Transversal Ecocritical Praxis – An Interview with Patrick Murphy

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Dr. Patrick D. Murphy is a Professor and Chair of the Department of English at the University of Central Florida. He has authored *Ecocritical Explorations in Literary and Cultural Studies* (2009), *Farther Afield in the Study of Nature Oriented Literature* (2000), *A Place for Wayfaring: The Poetry and Prose of Gary Snyder* (2000), and *Literature, Nature, and Other: Ecofeminist Critiques* (1995). He has also edited or co-edited such books as *The Literature of Nature: An International Sourcebook* (1998) and *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism and Pedagogy* (1998). He is the founding editor of *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies Literature and Environment*. His ecocritical work has been translated into Chinese, Danish, Japanese, Korean, and Spanish. Frame conducted an interview with Murphy to learn more about his new book, *Transversal Ecocritical Praxis* (2013), and to discuss with him the field of ecocriticism in general.

Considering the vast array of literature on ecocriticism, and the great variety of definitions employed, could you perhaps explain what ecocriticism comprises according to you?

I see two ways to approach answering this question. The first is to identify my sense of the term, which necessarily is influenced by the second, which is to describe the historical development of the field, but they are quite intertwined actually. Whatever was going on elsewhere in the world at the time, I had no sense in literary studies in the U.S. of a movement, of what could be called an "-ism," when I began graduate school in English in 1981. There was American Studies, which had a strong regional and place emphasis to it, and some incipient attention to nature, but more as landscape than environment or ecosystem. There were people teaching courses on place and space, nature writing, and such, and there were individual books that had been out for a while, such as Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden*. But my 1983 M.A. thesis on Gary Snyder and Wendell Berry was titled *A Quest for Place*, and the word "ecocriticism" does not appear in it. I used the term "ecological poets," but without any clear definition of it in the way that Leonard Scigaj would later develop it. Lawrence Buell wasn't seen at that time as an ecocritic but an early Americanist scholar of Emerson and Thoreau, for instance.

It seemed to me that two strands were coming together, an interest in nature in literature and a renewed interest in literary nonfiction, but not much was happening with fiction and poetry, except maybe attention to canonical figures. I was mainly interested in poetry and always had science fiction in the back of my mind. When I went up to UC Davis from Los Angeles, the faculty was interested in my attention to Snyder, as an individual writer and not as a representative figure in an ecocritical movement. And I was interested in Snyder and Berry because of environmental issues, not "nature" in some general or symbolic way. Although I published two articles out of my M.A. thesis, my sense of being an ecocritic, maybe even before I had that term in mind, occurred when I wrote my paper on Gaia imagery in poets by male authors, which I didn't publish in a literary journal but in *Environmental Ethics*. So, for me ecocriticism has never been a study of representations of nature in literature, although I think that forms part of ecocriticism, but it has always been a thematic, philosophical, and ethical concern. And not just with thematic orientations of writers, but also with calls to action, representations of alternative ways of living and critiques of the current mainstream ways of living.

So, ecocriticism is a movement of literary analysis with a wide range of emphases and orientations that takes the human/rest-of-nature relationship as always a central concern. That concern need not be a thematic one, however, but can be stylistic and formalistic as well. The focus of study is not limited by historical period, genre, or mode of representation, but critics need to be attentive to avoiding anachronistic claims about scientific sensibilities of ecology when viewing literature of earlier historical periods. And any ecocritical orientation in literary analysis has to show some sense of environmental and ecological realities.

As you explained in answer to the previous question, you see ecocriticism as a diverse field addressing a wide array of topics and employing a wide array of orientations. In your recently published book *Transversal Ecocritical Praxis*, however, you do seem to argue for a shared methodological groundwork for ecocriticism. Could you expand on this new methodological groundwork and its key concepts of "transversality" and "praxis"?

