theories and methodologies

After Sustainability

STEVE MENTZ

IT SEEMED LIKE A GOOD IDEA WHILE IT LASTED, BUT WE SHOULD HAVE KNOWN IT COULD NOT LAST. THE ERA OF SUSTAINABILITY IS OVER. BEhind our shared cultural narratives of sustainability sits a fantasy about stasis, an imaginary world in which we can trust that whatever happened yesterday will keep happening tomorrow. It's been pretty to think so, but it's never been so. In literary studies, we name this kind of fantasy *pastoral*. Such a narrative imagines a happy, stable relation between human beings and the nonhuman environment. It seldom rains, mud doesn't clog our panpipes, and our sheep never run away while swains sing beautiful songs to coy shepherdesses. In this sustainable green world, complicated things fit into simple packages, as literary criticism has recognized, from William Empson's "pastoral trick" (115) to Greg Gerrard's "pastoral ecology" (56–58). This green vision provides, in Gerrard's phrase, a "stable, enduring counterpoint to the disruptive energy and change of human societies" (56). That's the dream toward which sustainability entices us. To be sustainable is to persist in time, unchanged in essence if not details. That's not the human experience of the nonhuman world. Remember the feeling of being wet, like King Lear, "to the skin" (Mentz, "Strange Weather"). Changing scale matters, and local variation does not preclude global consistency, but the feeling of the world on our skin is disruptive. Our environment changes constantly, unexpectedly, often painfully.

Moving beyond happy fictions of sustainability need not mean consigning ourselves to an unintelligible ecosphere. If we turn from green pastures to blue oceans, we find an already present, partly explored environment for postsustainability thinking. Letting go of harmony, we find in the world ocean an environment that is, from a human point of view, clearly unsustainable but that makes up most of the planet. Two facts seem especially salient. First, the ocean is our world; it covers almost three-fourths of the earth's surface and contains over ninety percent of the biosphere (DeLoughrey 20). Second, human beings can't survive in the sea. The ocean represents our near-

STEVE MENTZ, professor of English at St. John's University in New York City, is the author of *At the Bottom of Shakespeare's Ocean* (Continuum, 2009) and *Romance for Sale in Early Modern England* (Ashgate, 2006) and a coeditor of *Rogues and Early Modern English Culture* (U of Michigan P, 2004). He has written articles and chapters on ecological criticism, Shakespeare, maritime literature, and the early modern book trade, and in 2010 he curated an exhibition at the Folger Shakespeare Library, *Lost at Sea: The Ocean in the English Imagination, 1550–1750* (www.folger.edu/lostatsea). He is writing a book on shipwreck from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611) to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719).

© 2012 BY THE MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2012.127.3.586 Published online by Cambridge University Press

est and richest vision of a nonhuman, nonsustainable ecology (Mentz, *At the Bottom*). As the global climate becomes increasingly unstable, we have begun to recognize that planet-sized ecological questions are really questions about the ocean (Earle). Imagining earth as ocean rather than garden enables us to escape pastoral nostalgia. For literary humanists, that's good news, because building systems to accommodate and even enjoy radical change is something literature does well. The ecological crisis we live in challenges our appetites for change. We must learn to love disruption, including the disruption of human lives by nonhuman forces (Morton, *Ecological Thought*). After sustainability, we need dynamic narratives about our relation to the biosphere.

The most forthright public declaration of the postsustainability world comes from Bill McKibben. McKibben's "new name" for our planet inserts an almost silent vowel inside a familiar word, so that "eaarth" indicates the "tough new planet" climate change has built (2–6). His model, however, still invokes comfortable visions of the premodern environment. The world before global warming, McKibben claims, occupied "the sweetest of sweet spots," with stable temperatures, glaciation, sea levels, and "predictable heat and rainfall" (1–2). To adapt a phrase from Lear's middle daughter, McKibben names the very deed of the love we must feel for our disorderly planet, but he comes too short, because he does not embrace the basic disorder in all natural systems. Local records and experiences show that global stasis has never been locally stable. As Vladimir Janković notes, early modern observers found the weather patterns they recorded full of "uncommon" and "extraordinary" events (2), and, especially before the early eighteenth century, they expressed their findings in "the idiom of marvel and providence" (33). Human beings experience the weather as constant change (Ross 233–34), and it's weather, not climate, that our bodies encounter day by day. Ecological science may prefer larger physical and temporal scales, but human meanings get made on the skin. We may wish to believe that hurricanes rupture a sustainable norm, but historical and contemporary experiences suggest that departures from stability—catastrophes—constitute the real normal.

