Ecocriticism, a field existing on the sometimes rocky terrain where culture and environment meet, has recently developed from a sparsely populated area of study into a busy intersection of scholarly work.¹ The number of journals, presses, and academic programs devoted to the field has mushroomed. There is perhaps no better evidence of the recent growth of interest in ecocriticism than the rapid expansion of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) and its official journal ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment. But even as the community of ecocritics grows from a hamlet into a bustling metropolis, the movement itself has been slow to survey urban environments. Ecocriticism has instead developed in tandem with growing academic interest in nature writing, American pastoralism, and literary ecology. The resulting body of critical work claims rural environments and wild nature as its domain, meaning that most ecocritics in the United States have focused their attention on America’s rural past or on the remaining wide open spaces of the Wild West.²

But what happens when ecocriticism crosses the Mississippi or heads for a night on the town? Once it’s seen New York, how can you keep it down on the farm (or pine barren or desert ecosystem)? These are the questions which animate the following attempt to assess the urban challenge to ecocriticism. There is a growing body of cultural criticism engaged with urban ecology that tends to reject mainstream ecocriticism’s focus on the genres of nature writing and pastoral, insisting on the incapacity of these genres to represent the complex in-
teractions between political choices, socio-economic structures, and the densely-populated ecosystems that shape urban environments. This essay attempts to bring this distaff branch of ecocriticism into dialogue with its more famous country cousin, exploring their different contributions to the philosophical grounds, cultural geography, and critical genealogy of ecocriticism. I wish to maintain that the insights generated by this distaff branch, which I will call social ecocriticism, are needed if we are to successfully incorporate urban environments within the domain of ecological criticism.

**The Grounds of Ecocriticism**

The beliefs that have been central for most practitioners of ecocriticism, who I will call deep ecocritics, were laid out in the tremendously influential book *Deep Ecology*, in which Bill Devall and George Sessions describe the movement’s “ultimate norms” as “self-realization and biocentric equality” (205). In Michael Tobias’s volume of the same name, Arne Naess, the Norwegian philosopher usually credited with founding Deep Ecology, describes the movement through a series of oppositions with “Shallow Ecology,” creating an opposition between the “shallow” focus on Nature as a valuable resource for humans and the “deep” imperative to treat nature as valuable in its own right (257). The primary gospel of Deep Ecology is that we must abandon androcentric planning and develop a biocentric understanding of the environment, an understanding which is to be gained by existing in harmony with unspoiled nature.

In adopting this focus, the Deep Ecology movement has overlooked a variety of environmental concerns that are central to urban life. At one point, Devall and Sessions acknowledge the range of environmental issues, such as resource extraction and employment policy, that Deep Ecology dismisses by ignoring cities (158); while admitting that “these are vital issues” (159), Devall and Sessions insist that wild nature alone can provide the experience needed to foster “self-realization and biocentric equality” (111). They delineate four deep ecological principles that they believe can only be developed through interaction with wide open spaces: “1) developing a sense of place, 2) redefining the heroic person from conqueror of the land to the person fully experiencing the natural place, 3) cultivating the virtues of modesty and humility and 4) realizing how the mountains and rivers, fish and bears are continuing their own actualizing processes” (110). I would argue that these four qualities (minus the bears) can just as easily be found in urban environments. The failure to recognize this fact points to one of the major flaws with ecocriticism grounded in
deep ecological theory: it tends to engage in a form of wilderness fetishism, analyzed in detail in the work of William Cronon, that disables it from offering a useful analysis of urban environments.

In contrast with these Deep Ecological principles, the central tenets of Social Ecology, which have been so influential for the distaff branch of ecocriticism practiced by social ecocritics, are defined by the Institute for Social Ecology as a set of beliefs that “integrates the study of human and natural ecosystems through understanding the interrelationships of culture and nature” (Davis, Ecophilosophy 123). The man most centrally identified with the Social Ecology movement, Murray Bookchin, has described the movement’s “most fundamental message” in stating that “our basic ecological problems stem from social problems” (Philosophy 35).

This focus on how the social, political, and economic decisions made by humans effect our interaction with the environment has been particularly fruitful for analyzing urban areas.

Social Ecologists have not, however, simply accepted cities as they are; they frequently offer a critique of the ways in which metropolitan culture transforms urban environments. In Urbanization Without Cities, Murray Bookchin writes about cities as a necessary though flawed step toward human progress, much like the role of the Bourgeoisie in Marxist historiography. Social ecologists like Bookchin offer a critique of urbanization at the same time as they note the progressive role played by cities in the ongoing social dialectic that weaves together humans and non-human nature. In Bookchin’s effort to “redeem the city,” he makes a series of connections between the ecology of wide open spaces and that of metropolitan places, noting that this argument “runs counter to the conventional wisdom that city and countryside, like society and nature, are necessarily in conflict with each other, a theme that pervades so much of the writing on urbanity of western society” (x)—including the writings of Devall and Sessions and other Deep Ecologists.