As I indicate in the introduction, I turn to Hannah Arendt, Hwa Yol Jung and, through him, Calvin Schrag to get to this term. I think it helps to articulate an activity in which many ecocritics are already engaged, but without a term and a clarification of the concept there is no way to define and make systematic such work. The first point is that the idea of the transversal interdicts tendencies toward universalist expectations and prescriptive poetics. Not every literary work or cultural phenomenon is equally amenable to the same theoretical orientation

as other works and phenomena. So, transversal is intended to encourage readers and critics to ask what kinds of approaches a literary work or cultural phenomenon is calling on us to take toward it before we begin interpreting it. There is the old saying in the U.S. that when you only have a hammer, everything looks like a nail. When a critic only has one theory to deploy or one disciplinary knowledge base on which to rely, then he is limited to banging away at every type of text, regardless of the particularities of that text. Here, Bakhtin's emphasis on architectonics is useful as a counterweight to genre classification. Architectonics focuses on the particularities of the structure of an individual work, thereby encouraging critics to view the uniqueness or distinctiveness of the text at hand, rather than seeking to gloss over difference as a result of genre classification. The field of postcolonial studies has stridently argued this point very productively in terms of how cultural particularities shape a work in ways not evident to a reader from another culture, who might not recognize, say, the thematic significance of classical Indian music in a novel by Indra Sinha, or might miss the symbolism of certain tree species in an African or Maori novel, or matrilineal kinship ties in a Native American story. There has been, for instance, the mislabelling of certain supernatural representations, what some spiritual ecofeminists such as Charlene Spretnak might term the "ultranatural," in Native American fiction as magical realism, when that is actually a specific practice of a set of Latin American novelists, such as Carlos Fuentes, to evade censorship. One is a representation of native spiritual beliefs, as in the fiction and nonfiction of Linda Hogan, and the other is a politically motivated literary style. Certainly, that distinction is relevant to ecocritical analyses of themes and symbols in Latin American and Native American nature oriented texts.

Also, I see transversal as working differently from the intersectional approach that has been quite productive in feminist studies. But, too often, I think, the way intersectionality has been handled is not by synthesizing relationships of subject positions and interpellations—if I can turn to Louis Althusser for a moment—but by layering one kind of oppression or difference on top of another, and then failing to distinguish primary and secondary elements in a particular situation or a moment, or recognizing that the intensity or source of oppression can shift in different circumstances. Also, the intersectional approach tends to rely on class, race, and gender as its constitutive characters, with more recently disability studies added on to that, and most recently environmental justice. But as a result, the critical interpretations developing from that tend to remain strongly anthropocentric or gynocentric. I'm concerned with the survival of difference as an ecological concept on the one hand, and on attention to the unique event of being on the other hand.

Praxis we can clarify more easily. It is the invocation that practical applications be integrated with a self-awareness and self-avowal of theoretical orientations and

concepts, and not some pretence that one's reading is theory-free, or that it is okay to attempt to adopt a position of atheoretical naiveté as a form of alleged freedom from ideology and interpellation. I would argue that the less aware we are of our foundational beliefs, concepts and the sources of our ways of thinking about the world, the more we are subject to them, both in terms of their benefits and in terms of their limitations and weaknesses. That may not be much of an issue in other countries where there is a different intellectual tradition of literary criticism and cultural studies.

Praxis is also intended to challenge theoretical approaches that are only applied to literature and culture and are not called into question by the literary works that resist their application. When I taught doctoral courses at another university in literary theory applied to major American authors or comparative literature, I always counselled the students that they should both use theories to understand and question literature *and* use literature to challenge and question theories. The relationship should be dialogical on the basis that no theory is adequate to the complexity of the reception of a literary work or the experience of a cultural activity, nor are authors obligated to have their work conform to the dictates of any theoretical model—again my resistance to the prescriptive. When they tried to engage such a dialogical process in the same kind of course taught by one of my colleagues, he told them that they weren't allowed to question the theories, only apply them. I think that's stupid. Whenever we adopt or adapt a theory and start to wield it in the world, along with it comes an historical legacy, it is deployed in a particular historical and cultural moment, and it has ramifications for how readers and critics think beyond any immediate application.

One philosopher who has strongly influenced your thinking is Mikhail Bakhtin, who himself has never directly addressed ecocritical issues. What makes Bakhtin's theories and methods so relevant for the field of ecocritcism?

Coming out of a Marxist analytical tradition, which I eventually viewed as highly teleological in practice, I was looking for a way of thinking that was more open-ended, at the same time that it would maintain an ethical orientation in contrast to the value neutral mind set of structuralism or the individualism of new critical close reading. I entered graduate school in 1981, the year *The Dialogical Imagination* was published and when Bakhtin's ideas were getting more consideration via such theorists as Tsvetan Todorov and Julia Kristeva. I was intrigued by dialogics and in my dissertation developed an argument about the novelization of poetry, particularly modern American long poems and sequences. My dissertation did not address ecocritical issues as a whole, but I was able to

devote one chapter to Robinson Jeffers and through that initiated my integration of Bakhtin and nature-oriented literature. I was also working on applying dialogics to Snyder's *Myths & Texts*, a book-length poetic sequence.