Intellectual frameworks for postsustainability appear in the two modeling sciences whose names are built on the Greek root *oikos*: economics and ecology. The ecologist Colleen Clements observes that sustainability itself is an "unnatural value . . . [a] fairy tale ideal of an ecosystem of achieved and unchanging harmony" (215). The postequilibrium shift in ecological thinking trumpeted its arrival in Daniel Botkin's *Discordant Harmonies* (1992). As Gerrard narrates, the "new ecology" of dynamic change displaced the "climax," or static equilibrium, proposed in the early twentieth century by the plant ecologist Frederick Clements (57). In economics, the neoclassical synthesis that relied on supply-and-demand equilibrium was challenged by John Maynard Keynes, whose post-Depression model put pressure on market equilibrium without entirely abandoning the concept (Hayes). In the humanities, however, the pastoral idea of the sustainable system has not yet been superseded (Dove). To move from a static ecological relation to a dynamic one requires a new understanding of environmental interrelations, which, as Colleen Clements describes them, make up not "a well-meshed, smoothly-working, serene system but one representing many stasis breakdowns compensated for by new inputs which keep the oscillations within certain critical limits" (218). Ecology, in this view, represents a dynamic set of relations, which sometimes transgress even "critical limits." Just as early modern weather watchers wanted a system that made sense of meteors and eclipses, today we need an ecology of catastrophe that will resonate with literary models outside pastoral. In a world in which disruptive climate

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2012.127.3.586 Published online by Cambridge University Press

change has tangibly begun and we recognize that permanent sustainability was never really possible, we expect and encounter radical disruption in all natural systems at all times.

Recent efforts to bridge postmodern theory and environmental literary criticism address ecocriticism's delay in following the ecosciences' shift from equilibrium to dynamism. Timothy Morton's *Ecology without Nature* claims that "the idea of nature is getting in the way of properly ecological forms of culture, philosophy, politics, and art" (1). Morton's plea for a "dark ecology" of "irreducible otherness" subverts the pastoralism of his own field of literary study, Romantic poetry (151). Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, which locates agency in networked assemblages of human and nonhuman actors, further displaces pastoral bias: "Political ecology does not shift attention from the human pole to the pole of nature; it shifts from *certainty* about the production of risk-free objects . . . to *uncertainty* about the relations whose unintended consequences threaten to disrupt all orderings, all plans, all impacts" (25). While Morton's tragic vision does not always mesh with Latour's dizzying optimism (Mentz, "Tongues"), Morton and Latour gesture beyond pastoral stasis. Inhabiting a dynamic world requires giving up certain privileges and stabilities, but it produces a new freedom for thinking inside constant change. The task of literary ecocriticism in a postpastoral world does not exactly mirror the descriptive horizontalization of Latour's or Morton's theoretical criticism. Literary culture generates narratives about human bodies and minds inside plurality as well as visions of strange multiplicity. The archives of literary history record human attempts to confront the chaotic world assemblages about which Morton, Latour, and others theorize.[1] It turns out that, despite the hegemony of sustainability, we have a long history of thinking through our dynamic and painful environment. Large parts of this history involve salt water.