As can be seen from this thumbnail sketch, at the root of the difference between deep and social ecocritics is a profound philosophical disagreement about the role that humanity and our built environments play in global ecology. Most ecocriticism, following the lead of Deep Ecology, insists that we “must break through our preoccupation with mediating between only human issues” to realize that human domination of the environment, more than human domination of other humans, is “the overriding problem” (Love, “Revaluing” 203). For cultural critics influenced by Social Ecology this position has two theoretical flaws: first, it establishes an absolute dichotomy between domination of humans and domination of the environment, though social
ecocritics would argue that they are linked by what Murray Bookchin calls the "epistemologies of rule" (Ecology 89); second, humans can only act on human values and make human choices so it makes little sense to speak of moving beyond human issues and adopting a biocentric viewpoint.

Another problem with the appeal of deep ecocriticism to some primal experience of Nature is that, as poststructuralist theory often reminds us, we can never definitively know something outside of the language we use to describe it. In applying this insight to ecocriticism, Alexander Wilson argues that "our experience of the natural world . . . is always mediated" (12). Wilson points out that whether we experience nature through a trip to the mountains, an animal show on TV, or working in our garden, this interaction is always shaped by "rhetorical constructs like photography, industry, advertising, and aesthetics, as well as by institutions like religion, tourism, and education" (12). For this reason, "there are many natures" (12), and not a seamless Mother Nature who dictates certain actions and policies. As Raymond Williams noted, "nature" is one of the most complex words in our language; and it is intimately interconnected with words like "society" and "culture"—words which are all too often seen as its antonyms rather than as its co-conspirators. This insight is often downplayed or even dismissed by deep ecocritics, who tend to have a strong antipathy for poststructuralist theory.5

Deep and social ecocriticism are alike in their rejection of humanism, but the difference is that the former rejects the "human" part of the equation while the latter is more troubled by the "ism." Michael Branch argues that ecocriticism and poststructuralism are similar in their basic premise that meaning, and individuals, exist only in a series of contextual relationships which poststructuralists call "intertextuality" and which ecophilosophers see as the primary interconnection of humans and their environment. Thus both poststructuralists and ecocritics (and especially critics who are both) object to claims of ungrounded objectivity and authority, the former on the grounds of a resistance to theories of language which instantiate notions of "presence" and the latter as part of a program to undo anthropocentrism. In the end, however, Branch rejects poststructuralism for sneaking anthropocentrism in through the back door by attempting "to use the ubiquity of language to keep humans at the center of our cosmological paradigm" (50). In short, deep ecologists are troubled by humanism because they hope to replace androcentrism with a biocentric view that displaces the human, while social ecologists, influenced by poststructuralism, are more likely to be troubled by the raising of the human into an
“ism”—a transcendent, ahistorical, and monological category of absolute value (as in the popular bromides which begin something like “The time-honored truths of Humanism tell us that . . .").

Like Branch, SueEllen Campbell attempts to reconcile poststructuralism and ecocriticism but is unable to do so because of the limitations imposed by a Deep Ecological perspective. She begins by positing an opposition between poststructuralism and ecocriticism that must then be breached. In the very act of applying a theory that breaks down binary oppositions, a distinction between “theorists” and “ecologists” is maintained. And the two are relegated to very different environments: “All those days in the wilderness had taken me about as far as I could be from the crowded cafes and academic closets of theory” (199). The province of the ecologists is the great outdoors and wide-open spaces of the West; theoryheads, cut off from the rejuvenating forces of nature in their dingy eastern enclaves, are corralled into the cramped spaces of smoky cafes and even closets. If ecocriticism is to speak for both environments, it is time to bring theory out of the closet and realize that it is a necessary presence not just among cafe society but in confronting the open spaces patrolled by the ecological posse (their trusty .45s in hand, ready to shoot trespassing, beret-wearing theoreticians).

In other words, Campbell’s attempt to find parallels between the opposed realms of theory and ecology is misguided because a truly effective ecocriticism is, to borrow popular poststructuralist phraseology, “always already” theorized. Wilderness areas, as much as cityscapes, are shaped by complex socio-political, economic, and philosophical discourses. A remote pond in the Rocky Mountains is affected by the decision not to build a resort on its shores just as the Manhattan landscape was affected by the decision to build the World Trade Center. Campbell’s attempt to reconcile theory and ecology on the basis of a mutual “experience of lost unity and a desire to regain it” (209), which she argues is central to both Lacanian understandings of the self and ecological conceptions of the environment, ignores the poststructuralist insistence that such a desire for unity is illusory and not recoverable. Rather than search for a mythic Edenic past, a society can try to model itself after other societies which have been more beneficent toward their environment, but this requires complex social, political, and economic—that is, theoretical—decisions. There is no unmediated way of existing in harmony with Nature, and there never has been. Once we make human decisions on how to exist in our surroundings, we are already involved in socio-cultural (and again, theoretical) modes of thought. Campbell’s desire for unity with the land can certainly motivate a kind of theory which will benefit our planet, but it will fail to move us “beyond the human” (210) and outside of
"networks of language and culture" (211) because we are human and our understanding of the land is visible only in our language and culture. We can attempt to harmonize with our surroundings, but these attempts will only be meaningful to the extent that they are manifested in our ways of speaking to one another and living together. The deep ecological perspective adopted by many ecocritics, bereft of the theoretical insights of Social Ecology, will always be incomplete; it will also be unpersuasive and unavailable for most city dwellers and ultimately inadequate for nonurbanites as well.

