Material Ecocriticism and Changing Natures

Serpil Oppermann, Professor, Department of English, Hacettepe University, Ankara, Turkey.
Serenella Iovino, Professor, Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, University of Turin, Turin, Italy.

Inspired by recent research in physical and social sciences, the new materialist paradigm proposes to see matter in terms of its agentic capacity and meanings. Matter, as Karen Barad says, is not a blank slate but a process in which discursive practices and material formations are mutually implicated. Situated in this conceptual horizon, material ecocriticism asks us to rethink the questions of agency, text, narrativity, and communication. This approach proposes to rework the human-nonhuman relations in ways that take into account matter’s “inherent creativity” (Bennett), nature’s agentic expressions and performative enactments.

The main conceptual tenet of material ecocriticism, the agency of matter, has vast implications on the ideas of narrativity and text. If matter is agentic and endowed with meanings, every material formation is “telling,” and therefore can be the object of a critical analysis aimed at discovering its stories and its place in a “choreography of becoming” (Coole and Frost). In other words, taking matter as a text, material ecocriticism investigates the narrative potentialities of reality as they are visible in bodies, landscapes, bacteria, electric grids, atoms, cells, waste, nuclear sites, oceanic plastic, etc.

This seminar will explore 1) the agency of matter, 2) the emergent interplays between the human and the nonhuman, also considered in posthumanist terms, 3) and the material-discursive dynamics that influence deeply the ideas of narrativity and text. These issues are important in discussing the changing concepts of nature and the environment.

Seminar papers and informed discussions will focus and build on the following questions:

1. What is “narrative agency,” and how does agentic matter disclose its narratives?
2. How do we read the stories that emerge from the myriad expressions of natural and material formations, such as bodies, species, toxic elements, landscapes, weather patterns, atoms, cells, bacteria, etc.?
3. Does biosemiotics offer a legitimate account of these stories?
4. What new ethical insights can material ecocriticism hope to offer?
5. How does a reconfiguration of matter’s dynamics combine with issues of posthumanism?

In this seminar we will use short videos as examples and ask the participants to respond in light of the recommended readings below:


Seminar leaders Serpil Oppermann and Serenella Iovino are co-editing *Material Ecocriticism* (Indiana University Press, forthcoming), and have co-authored “Material Ecocriticism: Materiality, Agency, and Models of Narrativity” (*Ecozon@* 3.1 (2012): 75-91, as well as “Theorizing Material Ecocriticism: A Diptych” *ISLE*: Special Cluster, 2012). For more information, please visit their pages at academia.edu: [http://hacettepe.academia.edu/SerpilOppermann](http://hacettepe.academia.edu/SerpilOppermann) and [www.unito.academia.edu/serenellaiovino](http://www.unito.academia.edu/serenellaiovino)

To pre-register for this workshop, please contact Greta Gaard: greta.gaard@uwrf.edu