Moving beyond sustainability requires different models for thinking about nonstable systems. That's where the sea proves useful. The humanities can add ocean stories to emerging models of ecological resilience, which measure the tendency of ecosystems to tolerate disturbance after perturbation. Lance H. Gunderson and C. S. Holling have coined the term *panarchy* to describe an overarching model of transformation in human and ecological systems. Desires for new systems, however, should be balanced by an awareness that today's post-equilibrium situation is not new. Human structures have never been sustainable, as rigorous ecothinkers have already recognized (O'Grady; Buell 85). McKibben's *Eaarth* argues that descriptions of global warming as a problem for "grandchildren" represent a failure to face the reality of today (51). To invert McKibben's claim, I suspect that all gestures toward an orderly past or once-sustainable golden age, including McKibben's, falsify lived historical experience. Human beings have never lived in pastoral stasis, natural or cultural. Literary studies can contribute to ecodiscourses by showing how cultural meanings emerge through encounters between human experiences and disorderly ecologies. Through these encounters, we learn what living in a postsustainable world feels like on our bodies, as well as how to devise conceptual structures to make sense of disorder. To accomplish this accommodation of dynamic change—to be a "connoisseur of chaos," in Wallace Stevens's phrase (166)—requires ornate provisional systems and visionary narrative glimpses of being in the world.

Fortunately, the poets have been there before us.

Immersion

There's no better place to start than on an Atlantic beach with Walt Whitman:

> You sea! I resign myself to you also—I guess
> what you mean,

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2012.127.3.586 Published online by Cambridge University Press

I behold from the beach your crooked
inviting fingers,
I believe you refuse to go back without feeling
of me,
We must have a turn together, I undress,
hurry me out of sight of the land,
Cushion me soft, rock me in billowy drowse,
Dash me with amorous wet, I can repay you.
(39–40)

The poet's intimate relation with the sea reprises some central motifs of Romanticism, but Whitman's ocean does not resemble a pastoral landscape. If the essential topography of pastoral is green grass and flowers, switching to the turbulent ocean radically reshapes the self-world relation. The pleasure and threat in Whitman's lines, the mixed lure of "amorous wet" and "crooked inviting fingers," point toward an oceanic vision that entices and outrages. The initial and controlling phrase of Whitman's litany—"I resign myself"—cedes control while immersing the body in watery contradictions. This is what a nonsustainable environment feels like.

The central trope of this body-sea encounter is paradox, the sudden meeting of opposites. An oft-quoted line later in this section of "Song of Myself" embraces contradiction: "I am not the poet of goodness only, I do not decline to be the poet of wickedness also." In the postpastoral ocean, the poet is "Partaker of influx and efflux, extoller of hate and conciliation" (40). The narrative hurries into disorder, venturing "out of sight of the land," following a "guess" rather than a fixed meaning. Motivating the poet's resignation is an erotics of surrender in which the solitary human being relinquishes autonomy into a body incalculably larger than its own: "Cushion me soft, rock me in billowy drowse." The visionary possibilities of immersion animate the stanza-opening pun: "You sea!" cries the poet. We do see.

Beyond the ecstasy of the encounter, this passage leads toward a postsustainability literary ecology because it imagines disorder as production. The surf is insistently relational, "refus[ing] to go back without feeling of me." The body-ocean conglomeration creates something new. Whitman's metaphor, a few lines down, is troubled childbirth: "Do you fear some scrofula out of the unflagging pregnancy? / Did you guess that the celestial laws are yet to be work'd over and rectified?" (40). The notion of an "unflagging" generation of new life and new forms recalls Latour's fecund assemblages. The sense that the "laws" of the universe are themselves only being formed matches the French theorist's insistence that new orders are always possible. The threat of scrofula plus endless fecundity: Whitman's lines produce meanings for a postequilibrium world.