George Sessions presents an extreme version of Deep Ecological dogma which is clearly anathema to urban ecocritics: "To be fully human we must protect and nurture our wildness, which involves bioregional living, intimate contact with wild animals and plants in wild ecosystems, animistic perceptions, and primal nature rituals" (6). One hears an unfortunate echo of this thinking in Glen Love's insistence that the only way for urban writers to gain true ecological awareness is for them to "slough off their New York or L.A. skins when they confront western landscapes" ("Revaluing" 209). When the arrogance (a profoundly anthropocentric posture) of Session's statement that only those in contact with the wild can become fully evolved humans is transported into Love's version of ecocriticism, we are provided with a prime example of the danger of importing the postulates of Deep Ecology into an undertheorized ecocritical perspective. Gratuitous swipes at urbanites and claims that only wild nature can "humanize" our sorry lot are all too common in ecocentric thinking. Yet anyone who has spent some time in the great outdoors knows that there are plenty of unevolved, anthropocentric, close-minded folk residing in remote areas. Where I grew up, on the Washington/Idaho border, we had a saying: "this place is much too nice for the people who are moving here." As the neo-Nazis and members of the Aryan Nations and The Order built their compounds in Northern Idaho, it was hard to see how the crystal-clear lakes and majestic mountains infused them with enlightenment. And do we really want to exclude from "essential humanness" (Sessions 5) the many people of color and gays/lesbians who are primarily urban dwellers in part because they have been chased away by the enlightened inhabitants of rural America? I purposefully overstate the case to draw attention to the very real plight of those of us who have sought refuge in the city only to be told by our betters that unless, like them, we commune with wild nature we will always be less than human—part of the problem and never part of the solution.

To return to an argument promulgated by William Cronon, the "wilderness fixation" of many deep ecocritics can blind them to the
existence of urban environments and the ways in which these metropolitan places challenge overly narrow conceptions of ecotheory. Cronon has pointed out flaws in the very concept of wilderness as it appears within certain forms of environmental thinking associated with Deep Ecology, arguing that “in its flight from history, in its siren song of escape, in its reproduction of the dangerous dualism that sets human beings somehow outside nature—in all these ways, wilderness poses a threat to responsible environmentalism at the end of the 20th century” (43). He makes a compelling case, noting the myopic view of the “frontier” as a supposedly simpler time and space and the ways in which the opposition between Man and Nature was written onto the wilderness through policies of Indian removal. But surely there are ways to celebrate the wilderness which do not inherently represent it as “a flight from history” based on a “romantic ideology” with “no place in which human beings can actually make their living from the land” (42-43). This point of view overlooks the aesthetic and spiritual components of diversity, not to mention its contribution to biodiversity. In short, the insights of Deep Ecology should work in tandem with the Social Ecological approach to ecocriticism. Despite the flaws in Cronon’s analysis of the flaws in wilderness thinking, he reasonably concludes that we need to “see a natural landscape that is also cultural, in which city, suburb, countryside and wilderness each has its own place” (43). He is right to conclude that we need to find a middle ground between country and city—and he doesn’t mean the suburbs—which might be called “home.”

The Geography of Ecocriticism

The different conceptions of the human element manifested in deep and social ecocriticism are related to the very different cultural geography of the two modes—the two different homes in which they have resided. The predominance of deep ecocriticism is connected to the fact that ecocritics have been disproportionately located in the West and/or in rural areas. The schools where you find a higher than average concentration of scholars who might call themselves ecocritics are places like the University of Oregon, the University of Nevada, Reno, or rural colleges. Not surprisingly, then, a quick glance at ASLE’s 1999 Membership Directory reveals that there are more members from Nevada (a state with roughly one and a half million residents, according to the 1990 census) than from New Jersey (population: eight million). Oregon and Ohio are equally represented in ASLE’s membership though the latter contains almost four times more people than the former. The scholarly journals most likely to publish essays on
ecocriticism tend to be in places like Utah (Weber Studies, Western American Literature), Nevada (ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment), or other western states: Arizona Quarterly, Iowa Review, North American Review, North Dakota Quarterly, Texas Studies in Language and Literature. The cultural geography of ecocritics is not unrelated to the terrain that they study. Glen Love provides evidence of the ways in which these two are related when he argues that pastoralism is a natural outgrowth of the literature of the American West, in which “nature continues to occupy a much larger place than it appears to in the eastern and urban imagination” (“Et” 196).

