

REVIEW ESSAYS

Political Environments

KATHERINE F. CHANDLER

A review of Jane Bennett, Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); and Isabelle Stengers, Cosmopolitics I, trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). Cited in the text as VM and CI, respectively.

Following relations between texts and environments, ecocriticism has typically examined how human cultures affect and are affected by the physical world, while at the same time pointing to the political stakes of these issues. In her introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), Cheryll Glotfelty observes that “most ecocritical work shares a common motivation: the troubling awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet’s life support systems.”¹ By reflecting on key historical, aesthetic, and ethical concerns, ecocriticism provides crucial insights into the conceptualization of nature and the political implications of these views.

Addressing ecological issues in this way, most ecocritical texts uphold a distinction between human action and cultural modes of perception, on the one hand, and the material environment, on the other. Even though ecocriticism pursues a dense web of connections that link texts and humans to natures, its political aims tend to focus on the agency of humans and social constructs. Figuring

humans as conquerors of lands, exploiters of natural resources, or even as contemplative subjects moved by the sublime, ecocritics challenge readers to reexamine how certain cultural practices shape human interactions with the natural world. In these accounts, humans are actors, while the environment serves as a physical frame and limit. During the fifteen years following publication of *The Ecocriticism Reader*, approaches considered by ecocritical writers have broadened and expanded considerably; the range and scope of these new tendencies is suggested by this special issue of *Qui Parle*. Nonetheless, both within ecocriticism and in the environmental movement more generally, political action continues to focus on human agency and challenges posed by humans to environmental limits.

In this review I turn to two works at the interdisciplinary edges of ecocriticism, both of which transform this political tack. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, by Jane Bennett, a professor of political theory at John Hopkins University, follows the participation of nonhumans in Western political thought and practices. Drawing on the work of Spinoza, Nietzsche, Thoreau, Darwin, Adorno, and Deleuze, she puts forth a theory that recognizes the role of nonhuman forces in events. Arguing that action can never be confined to a solely human realm, Bennett points to what she calls the “vital power” of materiality. She contends that ecological politics should take up a distributed view of agency that extends beyond human actors. *Cosmopolitics I*, by Isabelle Stengers, a philosopher of science at the Free University of Brussels, transforms the other side of the political framework usually taken up by ecocritics, highlighting the role of science in constituting limits and thus challenging the idea of an already given nature. Drawing on her previous work in the history of physics, she proposes that scientists develop an ecology of practices. Stengers suggests landscapes are constituted through contingent relations between human and nonhuman elements and the practices that make them known, troubling easy distinctions between the natural world and how it is understood. By focusing on knowledge of the physical world, her analysis maintains there are no limits outside politics and, instead, suggests that a central tenet of political ecology would be the criti-

cal examination of the diverse and divergent ecologies of practices that give limits form.

These books propose two corresponding moves to transform current configurations of environmental politics: agency should be broadened to incorporate the participation of nonhumans, while environmental constraints should be analyzed through an ecology that cannot be debated outside the cultural and natural practices from which they emerge. Taking on these themes, the authors connect with recent turns in ecocriticism, yet their projects pursue explicitly political dimensions that would significantly transform the politics of ecocriticism. In what follows I take a closer look at how the authors formulate political ecology and examine the significance of their transformations.