Swimmer Poetics

A skeptic might counter that Whitman's verse relies too much on a heroic expansion of the self and that his rhyming insistence on the sea's "feeling of me" screams anthropocentrism. This section of "Song of Myself" does not grant agency and citizenship, in Latour's sense, to the wide universe of things. It does, however, capture the twinned joy and danger of a disorderly, threatening world. Entering the surf puts the body at risk and invites disorientation. The ocean, that place, like the poet's ego, "of one phase and of all phases" (40), has always represented a dangerous but attractive proving ground for heroic endurance. From Beowulf's and Odysseus's nights in the sea to the more recent adventures of John Cheever's swimmer and Yann Martel's Pi, Western literature frames immersion as risky and transformative. To swim requires giving oneself over to the alien element. A poetics of buoyancy would focus on the temporary stability in which we recognize the swimmer's skill. Hostile waters force swimmers to balance human strength, technique, and "feel for the water" against mortal and ecological limits (Sprawson 13). The swimmer's

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2012.127.3.586 Published online by Cambridge University Press

vulnerability and effort provide a model for how to live in our world today, when landed life increasingly resembles conditions at sea.

To imagine a swimmer poetics for our storm-filled world can generate unsustainable but engaging narratives. Swimmers live in the world and enjoy it, but being in the water means knowing that stability cannot last. As the visible catastrophes of climate change appear, we recognize ourselves in the swimmer more than in the gardener. The belief that this planet was once a bountiful garden is a powerful human myth, though the laborer's georgic has always conveyed the better metaphor. Today, however, the world ocean flows into cultural view. As Daniel Brayton observes, the long-standing terrestrial bias of environmental studies, with its focus on grounded ethics of the land, has always been an untenable fiction on our blue planet. "Earth is a misnomer," the microbiologist Ed DeLong has said. "The planet should be called Ocean" (qtd. in Helmreich 3). Taking this advice to heart, we need a swimmer poetics.

Expanding the Ocean

The real limitation of Whitman's surf is its foamy solipsism, its unwillingness to escape the boundaries of the self. For Whitman, the self and the world match perfectly because both are "large [and] contain multitudes" (72). Postsustainability ecopoetics seeks flashes of poetic insight and provisional systems of meaning, but Whitman's poem enables the vision without the system. To flow toward a more systemic model, I juxtapose to Whitman's verse the francophone Caribbean poet and theorist Édouard Glissant's late-twentieth-century prose poem "Ocean":

> The ancestor speaks, it is the ocean, it is a race that washed the continents with its veil of suffering; it says this race which is song, dew of song and the muffled perfume and the blue of the song, and its mouth is the song of all the mouths of foam: ocean! you permit, you are accomplice, maker of stars; how is it you do not open your wings into a voracious lung? And see! there remains only the sum of the song and the eternity of voice and childhood already of those who will inherit it. Because as far as suffering is concerned it belongs to us all; everyone has its vigorous sand between their teeth. The ocean is patience, its wisdom is the tare of time.[2]

Even more than Whitman's, Glissant's poem operates through addition; the encounter with ocean no longer simply connects self and surf but also involves the global history of "a race that washed the continents with its veil of suffering." Glissant elsewhere describes the challenge the Caribbean poses to Western historical narratives: "Compared to the Mediterranean, which is an inner sea surrounded by lands, a sea that concentrates . . . the Caribbean is . . . a sea that explodes the scattered lands into an arc" (*Poetics* 33).[3] Glissant's ocean does not invite the swimmer; rather, it "speaks" in the ancestor's voice. In the same hortatory mode, the poet commands that the ocean reveal itself: "you permit, you are accomplice, maker of stars: how is it you do not open your wings into a voracious lung?" The urgent fantasy that structures this poetic blast imagines the Caribbean as sonic base, "dew of song and the muffled perfume and the blue of the song," seething with historical possibilities. Caribbean salt water transforms linearity into a melody of suffering and patience.

Glissant rejects static conceptions of the world for postsustainability dynamism. The beach captures an alterity at the center of human experience, but even this symbol remains opaque: "The edge of the sea . . . represents the alternation (but one that is illegible) between order and chaos. The established municipalities do their best to manage this constant movement between threatening excess and dreamy fragility" (*Poetics* 121–22). Through the metaphor of "municipalities," Glissant connects systems of thought to political struc-

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2012.127.3.586 Published online by Cambridge University Press

tures but then watches both founder on shifting sands. The no place or border place of the shoreline, which Jean-Didier Urbain calls an "aesthetics of the void" and a "counterworld" (60, 113), opposes straight narrative lines. The result, for Glissant, is a willing embrace of incomprehension: "Widespread consent to specific opacities is the most straightforward equivalent of nonbarbarism. We clamor for the right to opacity for everyone" (*Poetics* 194). The sustainability myth has always been a plea for transparency, for an environment that human beings can understand and therefore cherish. Glissant insists that we give up legibility with sustainability. The challenge of postequilibrium is learning to love the illegible, while still deciphering it, partly.