Indeed, the pastoral looms large in deep ecocriticism. And Love is not alone in arguing that pastoralism will only become more significant as its chief concern, the interconnections between human beings and nature, comes to dominate a time “when the comfortably mythopoeic green world of pastoral is beset by profound threats of pollution, despoliation, and diminishment” (“Et” 196). But Love also sees a need to reconceptualize the pastoral to make it relevant for a contemporary world: “Pastoral’s ancient and universal appeal—to come away—requires new examination in an age in which there is no away. Pastoral, rightly understood, has always been a serious criticism of life. Ecocriticism, I think, can give us a serious criticism of pastoral” (“Et” 198). This is, however, a criticism from within the pastoral rather than a criticism of the pastoral from some other vantage point. According to Love, one of the markers of this “new pastoral” is that “wild nature has replaced the traditional middle state of the garden and the rural landscape as the locus of stability and value, the seat of instruction” (“Et” 203). While in classic pastoral the city dwellers took a refreshing trip to the country in order to return to their home rejuvenated, this new pastoral sees the remaining American wilderness as offering a radical challenge to the eco-unfriendly ways of urbanites.

The challenge which social ecocriticism offers to this rural focus of deep ecocriticism is of a parcel with the environmental justice movement’s effort to reconceptualize the notions of “habitat preservation” and “endangered species” to include the homes of inner-city people of color and their inhabitants, whose lives are threatened by the results of “environmental racism.” Many within the environmental justice movement felt that the mainstream environmental agenda was captive to classist and racist interests in issues like the preservation of wilderness and wildlife for the leisure and recreation of those Americans from the same class as the leadership of the environmental movement, which was almost devoid of people of color—a fact which Dana Alston points out was viewed by some as “another form of ‘en-
vironmental racism” (3). As one Hispanic woman protesting the effects of a gasoline terminal in her neighborhood put it, “we are the real endangered species in America, people of color” (Suro A1). And many civil rights leaders were slow to see how lead paint and air pollution were indeed a “Black thing” or a concern for Native Americans, Hispanic Americans and other people of color. The United Church of Christ’s report on toxic waste and race made it hard to ignore the relevance of environmentalism to the civil rights movement when it revealed that three out of five Black and Hispanic Americans and about half of all Asian/Pacific Islanders and Native Americans live in communities with uncontrolled toxic waste sites (Marks 9).

It is important that the ecocritical movement not replicate the larger environmental movement’s marginalization of the ecological plight of communities of color. Rather, we should learn from the more recent efforts to bring the civil rights and environmental movements together in theory and practice. In the past, the environmental movement’s emphasis on issues such as wilderness preservation and protecting endangered species often served to deny the relevance of incidents of environmental racism. Now groups exploring the connections between these different forms of ecological destruction can provide a basis for united action. Such connections can also be formed in the theory and pedagogy of ecocriticism if it is not held captive by an exclusively non-urban bias. At the same time, the focus on urban environments should not blind us to the insights of movements concerned about “wild nature” or to the fact that environmental racism is not solely an urban phenomena. In fact, many of the case studies in Robert Bullard’s classic collection *Confronting Environmental Racism* are devoted to the ecological concerns of rural communities of color.

Still, ecocriticism will continue to be a relatively pale and undertheorized field unless and until it more freely ventures into urban environments. Even some of the practitioners of the nature writing and new pastoralism beloved by deep ecocritics have cautioned that their works and the larger scope of environmentally-concerned writing and culture are too constrained by the critical rubrics used to contain Nature. The superlative tone of John A. Murray’s celebration of the “rise of nature writing” as “America’s next great genre” in a special nature-writing symposium published in *Manoa* was critiqued by some of the very writers celebrated by Murray. These writers responded to the elevation of their craft with suspicion. For instance, Barry Lopez and Christopher Merrill caution against fetishizing nature writing at the expense of more nuanced analysis of the interaction between humans and their environment in all kinds of writing and various settings. Merrill argues that the “strongest writers” rec-
ognize the ways in which environmental, cultural, aesthetic, spiritual, and political problems “intersect and overlap and shed light on one another” (93). Lopez cautions that “natural history writing takes as its proper subjects not solely things like polar bears or sunsets but the complex biological, social, economic, and ethical relationships among these things” (89). He fears that nature writing will “come to be seen as a genre rather than a tendency in American literature toward justice” (89). Harmonizing with the call of social ecocritics, he argues for a broad definition of “natural history writing,” one which allows for exploring the relationship “not simply with all that composes the Earth but between conquering and conquered people, for example” (89). He indirectly chastises Murray and other celebrants of nature writing for overlooking the work of Louise Erdrich, Barbara Kingsolver, J. M. Coetzee, and other writers who, like Lopez, are “addressing issues of prejudice, of dignity, and of tolerance” (90).

These are the qualities of environmentally-committed writing that is not solely the domain of celebrants of wild nature and inhabitants of rural environments. Contrary to the implicit assumption of many ecocritics that daily contact with the green world is more likely to develop ecoconsciousness than life in the city, studies which have compared the environmental consciousness of urban and rural dwellers have either found little difference or have discovered that rural residents tend to express lower levels of environmental concern than do urbanites. Some have theorized that this counterintuitive result—those living closest to the land having the least respect for it—is based on the dependence of many rural residents on the extraction or use of natural resources and their greater likelihood of favoring economic development at the expense of environmental protection. Whatever the cause, this rural-urban gap reveals that it may be less than wise to counsel those entering our field to “go West, young ecocritic” if we want them to look for environmentally-enlightened cultural practices.