Vibrant Matter

To theorize “the force of things,” Bennett begins with a series of sketches. In “Thing-Power I: Debris,” she writes: “On a sunny Tuesday morning on 4 June in the grate over the storm drain to the Chesapeake Bay in front of Sam’s Bagels on Cold Spring Lane in Baltimore, there was: one large men’s black plastic work glove, one dense mat of oak pollen, one unblemished dead rat, one white plastic bottle cap, one smooth stick of wood” (*VM*, 4). Paying careful attention to what is found in the storm drain, she observes how some of the objects betoken human actions—the efforts of the worker, the success of the rat poisoner, or the litterer’s toss. Beyond the human context, though, she contends that each thing, in its nameless affects, contains its own singularity. Elaborating on Spinoza’s claim that “all things are animate, albeit in different degrees” (*VM*, 5), she points to the vital force found in each thing. Describing her response to the items in the storm drain, she argues that the affective trigger provoked by each thing’s singularity opens one to the sensorial world. Bennett attributes this kind of awareness to Thoreau, who strove “to be surprised by what we see” (*VM*, 5), and observes its affinities with Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology. Yet, in advocating for such a stance, Bennett emphasizes the political goals of this attitude: “This sense of strange

and incomplete commonality with the outside may induce vital materialists to treat nonhumans—animals, plants, earth, even artifacts and commodities—more carefully, more strategically, more ecologically” (VM, 18).

Drawing on the vitality of things, Bennett then turns to questions of agency. While affective bodily responses are the starting point for her theory, she moves beyond singular bodies to develop a conception of action based upon assemblages. Through the work of Spinoza, she observes how bodies relate, writing, “[B]odies enhance their power *in or as a heterogeneous assemblage*. What this suggests for a concept of *agency* is that efficacy or effectivity . . . becomes distributed across an ontologically heterogeneous field” (VM, 23). To develop this theory, she analyzes a power blackout that affected 50 million people in North America in August 2003. From the U.S.-Canada Power Outage Task Force report, she observes how electricity, power plants, transmission wires, Enron, consumers, and the Federal Regulatory Commission all played a role in the power outage. Bennett’s analysis points to the difficulties of attributing this failure to either human or nonhuman causes, observing how both humans and electricity were actors in the blackout. Moreover, she highlights how the results enacted through this assemblage of humans and nonhumans exceed the intentions that enabled its formation. Drawing on the work of Deleuze and Guattari, she elaborates: “Assemblages are not governed by any central head . . . the effects generated by an assemblage are, rather, emergent properties, emergent in that their ability to make something happen . . . is distinct from the sum of the vital force of each materiality considered alone” (VM, 24).

The final part of the book explores political ecologies, considering how diverse configurations of humans and nonhumans fit into democratic practices. Bennett writes: “If human culture is inextricably enmeshed with vibrant, nonhuman agencies, and if human intentionality can be agentic only if accompanied by a vast entourage of nonhumans, then it seems that the appropriate unit of analysis for democratic theory is neither the individual human nor an exclusively human collective but the (ontologically heterogeneous) ‘public’ coalescing around a problem” (VM, 108). As such,

Vibrant Matter proposes a discursive shift from environmentalism to vital materialism in order to more broadly take up the range of political ecologies confronted by publics, pointing to three possible advantages. First, materiality, unlike the environment, is a term that can more easily be distributed between humans and nonhumans. Second, the vitality that animates assemblages and publics alike amplifies their lively, evanescent, and vibratory aspects, disrupting both organicist and mechanistic models of nature. Finally, vital materiality challenges humans to recognize alterity in their own being. “In a world of vibrant matter, it is thus not enough to say we are ‘embodied.’ We are, rather, an *array of bodies*, many different kinds of them in a nested set of biomes” (VM, 113).

In her work, Bennett points to a number of challenges that arise through the theory she develops. Cultural, linguistic, or historic constructivism all appeal to humans as the source of the political, explicitly challenging the notion of thing-power that forms the basis of her theory. And while she recognizes how such works have effectively taken issue with moralistic and oppressive appeals to “nature,” she raises concerns about how these frameworks erase nonhumans. Also, she notes the difficulties of assigning blame, given current modes of governance, based on distributed agency. And even though Bennett takes the charge of vital materialism seriously, its task remains difficult to articulate. “In composing and recomposing the sentences of this book,” she writes, “I have come to see how radical a project it is to think vital materiality. It seems necessary and impossible to rewrite the default grammar of agency” (VM, 119). Thus, *Vibrant Matter*’s final concerns are those that most explicitly highlight its connection to ecocriticism, questioning how language can serve as a link between humans and nonhumans rather than a wedge that drives them into separate spheres.