What Postsustainability Does Not Mean

We do not have to stop recycling. It's still a good idea to develop renewable energy, compost household waste, eat less meat, drive and fly less. We can even covet Priuses. But we need to stop dreaming green dreams. Our environmental logic hopes for a stable, happy life—but if sustainability has always been a pipe dream, it's no wonder we can't get back to it. Human cultures have been remaking ecosystems and climates since the dawn of agriculture, with increasing rapidity in the modern era (Mainwaring, Giegengack, and Vita-Finzi; Ruddiman). Making political and personal choices to reduce the human ecofootprint can be thought of not as a route back to Eden but as a form of practical self-defense in a chaotic environment—as learning to swim, not planting eternal gardens. What we should crave is not stasis—would we want it if we could get it?—but room to maneuver. Not permanence but buoyancy. The great weakness of our industrial fossil-fuel economy is its exclusion of other forms of production, so that when systemic catastrophes come—wars, oil spills, financial crises—we have few alternatives. We need options, not sustainability.

The great practical challenge of the twenty-first century will be replacing oil monoculture with something, anything, else. But despite oft-renewed dreams of a radical breakthrough—cold fusion or superbioalgae or something not yet imagined—the postoil economy will likely continue mixed and chaotic. A literary ecoculture that pines for pastoral stasis will not be able to make sense of such a world. But an ecocriticism that treats dynamic change as a fundamental feature of all natural systems—a feature, not a bug—may help us recognize that change is the "natural" value, the condition and structure-breaking structure of all systems. Literary culture has always been fascinated with the interplay of stability and disruption, and literary attitudes toward change can aid us in reimagining ecological dreams. Literature, too, has long peered into the oceanic world that ecocriticism has ignored. If we recognize that our global environment, in its changeableness, its alterity, and its violence, appears more oceanic than terrestrial, we might be able to invent literary ecologies that put the sea at the center, not the margins. We'll still be swimming in deep water, perhaps far from shore—but we'll have a better idea of what we're doing there.

Notes

1. Morton's recent work has moved into the philosophical field of "Object-Oriented Ontology," or "OOO," in dialogue with philosophers including Graham Harman and Levi Bryant. A lively introduction to Morton's OOO thinking can be found in "Objects as Temporary Autonomous Zones," but the best place to start is probably the "OOO for Beginners" page on his blog.

2. "L'ancêtre parle, c'est l'océan, c'est une race qui lavait les continents avec son voile de souffrance; il dit cette race qui est chant, rosée du chant et le parfum sourd et le bleu du chant, et sa bouche est le chant de toutes les bouches d'écume; océan! tu permets, tu es complice, faiseur d'astres; comment n'ouvres-tu pas tes ailes en poumon vorace? Et voyez! il ne reste que la somme du chant et

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2012.127.3.586 Published online by Cambridge University Press

l'éternité de la voix et l'enfance déjà de ceux qui en feront héritage. Car pour la souffrance elle appartient à tous: chacun en a, entre les dents, la sable vigoureux. L'océan est patience, sa sagesse est l'ivraie du temps" ("Océan").

3. Glissant's phrasing adapts a famous line describing the Caribbean from Kamau Brathwaite's poem "Calypso": "The stone had skidded arc'd and bloomed into islands: / Cuba and San Domingo / Jamaica and Puerto Rico . . ." (48).

Works Cited

Botkin, Daniel. *Discordant Harmonies: A New Ecology for the Twenty-First Century*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992. Print.

