Relations, Ethics, and Storytelling: On Ecology without Culture

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An Interview with Christine Marran, *University of Minnesota*
Interviewers: Lee Mandelo and Abby Rudolph, *University of Kentucky*

Christine Marran is a Professor of Japanese Literature and Cultural Studies at the University of Minnesota and Chair of the Department of Asian Languages and Literatures. Her current research lies within the disciplinary frame of ecocriticism. Her most recent book, Ecology Without Culture *(University of Minnesota Press, 2017) argues that environmental thinking requires a critique of culture. Introducing her concepts of the "biotrope," "ethnic environmentalism," and "obligatory storytelling," Marran shows how cultural ideas, which work at a humanistic scale usually toward human interest, can impede our ability to speak about the more-than-human world. Through discussion of texts about industrial modernity, her new materialist approach illustrates how ecocriticism can account for things smaller and greater than a selective humanist "we" only if it takes a critical position on cultural exceptionalism.*

Abby Rudolph (AR): *We just read* Ecology Without Culture *in our social theory seminar. Can you talk us through what led you to this book? How did you get to this point in your scholarly career and your inquiry?*

Christine Marran (CM): Yeah, I think there were probably two trajectories. The first was that I became familiar with the work of Michiko Ishimure, and I noticed that she never ever used the word Japan. For her, Japan as an entity didn't exist as anything other than a sort of capitalist corporate entity. And that got me thinking about how the nation-state can't really address certain formulations of communities—especially communities that are tied to the environment, whether it's through toxins, or because of certain geographies, or maybe even literary genealogies, and so on. These cannot be expressed through the form of the nation state.

So that's where I got this idea of ecology without culture. And at the same time, Timothy Martin had come out with this book a little bit earlier, *Ecology Without Nature*. For me, while I understand the point of that book, which is to say that "nature" as a concept is problematic—he points out how basically this Anglophone literature-based concept of nature is a romantic one that provides a false sense of what our environment looks like—I still felt that it was important to keep the concept of nature, the environment, and the material world in the room. I think those would be the two primary thoughts in my head as I was working through "ecology without culture."

But then culture for me grew to be larger than that, to be something associated with humanistic thinking and human values and culture for humanity. So, I just wanted to add that piece in the book to suggest that what we can *also* be talking about is cultural humanism as this thing that you need to rethink, in order to bring the agencies and interests of the material world to the fore.

Lee Mandelo (LM): *I'm fascinated by that maneuver of de-centering the image of culture, and by the materiality of cultural texts. You say matter is always storied and storytelling requires*

matter. What drew you to looking at that simultaneity? Can we keep building on that question of the image of culture versus material culture?

CM: Elizabeth Grosz's concept that we have bio-diversity in the world and that should inform our understanding that we have diversity within culture is helpful for that—her critique of logocentrism, patriarchy, and so on. But rather than say the culture mirrors biodiversity in the world, I'm interested in the way in which the material world gets used to push a particular image of culture, the way that the material world gets activated to solidify certain ways of knowing about a group of people or a nation state.

The example in the book is of Imperial Japan and the image of it as this very active, geothermal, volcanic, powerful nation that physically makes their imperialist endeavors—you know, their energetic movement outward into Asia, makes sense. We have alchemists of the time writing about this. So that's why, for me, it's not just about recognizing that we need to talk better towards the material world—its nonhuman denizens and so on—but, more than that, to show how it gets motivated, activated toward ways of thinking about being that are actually quite narrow.

AR: *That reminds me of the way that Appalachian culture has often been thought of as this siloed monoculture that is static and preserved, partially because it exists in a mountainous region. The idea is that since Appalachian people couldn't get out and other people couldn't get in, they just stayed the same, and they represent this "pure" settler heritage. Of course, that's a stereotype and does not capture the complexity of Appalachian cultures, but when geography and landscape is used to support stereotypes, they are given a kind of scientific validity.*

CM: Yes, that's a perfect example. I mean, it's not to deny that there aren't actual material reasons for why people live the way they do in a particular place—maybe in terms of what they eat, or how they build houses, or different religious thought that might emerge—but it really does bear, I think, looking at the ways in which that geography can be a handmaiden to producing certain notions about people moving. Just keep toggling back and forth.

