about “what ethical obligation is and how it is conveyed.”

For some, temporal distance diminishes the effect of ethical attachment, obligation, and effect. “Looking back, who cares now? It was all for nothing,” Alyn Edwards (former reporter for BCTV) exclaims in a 2005 interview in the documentary *The Squamish Five* about the Wimmin's Fire Brigade (also known as “Direct Action,” and “the Vancouver Five”). But this does not seem an entirely accurate assessment. The narrativizing of the Five — their histories, their acts, their trials, their convictions, and their legacy — continues (the interview Edwards gave was in 2005, a solid two decades after the actions), as do the material implications of such narrativizing. Vancouver's CKNW Radio Broadcaster John Ashbridge seems naïve indeed when, in an interview about the Five, he talks in *The Squamish Five* about media neutrality: “I would hate to think that the media would be biased. I would hate to think that the media would have some sort of preconceived notion of what these people are all about.” I used the words “manufacturing consent” earlier, borrowing from the title of Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's book about what they call mass media (what I prefer to call mainstream media), and I'd like to borrow another few words from this important book, as it seems to me very accurate when Herman and Chomsky claim that “the 'societal purpose' of the media is to inculcate and defend the economic, social, and political agenda of privileged groups that dominate the domestic society and the state” (298). Ashbridge, with his nonsense about media neutrality, is nauseating and ridiculous. But media neutrality (or the lack of it) is the least of the issue here. Narrativizing itself — whatever the angle — has important implications for theorizing activism.

We see in the media representations (both mainstream and underground) a fierce, almost desperate, and certainly frenetic will to power and control over the

whole matter of activist intervention. Competing for establishing their versions of power as the accepted history, the narratives of mainstream and underground media representations offer opposing ideological positions on activism that speak volumes on the moment in Canadian history that, in some ways, saw the birth of a new chapter in environmental ethics, an ethics entering the mainstream but vigorously resisted, an ethics first recognizing democratic rights of material, of material agencies that displace the human from its place of ontological primacy, rights The Five voiced and fought to safekeep.

The success of the mainstream media in presenting a relatively unified body of material *against* the activists has to do with what is going on in the reports with presuppositions about agency — and there *is* something going on with presuppositions about agency here: it has to do with the enthymematic assumption of the reportage that it is ultimately the human (not the nonhuman natural) that takes ethical and ontological priority and that has agency. An enthymeme is an informally stated syllogism with an implied premise. The implied premise in the mainstream media is that humanity takes ontological priority over nonhuman nature, that this is such an obvious *given* that it need not be graced with even the remotest of attention.

The material implications of 1980s Direct Action in Canada may have faded, but the activism itself was both material and symbolic (a point made by the Five themselves). This is not, however, the same as saying “It was all for nothing.” Among the many questions raised but finally abandoned (as the sentences played out for each of The Five in the various institutions in separate regions across Canada to which The Five were sent) was about definitions. Exactly what constitutes activism? What is violence? What is terrorism? John Dowler, in a June 22, 1984 letter to *The Vancouver Sun*, presents one of the few statements published in the mainstream media — right beside a letter that condemns these “terrorist miscreants” (Alexander A5) — voicing “protest [to] the media’s continuing fondness for the term ’terrorist’” (Dowler A5).

The *OED* defines terrorism as the use of violence and intimidating measures to achieve political ends. All of the activists have rejected the idea that their intents were to intimidate or to terrorize. Justice Samuel Toy of the BC Supreme Court calls them “common criminals” (Sarti A10) on the one hand, and terrorists on the other. Clearly, the one hand doesn’t seem to know what the other is doing. These five people cannot be both terrorists *and* common criminals: terrorism is, by definition, political — not the work of common criminals. Nor, however, is it a case that they are either one or the other: the very framing of this as a dichotomy is the effect of what is really a media melee, one that effaces, obscures, and misrepresents the stated activist aims of the group. Yet, most academics probably have difficulty accepting bombs as a viable route for activism, believing that it is better to encourage change through persuasion

than to force it with explosions. One of the answers for what qualifies as activism¹ for academics, therefore, has been the trickle-down theory (what we might call “slow activism”), where the seed we plant today may end up watered and, somewhere in the increasing haze and smog of the future, may bear fruit.

As academics (and if you are reading this, then you *are* an academic), such an answer has to carry a lot of weight, but it is not the only answer. Of the many kinds of activism, one thing common to each — and it seems painfully obvious to say it — is that something is shared with other people that may evoke change. Thus, when Ruzy Suliza Hashim suggests that “social activism can be defined as attitudes and actions that challenge to persuade the social delivery of status, power, and resources” (90), the definition does seem entirely sufficient: it is difficult to see how “attitudes” constitute activism; moreover, there is a bit of a tautology in arguing that actions define activism.

This said, though, it seems clear that what Hashim is trying to get at is that we might consider as activist things that seek to change the status quo. Such a broad and inclusive understanding of activism is useful for our purposes here because it allows us to talk about the primary work in which we engage: teaching, writing, and conferencing, primarily to students and other academics. We generally do not reach the average person on the street; we generally reach individuals more likely to attain positions of social and political influence than the average construction worker or beautician. Indeed, the work we do as scholars has a profound potential to effect change (and on this there is little room for dispute). Hashim powerfully articulates such a position in her claim that “it is imperative that the literature classroom is not just for teaching and learning of literary mechanics, but to provide an avenue to inculcate a degree of social responsibility which would allow them to become social activists in the future, even if it is only within the domain of the family or immediate community” (97).