Bennett’s proposals are innovative, and while in the end she may raise more questions than she can offer answers to, *Vibrant Matter* is a text ripe with possibilities. The strength of the work is its careful treatment of nonhumans as vital forces and the numerous examples employed to develop a political ecology of things. In this way, Bennett highlights how nonhumans partake in political action and draws attention to how publics might be transformed were

nonhumans more explicitly recognized as a part of democratic practices. She points to the role of language in developing publics to suggest that a task for political ecology is recognizing the various voices found in a range of materials. Ecocriticism might also be a place to further develop this project.

Cosmopolitics I

Stengers's text begins at the opposite pole, taking up how the material world is made. While this approach is suggestive of the constructivism that Bennett questions, *Cosmopolitics I* reformulates the perceived dichotomy between things and ideas, arguing that matter and knowledge are intertwined through practices. To pursue this argument, Stengers examines the history of physics, layering together competing modes of intelligibility to show how the physical world is informed by multiple, competing ecologies that she describes as landscapes. Stengers challenges totalizing views of the physical world and suggests that a complex political ecology is always present in any landscape. Of this project (which appeared in seven brief volumes in French), Stengers writes: "Step by step, I have attempted to bring into existence seven problematic landscapes, seven attempts at creating consistency where there is currently only confrontation . . . in each case, I tried to address the practices from which knowledge evolves, based on the constraints imposed by the uncertainties they introduce and their corresponding obligations" (*CI*, vii). *Cosmopolitics I* contains the first three landscapes; the next four will be published next year in *Cosmopolitics II*. In what follows I focus on how Stengers develops an ecology of practices and point to some of its implications for ecocriticism. As such, I sidestep the specifics that inform her thorough and careful reworking of the history of physics.

Stengers employs the term *ecology* by insisting on its dual significance in scientific and political registers; she argues that the two are necessarily linked. "The only singularity of political ecology is to *explicitly* assert, as a problem, the inseparable relation between values and the construction of relationships within a world that can always be deciphered in terms of values and relations"

(*CI*, 33). This quote shows how for Stengers, scientific practices of knowing are enmeshed with political practices of valuing. To make something intelligible—that is, to name, to quantify, to account for—is never merely a matter of representing reality (i.e., science); it is also a practice of giving value (i.e., politics). The most significant consequence of such a view is that it troubles the status of facts, as well as the stability of any framework used to establish and maintain consensus. “Ecology is, then,” Stengers proposes, “the science of multiplicities, disparate causalities, and unintentional creations of meaning” (*CI*, 34). She suggests that ecologies are created through processes of reciprocal capture, which can take up one of two modes of relationality. In current ecological practices, reciprocal capture might be described as a kind of parasitism, obfuscating the dual significance of relations involved. In such an ecology, the parasite, either matter or value, depending on whether the context is described as scientific or political, exists through the host’s ignorance, denying the existence of the parasite to which it is linked. The model Stengers advocates, on the other hand, is based on symbiosis: “each of the beings co-invented by the relationship of reciprocal capture has an interest, if it is to continue its existence, in seeing the other maintain its existence” (*CI*, 36). Facts and values, language and material, humans and nonhumans, politics and science lose the oppositional force they might have had as parasites of each other. Instead, reciprocal capture puts forth what Stengers describes as a strong constructivist stance, arguing that identities are established through reciprocal relations, as opposed to the weaker view, which might describe what is created as mere convention.