And, of course, the West itself is not merely so monolithic as it sometimes appears in the pages of ecocritical essays. Looking through the pages of Western American Literature or the other major journals of ecocriticism, one would never guess that much of the most interesting literature of the American West and some of the most astute readings of the western landscape have been devoted to unearthing the culture of one of the largest urban environments in the world: Los Angeles. A diverse and interesting group of fiction writers have taken Los Angeles as their subject, from Nathaniel West to Philip K. Dick, Walter Mosley, and Joan Didion. Yet these are not the names which appear in deep ecocritical analyses of the literature of the American West. And some of the best contempo-
rary cultural criticism has also focused on Los Angeles. Mike Davis excavates the future of Los Angeles in his stunningly perceptive book *City of Quartz*. The final chapter of Edward Soja's *Postmodern Geographies* explains how "It All Comes Together in Los Angeles" (197). And for Frederic Jameson, Los Angeles becomes the "concrete totalization" of postmodernity in his widely influential study of *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. These are not the usual suspects when one lines up nature writers and ecocritics, but their work speaks to an experience of urban environments more germane to the lives of the majority of the inhabitants of the western states, who live in cities and suburbs, than the most eloquent testimonials to one man or woman's encounter with the wilderness.

With these exclusions and evasions in mind, let us revisit Glen Love's pronouncement that in the American West "nature continues to occupy a much larger place than it appears to in the eastern and urban imagination" ("Et" 196). Does this mean that the West is devoid of urban areas? Does it imply that nature and urban space are antithetical? Is there no such thing as urban nature? Do cities somehow exist separately from the ecosystems of which they are a part? Adopting the theoretical perspective of a Deep Ecology-inspired new pastoralism forces aspiring ecocritics to give untenable answers to these questions. We would do well, instead, to adopt a theoretical frame as spacious as the land about which we write— one which makes room for the urban, suburban, small-town, rural, and wild spaces that fill the physical and cultural landscape of the United States, West and East, and its literature. This inclusive mapping of the terrain explored by Social Ecology is necessary if ecocriticism is to deserve the accolades that it has only lately won in moving from the academic hinterlands to real estate bordering on the cultural mainstream.

**The Genealogy of Ecocriticism**

It is not surprising that the distinct cultural geography of deep and social ecocriticism has given rise to a distinct critical genealogy as well. Just as the *ASLE Membership Directory* reveals a decided bias towards non-urban areas, so the *ASLE Bibliography* is dominated by contemporary nature writers; poets like Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder; and their Romantic or Neo-Romantic forbears, especially Henry Thoreau. Recently, references can be found to a more diverse group of writers, including Susan Fenimore Cooper, Annie Dillard, N. Scott Momaday, and Leslie Marmon Silko. But despite increasing gender and ethnic diversity, few ecocritical works have much to say about urban culture.
of any stripe. In this final section, I bring into dialogue one such work—Andrew Ross’s *The Chicago Gangster Theory of Life*—with Lawrence Buell’s *The Environmental Imagination*. Ross’s work represents the distaff side of the genealogy of ecocriticism, providing a social ecology-inspired cultural study of urban life, while Buell’s work is firmly within the main branch of ecocriticism, with its deep ecological literary analysis of nature writing.

The latter’s work has been especially influential, as we might expect given the predominance of deep over social ecocriticism. Buell’s book has, in a very real sense, become paradigmatic for literary analyses of the environment. In fact, Jay Parini argues that *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* has already become “the standard work on the subject” of ecocriticism (52). The title itself provides a mini-history of deep ecocriticism, with its implicit argument that our culture and our understanding of the environment is shaped by a nature writing tradition stemming from Thoreau. The book, which Buell describes as a “kind of pastoral project” (31), begins with his statement that despite his intention to write only about Thoreau and nature, he ended up with a “broad study of environmental perception, the place of nature in the history of western thought, and the consequences for literary scholarship and indeed for humanistic thought in general of attempting to imagine a more ‘ecocentric’ way of being” (1). In clarifying what he means by “ecocentrism,” Buell accepts, with slight modifications, Timothy O’Riordan’s definition: “Ecocentrism preaches the virtues of reverence, humility, responsibility and care; it argues for low impact technology (but is not antitechnological); it decries bigness and impersonality in all forms (but especially in the city); and demands a code of behaviour that seeks permanence and stability based upon ecological principles of diversity and homeostasis” (425). Buell’s focus is exclusively on the green world; he has little to say about urban ecosystems since “bigness” is in and of itself the enemy. And he eschews the broadly socio-political provenance of social ecocriticism to focus exclusively on literary concerns.