Brathwaite, Kamau. "Calypso." *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988. 48–50. Print.

Brayton, Daniel. *Shakespeare's Ocean: An Ecocritical Exploration*. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2012. Print.

Buell, Lawrence. *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and the Literary Imagination*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005. Print.

Clements, Colleen D. "Stasis: The Unnatural Value." *Environmental Ethics*. Ed. R. Elliot. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005. 215–25. Print.

DeLoughrey, Elizabeth. *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures*. Honolulu: U of Hawai'i P, 2007. Print.

Dove, Michael. "Equilibrium Theory and Interdisciplinary Borrowing: A Comparison of Old and New Ecological Anthropologies." *Reimagining Political Ecology*. Ed. A. Biersack and J. B. Greenberg. Durham: Duke UP, 2006. 43–69. Print.

Earle, Sylvia. *Sea Change: A Message of the Oceans*. New York: Ballantine, 1996. Print.

Empson, William. *Some Versions of Pastoral*. New York: New Directions, 1960. Print.

Gerrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. London: Routledge, 2005. Print.

Glissant, Édouard. "Ocean." *The Collected Poems of Édouard Glissant*. Ed. Jeff Humphries and Jane Humphries. Trans. Melissa Manolas. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2005. 50. Print.

———. "Océan." *Poèmes complets*. Paris: Gallimard, 1994. 78. Print.

———. *Poetics of Relation*. Trans. Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1997. Print.

Gunderson, Lance H., and C. S. Holling, eds. *Panarchy: Understanding Transformations in Human and Natural Systems*. Washington: Island, 2001. Print.

Hayes, Mark. *The Economics of Keynes: A New Guide to the General Theory*. Northampton: Edgar Allen, 2008. Print.

Helmreich, Stefan. *Alien Ocean: Anthropological Voyages in Microbial Seas*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2009. Print.

Janković, Vladimir. *Reading the Skies: A Cultural History of English Weather, 1650–1820*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000. Print.

Latour, Bruno. *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2004. Print.

Mainwaring, A. Bruce, Robert Giegengack, and Claudio Vita-Finzi, eds. *Climate Crises in Human History*. Darby: Amer. Philos. Soc., 2011. Print.

McKibben, Bill. *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2011. Print.

Mentz, Steve. *At the Bottom of Shakespeare's Ocean*. London: Continuum, 2009. Print.

———. "Strange Weather in *King Lear*." *Shakespeare* 6.2 (2010): 139–52. Print.

———. "Tongues in the Storm: Shakespeare, Ecological Crisis, and the Resources of Genre." *Ecocritical Shakespeare*. Ed. Dan Brayton and Lynne Bruckner. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011. 155–72. Print.

Morton, Timothy. *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2010. Print.

———. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2007. Print.

———. "Objects as Temporary Autonomous Zones." *Continent* 1.3 (2011): 149–55. Print.

———. "OOO for Beginners: MP3s, Lexicon, Tutorials." *Ecology without Nature*. N.p., 22 Mar. 2011. Web. 26 Oct. 2011.

O'Grady, John P. "How Sustainable Is the Idea of Sustainability?" *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 10.1 (2003): 1–10. Print.

Ross, Andrew. *Strange Weather: Culture, Science, and Technology at the Age of Limits*. London: Verso, 1991. Print.

Ruddiman, William. *Plows, Plagues, and Petroleum: How Humans Took Control of Climate*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005. Print.

Sprawson, Charles. *Haunts of the Black Masseur: The Swimmer as Hero*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1992. Print.

Stevens, Wallace. "Connoisseur of Chaos." *The Palm at the End of the Mind: Selected Poems and a Play*. Ed. Holly Stevens. New York: Vintage, 1972. 166–68. Print.

Urbain, Jean-Didier. *At the Beach*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2003. Print.

Whitman, Walt. "Song of Myself." *Leaves of Grass*. Ed. Justin Kaplan. New York: Bantam, 1983. 22–73. Print.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2012.127.3.586 Published online by Cambridge University Press