Yet, we can’t in our pedagogy force activism on students. What we can do is gently take the “opportunity to reinvigorate the teaching and study of literature, and to help redirect literary criticism into a significant, widely relevant social and public role” (Love 561). We also have (and should seize) the opportunity to question the very methods of teaching and researching that we employ — and let’s face it: however activist we may want to be, however much we may rail against elitism and hierarchy and class disparities, it remains a fact that all of us who go on conferences (and let us also remember that conferencing itself is a flagrantly unsustainable pedagogy) willingly place ourselves in an elite venue, not a park setting where admission is free to all and sundry or a public square where we are likely to rile revolutionary masses, but a university, an institution at which most of our neighbors *don’t* work. How academics participate in these hierarchies will in part determine the fate of what

Greta Gaard describes below as “the ground-zero victims of global climate change, the activist citizens who are leading the battles for climate justice.” The fact that the realities of academic activism conflict with so many of the ideals that Western academics profess may encourage us to wonder just *how* “activist” we really are. Aimee Carrillo Rowe has just cause to observe that activism simply “may not be an identity we might easily claim” (801).

There is ample reason to be wary of the unfettered optimism that might come with, as Nicholas Hengen Fox puts it, “wearing the cap of teacher-activist”: as Fox explains, wearing this cap “makes us feel good at the end of the day,” but the danger in believing “that teaching is a kind of activism [is that it] only aides [*sic*] the disconnect between the classroom and the streets.” His solution is to teach “texts as tactics,” wherein “rather than focusing on what a text says, students focus on how it has been — and could be — used in the world beyond the classroom” (15). What this means for Fox is that “rather than polishing histories of struggle or massaging ideologies, teaching texts as tactics aims to pursue political and social change in the present” (16). The key here, to borrow again from Gaard’s article, is that such work “energizes its audiences and invites movement toward action and activism alike.”

What Murphy calls the “unanticipated impact” of art “is precisely where the role of criticism can come into play in an extremely valuable way.” It does so, Murphy argues, by making “explicit that which may be implicit or immanent but unacknowledged and even unrecognized by the author and the characters invented.” This echoes a sentiment that I have made (see “Theorizing” 217) that theorizing ecocriticism can potentially take us toward the activism that has long characterized ecocriticism. Highlighting, for instance, links among meat, environment, and sexuality in *Timon of Athens* or the ethical and environmental implications of human flesh as meat in *Titus Andronicus*, to take two unlikely texts, ecocriticism draws out things of significant activist import that might otherwise remain unseen. As Murphy is right to argue, whether they are intentional or not, whether the characters or the author sees them or not, ecocriticism’s strength is that it can bring them to view.

After all, “if we do not teach students how to move from interpreting the world to changing it, our practice of politics is hardly a practice at all” (Fox 22). Exemplifying such an activist pedagogical practice, Iris Ralph explains below, in a compelling analysis of the resonance for contemporary forests of the Old English literary masterpiece *The Dream of the Rood*, that “pedagogical literary environmental activism engages with literature in order to address very real environmental crises that affect us in almost every aspect of our lives today.” Ralph’s argument — and the implied position of all of the articles in this Special Issue — is that there is an important relationship of literature to the natural environment. Such is not an argument that

we may take for granted. Even such an important and persuasive voice as Lawrence Buell's has suggested something different, that "literature always lead(s) us away from the physical world, never back to it" (Buell 11). It is not a position that seems an entirely plausible one, since one literary genre in particular has been understood to do precisely the opposite of what Buell says: poetry has long been both perceived and imagined as a vehicle that takes us closer to the physical, material world — hence, the perception of the ecological character and contestatory potential of Romanticism that we see first in Jonathan Bate, who argues that "there is a special kind of writing called poetry, which has the peculiar power to speak 'earth'. Poetry is the song of the earth" (251). Canadian poet Susie O'Brien explains that poetry is all about connecting with the material world — if ecocritical history is any indication. Desires for (and sometimes a naïve belief in the possibilities of) unmediated and authentic encounters with the natural world go a long way to explaining the generic preferences of ecocriticism for poetry. It is not surprising that ecocriticism should prefer poetry, O'Brien maintains, since it has the "capacity to produce the illusory impression of an unmediated reflection of the world" (184).

In the provocatively entitled 2009 book *Can Poetry Save the Earth*, John Felstiner talks about the "urgent hope" that characterizes much of what has come to be known as "nature poetry." The imagined or perceived proximity and access of poetry both to the senses and to the real is among the main bases of the activist thrust behind the ecocriticism that analyzes such poetry. Whether or not poetry or ecocriticism can save the earth, though, is perhaps not a question to be answered in these pages, but in not answering, each author proceeds on the assumption that Bill McKibben's comments about poetry work for the entire field of ecocriticism: while "it may not save the earth . . . it will surely help." It is a belief in this capacity of the written word to help that each of the contributors to this Special Issue share.

We each share the belief that relocating the limits of activist and academic coexistence means taking to heart the importance of the work that we do, the budging of the mindset that is unsustainable, the constant hammering away at the problems — even if it means, which it need not necessarily, with a shot-in-the-dark ("it might hit something") or a "slow activism" trickle-down ("it might grow") goal — and with trust in the fact that the arguments and connections we are making are right, and that every single person we teach or reach is one more person behind us. As Karen Kilcup movingly argues, "Practicing environmental criticism may not mean that as individuals we can safeguard coral reefs or ensure environmental justice, but it might mean that we cultivate enough hearts and minds, and spark enough action, to help accomplish such goals together" (853).

Note

1. This is precisely the question that our authors address in their contributions to this Special Issue, a question Amber Dean puts simply and succinctly in an article entitled “Teaching Feminist Activism”: she asks “what qualifies as activism?” (354).

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