

# Phaedra C. Pezzullo

## OVERTURE

### The most complicated word

We need different ideas because we need different relationships.  
(Williams 1980, p. 85)

But you know, grandson, this world is fragile.  
(Silko 1977, p. 35)

And when nature is heard as nonsense, (its) music will sound through,  
unhampered. Again, nature will be heard.  
(Minh-ha 1996, p. 102)

'Nature,' or to what I will refer more broadly as 'the environment,' is perhaps most misunderstood as a static place, somewhere 'out there,' somehow beyond or separated from the practices of everyday life. All too often, when the environment is reduced to a place, we tend to assume it signifies the country, and forget it also refers to the city. We imply that it is static, and not dynamic. We take it for granted, and turn our attention elsewhere. Under industrial, colonial, developmental, and other arrogant influences unwilling to appreciate its fragility or to listen to its complex composition, the environment often falls prey to what Renaldo Rosaldo (1989) calls an 'imperialist nostalgia,' in which 'people destroy their environment and then worship nature' (p. 108).

The environment, of course, is neither pure nor obsolete. Rather, it both exceeds the cultural and invokes a performative, heterogeneous discourse that shapes our entire lives. More than a location, *the environment is what it does* materially and symbolically. Yes, it is where we stand and where we lie down; however, it also heats and cools us. It provides us light at night. It fuels our cars, buses, trains, and airplanes. It permeates every pore of our flesh, DNA strand in our genetic make up, and identity written on and through our bodies. It involves processes with and without us that we still do not – and may never – comprehend.

Over a decade ago in this journal, an issue dedicated to environmental matters was edited by Jody Berland and Jennifer Daryl Slack, signaling the challenging array of scholarly research approaches, critical perspectives, and political stakes involved in exploring this field of research by engaging a range of themes, such as community, technology, water, ecofeminism, Earth Day, the weather, and computer simulations of global warming.<sup>1</sup> Since then, a small handful of cultural studies scholars has provided rich insights into how we might continue to identify, interpret, and intervene within and on behalf of the environment. Eschewing universal abstractions and skeptical of grand proclamations, these creative endeavors tend to be grounded in specific cultural and ecological contexts, while acknowledging that such perspectives shift, like ecosystems themselves, over time and space. Perhaps the most notable indicator of change has been the introduction of 'the environment' itself into the lexicon of cultural studies. For example, in *Keywords*, Raymond Williams' (1976) includes an entry on 'nature' and astutely observes, more than culture itself, 'Nature is the most complicated word in the [English] language' (p. 219). Three decades later, in the revised text, *New Keywords*, the term 'nature' (that notably cites Williams' earlier claim) is accompanied by a separate entry by Jennifer Daryl Slack (2005) on 'environment/ecology,' one that further complicates how these terms 'developed to assert different conceptions of separation and connection' (p. 106).<sup>2</sup>

Yet, for the most part, the environment remains marginalized within cultural studies publications, conferences, and conversations. Put more bluntly, it is unclear whether or not cultural studies actually is ready or equipped to engage the environment. As Jody Berland (unpublished address 2005) suggests, there seem to be at least three fundamental limitations of cultural studies – as some still currently practice it – that might suggest the roots of this reluctance: (1) an emphasis on the logic of representation that reinforces a dualism between nature and culture; (2) a resistance to critiquing consumption in any context; and (3) a resilient legacy from the Sokal affair and 'science wars' that continues to make some of us fear engaging and border-crossing into questions of science.<sup>3</sup> Further, I would add two points. First, it is telling that cultural studies scholars are more likely to publish criticisms about environmental movements or struggles than we are to take seriously environmental critiques. For me, at least, it is disappointing and disconcerting when cultural studies practitioners tend to dis-articulate the project of cultural studies from environmental politics, rather than making linkages and alliances between the two. Second, the environment stubbornly appears ghettoized in cultural studies, the purview of only those of us who identify as environmentalists or who make the environment one of our primary areas of research – as if one can or should talk about topics such as

popular culture, technology, government policy, or global flows without mentioning environmental dimensions as part of the analysis. Like foundational categories such as identity, economics, and historical context, the environment is and should be considered relevant to any research done in the name of 'cultural studies.'<sup>4</sup>