So, I viewed dialogics as a method of analysis, more than as a theory of literature. As such there had to be the recognition that to engage in genuine dialogue, and not alternating monologues, participants had to be mutually open to changing their ideas and actions. A sophisticated text engages its reader in a dialogue because the text is open to interpretation that alters its theme or communication because of, if nothing else, the changing context of the reception—here is where I found Hans Robert Jauss's ideas a useful addition to Bakhtin. I eventually found Hans-Georg Gadamer's key ideas helpful as well in regard to reception so there's a phenomenological bent to all of this. Jauss's theory of aesthetic reception adds an historical dimension to the interpretation of texts missing from structuralist reader-response theories. It takes into account why different audiences in different historical moments or different cultural milieus read a text differently. It also helps us in understanding why public interest in a text waxes and wanes. Gadamer works in here because of his interest in reader preconceptions, what he terms "prejudice" in the sense of prejudgment. When we become aware of these prejudices and personal historical milieus that we bring to a reading, then we can reconsider some of our initial reactions to a text, cross-cultural experience, or event, and can try to look at it with a different perspective, a consciously adopted one. Momentarily at least, we can step into a different frame of reference not only to understand a text better, but also to understand ourselves better, something we are morally obligated to do as an act of compassion and as a means of articulating an ethics. Bakhtin, in league with Emile Benveniste, also let me counter the structuralist and nonreferential arguments about language based on Saussure. I'm not interested in language as such, but in discourse, dialogue, and narration. Bakhtin let me think about semiotics in terms of nonhuman nature *speaking* in various extralinguistic ways, and humans understanding each other also semiotically and not just linguistically.

I think, though, what really became most important for me in terms of thinking through Bakhtin and wanting to promote adoption of his method and orientation in ecocriticism, was the 1993 publication of *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. There the very idea of the once-occurrent event of being, and so individual responsibility for collective phenomenon, correlated very well with my Catholic upbringing. I was raised a Catholic, and although I don't practice that faith as an atheist today, culturally I am still very Catholic in outlook and feel very deeply, perhaps even more than I believe intellectually, that people ought to justify their existence in some way or another. Also, both *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* and *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, and less so *Art and Answerability*, helped me distil

my idea of the *another*, that who or what which is different from me but not alien to me. I found the self/other and Self/Other dichotomies pushed by deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis inadequate because they promote the reductionism of binary oppositions, when, frequently, there are multiple oppositions/relations, dyads rather than dichotomies and triads, or what in Buddhism would be known as mutual co-arising or in ecological thought interdependence.

I think many ecocritics are highly dialogical in their critical practice even when they do not use Bakhtin as a theoretical foundation. His work, though, provides a vocabulary I find useful. Dialogics, for instance, calls for *praxis*, theoretically informed practical activity that helps counteract the legacy in the United States of the strongly anti-theoretical trend in early ecocriticism. Ecocriticism at the outset makes the claim that humanity's relationship to the rest of the material world—and I use that term here to include both that which occurs without human intervention and that which is synthesized by means of human intervention—is an important aspect of literary and cultural study. That is already a claim about responsibility for the profession of what needs to be analysed, understood, and explained—if not necessarily for every individual teaching and writing academically in the profession, nevertheless by a segment of it. Furthermore, once individuals have accepted that responsibility, then they are obligated to study a different range of disciplines from someone who has accepted responsibility to work in literary disability studies, or to teach a course in law and literature or race relations. Not that these fields are unrelated to ecocritical research; certainly intersections are there to be uncovered. Rather, their focus of attention leads them in different directions from someone studying water rights in environmental justice writing or climate change science fiction. For me, ethics means responsibility and a dialogical orientation that helps ward off tendencies toward dogmatism, universalism, and exceptionalism.

Ecocriticism is sometimes associated with animal and environmental activism. Do you envision an activist role for the ecocritic? Or do you think that ecocriticism and activism are separate practices with different agendas?