In the central chapters of *The Environmental Imagination*, Buell re-evaluates many of the fundamental concepts of literary criticism from an ecocentric perspective. He goes to the root terms of literary analysis—representation, reference, metaphor, setting, characterization, personae, and canonicity—to suggest that all these elements are dramatically transformed by an environmental perspective. Buell concentrates on literature because he sees it as only proper to focus on “the most searching works of environmental reflection that the world’s biggest technological power has produced” (2). He narrows his focus
even further by developing a fairly restrictive “checklist” of what counts as an “environmentally oriented work” (7).

In the process of outlining his ecocentric literary theory, Buell makes several jabs at the kind of green criticism engaged in by Andrew Ross and others influenced by social ecology. In defending “environmental mimesis,” Buell argues that it is “far healthier for an individual, and for a society, than the arrogance of cyberspace” (114). Buell characterizes Foucauldian analysis as premised on “the inevitable dominance of constructedness,” which he believes is less “productive” than the kind of criticism built on a “theoretical distinction between human constructedness and nonhuman reality” (113). Contrary to social ecologists’ insistence that the earth is mute and their warnings against attempts to imbue it with a personality which speaks for itself, Buell approvingly points to James Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis as a worthy attempt to “bond ecology to ethics” through “personification of the planet” (201). Buell even suggests that it might be necessary to have a “degree of what passes for misanthropy” in order to obtain some distance from anthropocentrism and make the inward turn needed to transform one’s self-consciousness (388).

It is precisely this perspective which worries Andrew Ross and motivates the questions he raises in his also widely influential book *The Chicago Gangster Theory of Life*. Ross would ask Buell in what way cyberspace is “arrogant” and why it should exist in opposition to (rather than simply in addition to) representations of nature?; what does it mean to “extricate art from homocentricism” (161) if art is a human creation?; can a human-authored text ever really encounter natural phenomena “as the environment manifests itself” (219)? Such questions trouble the genealogical dominance of deep ecocriticism.

Questioning the faith of Deep Ecology in the ability of Nature to speak for itself, the dominant concern expressed in *Chicago Gangster Theory* is that Nature will be used as an authority dictating certain social and cultural policies. This insight underlies much of Ross’s analysis of the relationship between the natural and social sciences, technology, and politics. He warns, in particular, that “discourse about scarcity and limitation in the natural world” translates into “calls for a reduction in rights and freedom in our civil society” (12). In other words, Ross is attuned to the ways in which dubious natural science—e.g., sociobiology—generates theories of nature which can provide justification for repressive social arrangements on the false premise that such theories are objectively revealed rather than culturally determined. This social ecological
perspective requires a shift from Buell’s literary analysis of wide open spaces to cultural studies of metropolitan places.

Ross critiques the means by which theories of nature are used to justify what are in fact socio-political decisions in the process of analyzing a stunning variety of cultural phenomena, from the movie *Ghostbusters* and the bombing of the World Trade Center to the Gulf War and the “Chicago Gangster Theory” referred to in the title of his book. This theory refers to Richard Dawkin’s hypothesis that human-kind has evolved a “selfish gene” much like a Chicago gangster would, over time, adapt a “ruthless selfishness” to survive in an amoral world. Ross sees this unwarranted transformation of a metaphorical construction loaded with social assumptions into a supposedly disinterested scientific theory as paradigmatic of the misuse of Nature to justify retrograde social theory (Dawkins argued that labor unrest was a sign of the selfish gene). In the process of proving his thesis that images of nature are used to cover over or falsely explain complex social issues, he examines the role of urban renewal and its metaphors of the “urban frontier” in creating a new “global city of finance capital and its two-tier post-Fordist service sector/professional economy” (113), while critiquing urban ecosystems theory. Ross also finds support for his thesis while analyzing how the “rhetoric of scarcity” and its accompanying image monoculture were used to bestow the mantle of ecological sanctity on the military-media complex during the Gulf War.

Underlying these wide-ranging explorations is Ross’s insistence that local cultural practices are intimately related with economic and political conditions of global proportions. This insight reveals the potential of social ecology-inspired cultural studies at its best. In demonstrating how “ideas that draw upon the authority of nature nearly always have their origins in ideas about society” (15), Ross shows the importance of socio-cultural analysis in getting at the ways we use and abuse nature. This analysis is on display in Ross’s brilliant study of Polynesia, “the birthplace of modern ecological romanticism” (28). He contrasts a knee-jerk environmentalism which sees any disruption of tradition as an assault on the last vestiges of unspoiled nature with a more nuanced analysis of the specific ways in which “tradition” and “nature” are deployed for different purposes. Sometimes, Ross argues, efforts to reclaim “native rights” are strategically useful for combating the corporate exploitation of native environments and indigenous peoples. In other cases, tradition is manipulated by self-interested elites in order to justify their authority and their own exploitative schemes. Ross points out that “a society bound together by a nature philosophy holds no guarantee of ecological well-being if it is governed by a pyramidal social hierarchy that depends upon selec-
tive access to natural resources to maintain its power” (71). Ross de-
flates the romantic notion that all native islanders live in close har-
mony with nature, noting that many Polynesian societies degraded
and even exhausted their environments. But he also points to indig-
enous movements, such as Hawaiian groups appealing to malama 'aina
(reciprocal care for the land), as offering one of the best hopes for so-
cially and environmentally responsible principles of sustainability.
This is a goal which Ross and Buell could agree on. And both
critics believe that this goal will only be realized through a funda-
mental transformation in our relationship to the environment. But
there are fundamental differences in how the two authors, and the
critical genealogies that they represent, reconceptualize our role in
the natural world. Ross refers to the theories of nature in need of
overhauling as ideologies which are manifest in various cultural
productions and the global socio-economic system in which these
productions take part; Buell, on the other hand, speaks of philoso-
phies which must be revised through ecocentric literary criticism
before we can address environmental problems. These divergent
perspectives provide two different versions of ecocriticism. While
Ross provides a cultural studies approach to analyze the socio-po-
litical components of various cultural phenomena, Buell provides
a more traditional critical approach to interpreting the “metaphys-
ics and ethics” of literary representations of nature.