AR: *Our seminar is involved in an ongoing discussion of both the possibilities that post-humanism provides and the limits of post-humanism, or the ways that it might be limiting when applied in certain ways. So when you call for an "approach that accounts for things smaller and greater than a selective humanist 'we,' which is always multiple and contradictory by virtue of so many things like accessibility to resources, economic disparities, gender inequalities and so on […] even if discourses of ecological totalities at the scale of planet purport to describe how we are all in this together, we know that we're not," to what extent do you feel that this project is related to post-humanism?*

CM: All right, wow! Yeah, that's a big question. I was just reading—I want to say Hellman and Alaimo, and their feminist critique of post-humanism, literally three days ago in our seminar. It hard, I think, to imagine that we're in a post-human world by virtue of the fact that still so much of what we do emerges out of humanistic thinking. So, let me ask a question: what is post humanism in this context? How should I be thinking about post-humanism, because there's so many different trajectories.

LM: *We have been thinking of it as a critical framework and that can facilitate a movement away from, or be critical of, Enlightenment humanist ideals and bifurcations.*

CM: Post-Enlightenment thinking is helpful for me to think about, because Enlightenment modernity is based in the notion of that we [humans] can understand the world through logic and rationalism. We have this Cartesian dualism of body versus mind at stake under Enlightenment humanism—and it's a fairly rigid way of thinking about who or what is/has mind. It limits the possibility of what we can call "mind" for the more-than-human world. Under enlightenment humanism, the environment is treated, as many have written, as a kind of banal backdrop, a place of resources.

I think Horkheimer and Adorno talking about the Enlightenment producing a kind of *myth* is exactly right: it produces this myth that science and rationalism and so on is going to get us exactly where we need to go. So, in that case, post-Enlightenment modernity, which I think we're calling post-humanism, is an opportunity to put all of that in question and to be skeptical about all that. It invites us to be skeptical about and to historicize science, historicize the stakes of science; science now it becomes a discourse. It allows us an opportunity to overcome that Cartesian dualism and allows us to think of the more-than-human world as more than backdrop for human activities and successes. In that sense, I think we could use the framework of post-humanism. I tend not to use that term, because I haven't talked as much about A.I. and technology, and I think once you get to thinking about the post-human, you really need to incorporate technology, A.I. prosthetics, all these things that we do to produce the human body as more than it is under Enlightenment humanism. And so that's why I tend not to use the word post-humanism.

Right now, where I am in my work is in this sort of critical interpretation of Enlightenment modernity—thinking about the material world, and toxins, and where we live, and less about technology. But, somebody like Rosi Braidotti is really great for thinking about and thinking through technology. Isabelle Stengers is really great for a critique of science studies and our deep trust in the scientific discourses that a post-Enlightenment modernity perspective would ask us to question.

AR: *So in that way post-humanism might be an ally of post-colonialism and other critical frameworks that trouble Enlightenment modernity, and it can be in conversation with those other theories, not separate from them.*

CM: Yeah, I think we still don't have a strong criticism of Enlightenment modernity that is compelling on a larger scale, given that we still deeply instrumentalize the material world toward human endeavors. And that instrumentalization is very deep part of Enlightenment that stays with us. When I'm talking with this Japanese friend of mine about this who's read a lot, he's always like, dude, Diderot, you know?

So, the question of when Enlightenment modernity begins, and whether we can find a similar way of thinking that I'm talking about now in the early modern context, is a very interesting question. But I still feel like we have to work through what has been bequeathed us in

industrial modernity and talk back to that, rather than just remember that we may have had other ways of representing the more-than-human world in early modernity. We're in a position where we need to be critical of what directly proceeds us or is in our own world with regard to our notions about human progress, progressivism, and that sort of thing.

LM: *That draws me to the work fiction culture does. In the chapter on "obligate storytelling," I was struck by the focus on relations that you illustrate, particularly in Ishimure's and LeGuin's work and relationality with a larger world. Would you speak a bit more about what you see as the contemporary importance of building those connections between ethics, relationality, and storytelling?*

CM: Right—relations, ethics and storytelling. I mean, certainly we don't want to tell the storyteller how to tell a story. At the same time, I don't think Aitav Gauche is wrong when he says the Victorian novel caused climate change. There's a way in which we can speak about a world in which you live that promotes certain ways of interpreting the environment, broadly conceived, and the more-than-human world.

For me as a literary critic, the point isn't to criticize those who don't recognize that fact or who continue to write in ways that are indebted to replicating the world as we're currently living in it under industrial modernity. The point is to look at literature and see if there aren't ways that we can help bring out the parts of writing that function to help us see the agency of the more-than-human world—these things in the world that we don't see attended to as much, I think, in literary criticism. So, for example the recent or prize winner, *The Overstory* by Richard Powers, is really trying to produce agency for trees.

You know, what does that narrative form look like? And as a critic or a reader, how do we interpret that and bring that to the fore in our own research and scholarship?

[Due to a technical error, the conclusion of our interview was unable to be transcribed. We thank Dr. Marran for her time and efforts with the social theory students.]