Given this unfortunate lack of a robust response to the last special issue on the environment in this journal, it seems timely once again to revisit and to re-imagine these research trajectories, in order to avoid stagnating in our evasion of environmental matters and risking the political and theoretical integrity of the practice of cultural studies itself. As such, this volume of *Cultural Studies* wishes to animate, rather than delimit our appreciation of the environment as vital to the past, present, and future of cultural studies.

Despite calls to the contrary in the US, this collection of international voices testifies that a eulogy for environmental movements and the environment itself is vastly premature and based on a narrow definition of each. Evidence of the vitality of the environment and those who speak for it may be found in the traces of local and transnational practices across the globe, suggesting both the possibilities and the limitations of language and human agency. As such, each contribution illustrates an appreciation of the dynamic, palpable, and significant ways the environment permeates culture (and vice versa), as well as a collective commitment to the ways that cultural studies has more to offer – and to learn from – taking environmental matters to heart. Motivated by specific contexts and practices, each articulates the environment as only one factor driving her analysis. In other words, although the environment is vital to their practice of cultural studies, each argues how the environment is connected with broader cultural, political, and ethical concerns, such as popular practices, marginalized identities, and the project of cultural studies itself. Overall, they offer a diverse – and, hopefully, inspiring – range of more ethical and sustainable possibilities within and beyond cultural studies.

As an overture for this provocative collection of voices, I offer the following 'brief excursions' (Pollock 1998) or riffs echoing some more familiar melodies and dropping hints of some notes of the harmonies just beginning to be heard in an attempt to invoke the kinetic and consequential spirit I have been describing.

*Environments spatialize and temporalize.* Multiple and sometimes contradictory social relations. Materially constituted and symbolically operating. Geographically-bound and politically-infused (Massey 1994). Biotic and abiotic ways of operating. Territories created by bird songs (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Communication routes established by beavers and cod fish (Innis 1930, 1940).

Articulations of identity (always are) constituted *in situ*. Even when, as Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) writes, some of us become turtles, voluntarily or involuntarily carrying 'home' on our backs (p. 43). In these contact zones, technological 'fixes' sometimes fail and unstable frontiers often appear simultaneously tangible and mystical.

*Environments blur boundaries.* When our tongues taste cocoa melting from the heat of our mouths. When our noses smell fresh peaches and mangos at the market. When our necks feel a chill on a winter's day. When our eyes dwell on a photograph of a cat we have not met – and we smile. When our ears hear a horse whisper to us. When we find ourselves in the *intermezzo* of life (Minh-ha 1996) – and also in the *crescendos* and the *diminuendos*. When we imagine local/global communities – including extraterrestrial ones. When norms are queered. False binaries and dualistic borders are obscured and complicated by rhizomes, cyborgs, and actor networks.

*Environments elude.* In those moments when we desperately and, sometimes, compulsively use Doppler radar to attempt to predict the weather or Global Information Systems to try to track and to forecast forest fires. In the glimpse of a bird quickly flying out of our line of sight. In our own bodies when we attempt to conceive a child and discover human-made toxins have polluted our breast milk and created our low sperm counts. And in the illnesses like SARS, mad cow disease, and avian flu, which plague us suddenly and unexpectedly – though undoubtedly. Like the green fire extinguishing in a dying wolf's eyes or the sense of time a mountain must know (Leopold 1949), it reminds those of us who will listen how relatively fleeting and fragile our own existence is.

*Environments charm.* As sure as the seasons change, tides ebb and wane, blossoms bloom, and winds whisper through trees. As long as our thirsts are quenched, our stomachs filled, and our homes are built. As soon as we inhale and exhale, dress and undress. We find its movements and colors indispensable to the magic and poetics of our lives. Speaking to our many needs and desires, we relish the ways it can 'fuse function, feeling, and meaning' (Spirn 1998, p. 3).