The problem with Buell’s model of ecocriticism is that it fails to
consider that a market-driven economy frames and shapes the ways
in which we appropriate the environment and that raising indi-
vidual consciousness cannot directly counteract these larger forces.
At the same time, Buell points to the problem with the way in which
Ross’s perspective seems to reify Nature, making it just another
tool for human decision-making. As though providing a caution-
ary tale for Ross’s vision of ecotopia, Buell points out that there is a
natural world which, whether or not we can know it in an unmedi-
atated form, does have certain features beyond our comprehension
and control. In other words, a deep ecological perspective can act
as a check on visions of radical social transformations which fail to
take into account the possible abuse of nature not figured into some
versions of social ecology.

For deep ecologists, the dominant androcentric worldview needs
to be transformed at the level of individual consciousness in order to
develop true ecological awareness. For social ecologists, it doesn’t make
sense to speak as though individual consciousness somehow precedes
or escapes from social life. Reading The Environmental Imagination and
Chicago Gangster Theory together, as different voices in the same cul-
tural conversation, might provide a way of reconciling these apparently divergent genealogies. The awakening of an environmental consciousness which Buell argues can happen through literature is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the kind of socio-political analysis Ross insists is needed to guide ecological praxis. However, both perspectives are united in their vision of a society existing in a nonexploitative relationship with the Earth and its inhabitants. Perhaps this shared vision could allow deep social ecology to exist as a productive tension within a repoliticized ecocritical movement.

This is my hope: that the fissure between the terrain of deep and social ecocritics can be bridged if not entirely healed. I have been especially critical of the ways in which most ecocritics have ignored or failed to learn from the insights of Social Ecology because Deep Ecology has so dominated the development of ecocriticism that it has been incapacitated in its analysis of the urban environments in which most of us now live. More than two thirds of the inhabitants of the United States now live in cities and, as Patrick Markee reminds us, “the twenty-first century will dawn on a world in which, for the first time, more people live in urban areas than in the countryside.” Social ecocriticism takes this fact into consideration in its efforts to encompass the terrain of urban environments, and it reminds us that all environments—wild, cultivated, and built—are only approachable through language, community, and culture—a lesson that is needed to counteract the anti-theoretical bias of deep ecocriticism and its fantasy of unmediated contact with Nature. Shifting to a more community and cultural based understanding would not only complete ecocriticism, it would end the fetishization of rural, western, and wilderness spaces that has dominated the field at the expense of urban, eastern, and communal places.

Uniting the dominant and distaff branches of ecocriticism would make the whole movement more capable of engaging in the political, aesthetic, and ethical actions needed not just to preserve but to transform the environments that we inhabit. By overemphasizing and romanticizing distant climes, the influence of Deep Ecology on ecocriticism has too often prevented us from seeing both the beauty and the decay in our own backyards. In a sense, social ecocriticism can help us recall the original mission of Deep Ecology, which was defined by Arne Naess as the effort to extend the ecological movement beyond such issues as “pollution and resource depletion” to “deeper concerns which touch upon principles of diversity, complexity, autonomy, decentralization, symbiosis, egalitarianism, and classlessness” (95). Particularly in the last two in-
stances, these principles tend to dovetail with social ecologists' interests in transforming relations of domination inscribed in the current socio-political arena. In fact, the relation between the two ecologies could be seen as complimentary: Deep Ecology gives rise to the kind of internal moral transformation that Social Ecology hopes to harness for larger institutional change. Bringing together the two branches of ecocriticism that these movements have inspired—two branches which have been shaped by separate grounds, geography, and genealogy—offers the promise of strengthening the whole movement by allowing it to be responsive to Nature in all its manifestations, from the most remote outpost of our globe to Times Square on New Year's Eve.

NOTES

1. The expansion of ecological criticism might, without too much exaggeration, be termed a "population explosion" which challenges the "carrying capacity" of any one academic trying to haul the voluminous publications in the field from library to office. For a helpful bibliography of recent and classic ecological literary criticism, see Glotfelty and Fromm's *The Ecocriticism Reader*. The Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE) publishes occasional bibliographies as well. And each issue of the ASLE journal *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* has a large section devoted to book reviews of ecocritical works.