“The constructivist ambition does not require—quite the contrary—that we yield to the monotonous refrain ‘it *is only* a construction’” (*CI*, 38). Because nothing transcends the status of constructions, Stengers proposes a more careful examination of how ecologies of practices both constitute themselves as and adapt themselves to realities that register scientifically and politically. As discussed above, ecologies are relations formed through reciprocal capture, which Stengers forms into landscapes. An ecology of practices also implies constraints and indicates an ongoing process

of transformation. “Here, the notion of constraint has nothing to do with a limitation, ban, or imperative that would come from outside,” Stengers writes, “and everything to do with the creation of values I associate with the event of reciprocal capture” (*CI*, 42). An identity within an ecology of practices becomes stable through requirements and obligations. What is taken as inside or outside a given set of practices is relational; as such, Stengers’s critical position is to interrogate intersections between ecologies of practices and their constraints. She observes: “The manner in which limits are presented is a part of their identity, like the production of all relations. For that reason it is the target, par excellence, of strategies of power, which need to smooth over differences” (*CI*, 47). *Cosmopolitics I* consequently aims in the opposite direction, highlighting the diversity of constraints employed by ecologies of practices and the varied topologies they form. “For each practice, it is on the basis of the definition of what is designated as ‘reality’ and what will be asserted as ‘value’ that the scope, implications, and obligations [of the landscape] can be specified” (*CI*, 53). In this manner *Cosmopolitics I* questions identities through landscapes and explores adaptations through the creation of facts and values, on the one hand, and constraints, established by requirements and obligations, on the other.

Cosmopolitics I argues that a key task for political ecology is working through multiple ecologies of practices to more carefully render the various topologies constituted. I have positioned the work as a reformulation of environmental politics, exploring how it transforms the idea of material limits. Stengers fundamentally transforms totalizing ideas of “the universe,” “the environment” or “the Earth.” In her view, each concept exists in a topography and is dependent upon reciprocal capture with other aspects; Stengers’s landscapes are a composition of language, material, humans, nonhumans, facts, values, science, and politics. Each element becomes intelligible only through an ecology of practices, specific in scope. The “universe,” for example, cannot be imagined as separate from its designation by physicists and the nonhumans that establish it as such; moreover, diverse groups of human physi-

cists and nonhumans will compose the “universe” through varied and competing arrangements, assembling facts and values to form different requirements and obligations. Constraints are therefore embedded in the practices that create them. Limits are not outside ecologies of practices and, instead, are formed through them, always already contained in the landscape itself. Politically, this suggests that environmentalists cannot rely on the absolute, natural limits of “the environment” to put forth claims; rather, their practices should promote careful regard for the diverse, competing interests that form various “environmental” landscapes. Observing how requirements and obligations are made through ecologies of practices, ecological politics would become less about interventions by humans to environments and more concerned with their mutual adaptation.

Ecocritics and environmentalists alike might rightly be wary of such an approach to politics, as it destabilizes any reference to the natural world and significantly revises how authority about the “universe,” “nature,” or “the environment” is conceived. Yet, Stengers writes, “Ecological practice (political in the broad sense) is then related to the production of values. But those values, modes of evaluation and meanings do not transcend the situation in question. They are about the production of *new relations that are added* to a situation already produced by a multiplicity of relations” (*CI*, 33). With this in mind, one might ask how ecocriticism could be folded into ecologies of practices, and what adaptations it might propose. In particular, one might ask how the literary, artistic, and aesthetic dimensions of the environment further complicate and diversify the landscapes Stengers forms. Taking seriously the idea that limits are always constituted through practices, ecocritics might show how the overlap between political and scientific frameworks also includes a dimension composed through literary and artistic forms. This is suggested by the term *landscape* itself, which carries with it an aesthetic tradition that could add further depth and complexity to Stengers’s considerations. The challenge for political ecology may be to show how practices of reciprocal capture and constraint implicate humans and nonhumans alike in

landscapes that are simultaneously political, ecological, and aesthetic, emphasizing how dynamic relations give rise to intersecting spheres of action and limitation.

Note

1. Cheryll Glotfelty, "Introduction: Literary Studies in the Age of Environmental Crisis," in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), xx.