*Environments nourish.* Inspiring spiritual refuge and rejuvenation through sacred mountains, sublime canyons, or calming bodies of water. Promising the freedom to roam, climb, swim, dance, relax, and tour. Redefining economic discourse in our everyday experiences with gardens, parks, farms, homes, jobs, and schools. Providing materials to build everything from

skyscrapers to paper. Fostering popular articulations to entertain and to educate us across every media technology from board games (Opel 2002) to IMAX (Acland 1998). Whether inspiring grotesque projections of the unfamiliar future or picturesque nostalgic fantasies, we are captivated by the affective and intimate intensity of the environment. This is why a silent spring is so shocking to imagine.

*Environments kill.* Tsunamis drown. Hurricanes devastate. Earthquakes demolish. Lead paint deforms. Pesticides destroy. Species die. People murder. Corporations pollute. Accidents – even nuclear ones – happen. Environmental movements and discourses have been articulated to racist agendas (Ross 1994, 1996, 1998, Cronon 1996, Hage 1998, Morris 1998, Moore *et al.* 2003), economically elitist politics (Helvarg 2004, Kennedy 2004), individualized politics at the expense of structural change (Grossberg 1992, Davis 1997), and essentialist notions of sex, gender, and sexuality (Domosh & Seager 2001, Massey 1994, Stabile 1994). Neo-conservatives relish opportunities to frame these hurtful and divisive linkages as universal, necessary, and inevitable. The damage, at times, feels irreparable.

*Environments provoke.* Governments to war. Authors to write. Activists to protest. Directors to film. Musicians to sing. Engineers to build. Scientists to experiment. People to consume. These acts are uneven and often unequal. Economically. Nationally. Globally. Questions arise. How can we enact long overdue global treaties to prevent further damage from global warming? What if we stopped placing the disproportionate burden of solid and hazardous waste on indigenous, people of color, and poor communities? When will drinkable water and breathable air become appreciated as human rights and not privileges? Is Wangari Maathai's honor of receiving the Nobel Peace Prize a sign that the world is beginning to recognize the link between sustainable environments and democratic movements? Questions continue.

*Environments haunt.* Our memories. With smells. With sounds. With tastes. With events. Our bodies. In scars. In growth. In pain. In love. Our mattering maps. Of who we once were. Of who we are. Of who we want to be. And, most certainly, (in) the pages that follow . . .

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anticipation of their own work in the summer of 2005 and then, in turn, edited again in the summer of 2006 to help foster linkages between the diverse voices gathered here.

## Notes

- 1 *Cultural Studies*, volume 8, issue 1, 1994. That same year, another noteworthy special issue dedicated to the environment was published: *Australian Journal of Communication*, volume 1, issue 3, 1994.
- 2 I favor the term 'environment' because it is more encompassing and less alienating than 'nature,' admitting to the inextricable linkage between people and the Earth. Arturo Escobar (1995) rightly notes, however, that there is a risk in this move in so far as, taken to an extreme degree, the environmental turn may become distorted as a justification for an anthropocentric view of agency and contribute to a belief in nature merely as a passive 'appendage to the environment' (p. 196).
- 3 Jody Berland, 'What is environmental cultural studies?,' Cultural Environmental Studies Symposium, York University, unpublished address 2005, cited with permission from author.
- 4 In this sense, I read Jennifer Daryl Slack and Laurie Anne Whitt's (1992) call for developing a more specialized 'ecoculturalist theoretical perspective' as an invitation to transform how we appreciate and articulate the broader project of cultural studies (as they do, from the historical roots until today), rather than as an attempt to develop a specialized branch that can continue to be marginalized and taken-for-granted. Slack revisits and embellishes on this point in her essay published in this volume, adding five points of her own to this overture's working list of why the environment remains far too marginalized in cultural studies.

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