More generally, Donald Edward Davis's *Ecophilosophy* provides, as the subtitle states, a "field guide to the literature" from Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in the 1960s to efforts in the 1980s to create a "new culture of wholeseness and harmony with Nature" (ix). *Teaching Environmental Literature: Materials, Methods, Resources*, edited by Frederick O. Waage, was the first guide to appear which acknowledged the development of ecocriticism as a "field." The attempt to provide an updated account of "environmental teaching" was undertaken by the 1996 publication of Collett and Karakashian's *Greening the College Curriculum*.

Further evidence of the explosion of interest in issues of culture and environment is provided by the plethora of recently published environmental readers. In addition to *The Ecocriticism Reader*, there are: *Being in the World*, *Constructing Nature*, *The Diversity of Life*, *The Endangered Earth*, *The Environmental Predicament*, *A Forest of Voices*, *This Incomparable Land*, *The Literature of Nature*, *The Norton Book of Nature Writing*, *Reading the Environment*, *Sisters of the Earth*, and *Writing Nature*.

For contemporary references to ecocriticism in the popular press, see, for example, Erik Davis's "It Ain't Easy Being Green: Eco Meets Porno" in the *Voice Literary Supplement*; Jay Parini's "The Greening of the Humanities" in *The New York Times Magazine*, which was attacked by Jonathan Yardley in the *Washington Post*; and Jonathan Collett and Stephen Karakashian's "Turning
Curricula Green” in The Chronicle of Higher Education, which then published Karen J. Winkler’s cover story “Inventing a Field: The Study of Literature About the Environment.”

2. The “classic” works on American pastoralism are Henry Nash Smith’s Virgin Land and Leo Marx’s The Machine in the Garden. The development of “literary ecology” could be traced to Joseph Meeker’s The Comedy of Survival and Yi-Fu Tuan’s Topophilia. Building on this foundation, a “new pastoralism” has been constructed by such popular works of ecocriticism as Neil Evernden’s The Social Creation of Nature, Jonathan Bate’s Romantic Ecology, and a work that is discussed at length in the final section of this essay: Lawrence Buell’s The Environmental Imagination.

3. In addition to Andrew Ross’s work, which is explored in the final section of this essay, other examples of ecocriticism focused on urban environments can be found in Bennett, Bennett and Teague, Cronon, Lukes, and Wright. Special issues of Orion, Terra Nova, and American Book Review have also addressed what the latter calls “urban nature.”

4. In genealogical terms, “distaff” refers to the “secondary” branch of the family descended from the female side as opposed to the “primary” father-to-son inheritance (the “spindle side” in contrast to the “spear side”). I use this term to express my belief that social ecology has not been the primary route through which ecocriticism has been transmitted and that (like a “distaff” branch in a patriarchal culture) it has thus been devalued.

5. Glen Love, for example, reveals this anti-theoretical bias when he claims that ecocriticism is separate from “that devaluing of the real and the consequential which has turned much of literary criticism into what Frederick Crews has called ‘the queen of techniques for overturning common sense’” (“Et” 197).

6. The term “environmental racism” seems to have first been used in the 1987 United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice report Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States, written under the supervision of Benjamin Chavis. The concept of environmental racism arose much earlier than the phrase itself. Robert Gottlieb notes that issues of environmental justice have been debated since the beginning of the Industrial revolution. He points to Jane Addams and her associate Alice Hamilton (author of Industrial Poison in the United States) as precursors to contemporary efforts to analyze environmental racism. The beginning of the modern environmental justice movement is usually traced to the series of protests and demonstrations set off in 1982 by the selection of poor and mostly African American Warren County, North Carolina as the site for a PCB landfill. This incident was closely followed by a 1983 General Accounting Office report which discovered that three out of four hazardous waste landfills in the Southeast United States were located in predominantly Black communities.

7. In the words of Benjamin Chavis, who was then the head of the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, “the idea of civil rights is expanding to include freedom from pollution, and an emphasis on social justice is being added to the idea of environmental protection” (Suro B7). This reconciliation process resulted in part from a response to the complaints by a variety of civil rights groups which were formalized by a letter campaign in
1990 during which hundreds of organizations sent letters to the “Group of Ten” (the ten largest environmental organizations). These letters charged that the environmental movement had “shown little willingness to recognize the legitimacy of or provide support to the struggle to alleviate the poisoning of communities of color . . . [they] have only token involvement of people of color in their operations and policy-making bodies . . . [and] some national environmental groups have taken steps in local communities which have actually been detrimental to the interests of people of color” (Guerrero and Head 11). Over the last few years, the situation has improved as discussions between mainstream environmentalists and civil rights activists have brought the two movements closer together. Now it is not uncommon for a court case challenging an incident of environmental racism to draw upon the combined resources of the ACLU, NAACP, and Sierra Club.

8. See Freudenburg, though he questions the methodology and logic of some of the studies showing more positive environmental attitudes among urban dwellers.

REFERENCES


From Wide Open Spaces to Metropolitan Places