They are separate practices with different agendas, but we should make a distinction between an ethical orientation and a formalist one. Structuralism probably faded out so quickly because it had no "therefore" to its analysis that led to interpretation and thematic attention. An ethically based criticism, in contrast, is a type of *intervention*, and therefore can function as a form of activism and certainly a method of encouraging others to become activists.

Ernest Callenbach, in talking about the Ecotopian vision, remarked that the United States needs lots of "social reconditioning" to move toward an ecologically

sustainable society, and he certainly saw his novels as a form of activist intervention, along with his nonfiction writing and his personal involvements in various causes. While an undergraduate I became involved in the anti-war movement and joined an anti-imperialist organization, and then was involved with the American Maoist movement. I participated in many demonstrations, sold political newspapers, and disseminated Marxist books before pursuing graduate education. Much of that time was spent actually engaged in propaganda and agitation, as well as spectacle and guerrilla theatre, talking to people, trying to persuade them of the belief system that generated the demonstrations and protests. I am still trying to persuade people today, but seek to persuade them toward a different set of values and concepts, and engage in critical agitation, propaganda, and theory through literary and cultural criticism, which is an academic form of persuasion. Of course, I also teach courses such as "international environmental justice literature" and "ecofeminism." Probably the biggest difference between those earlier activities and my current ones is my abandonment of a teleological dogmatism. I spend as much time on research and writing as I did on those other forms of engagement.

There are many ecocritics who are not as prolific as I am and have no wish to be. Some of them devote a considerable amount of their time outside academia to various forms of environmental activism. There are others who engage in extensive university and professional service within academia to promote an activist agenda, such as structural changes in their university's product purchasing and recycling programs, growing organic food on campus for the cafeteria, or encouraging green building. Others are heavily involved with study abroad and alternative spring break projects that take the form of environmental justice work. One of my colleagues, who publishes on and translates Caribbean literature, is also involved with hydroponics in Haiti and St. Kitts.

Different people have different strengths and inclinations. I burned out in the 1970s on confrontational demonstrations and protests, so I do the work that I can bear psychologically, and hope that it makes some difference in the world, mainly through being one element of influence within a larger social and intellectual milieu that inspires other people to change the way they live and how they view the world. In daily life I practice and promote to those around me a lifestyle of reduced consumption and awareness about environmental issues. In some other countries where ecocriticism is not yet as well established, academics there use me as a result of my having an international reputation through publication to justify their research and teaching, which they believe contributes to raising awareness about environmental crises and environmental justice.

In *Transversal Ecocritical Praxis*, you offer your readers a wide array of interesting issues, ranging from the gendered conceptualization of the sublime to Okinawa's need to reorient its economy towards a post-carbon future. What were your motivations for grouping these diverse discussions together?

The truth of the matter is that I needed to put a book together to bring much of my recent work to the attention of my varied audiences, who would have come across only some of this work on their own from their diverse vantage points and areas of interest. If you look at the acknowledgments page of the book, you will see that I have published much of this material, in earlier versions, in journals and books in different countries. I don't think that many American literary ecocritics read *Topia: the Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*, for instance, or that many European critics read *Tamkang Review* out of Taiwan, and I don't know anybody in my usual audiences who would have read my essay on Okinawa given its place of publication. So, there is that need to disseminate this work differently from its original place of publication.

Also, I wanted an opportunity to rework the material with greater freedom than the word count limits that are often imposed by journal and book editors. Above that, I wanted the opportunity to demonstrate how these topics are interrelated and how thinking about the Okinawan economy can help us think about a British novel such as *Solar*, or how science fiction can help us think about conservation biology, mega dam projects, and hurricanes. I think we have to wage a continuous effort to counter the spontaneous tendency in an age of information and pseudo-information overload to treat events and process as discrete and static entities. As I say in the book we need to work against *DIM: discrete incident mentality* on the one hand and *PAN: present as always normal* mentality on the other hand.

All of these topics and themes are intertwined in my mind and I needed a venue to try to represent them alongside and in relation to each other, which isn't possible with single essays or plenary addresses—a talk like that would just sound like a grocery list.

Ecocriticism started out as being a predominantly Western field of literary criticism. In recent times, however, the field has expanded to include research from Eastern countries as well. You yourself have spent a year doing research in Okinawa, and have dedicated some of your work to Asian environmental issues. In what possible direction, would you say, could the field move as a whole in the meeting between various cultures and their environments?

Initially, we had the situation that many of the ecocritics outside the U.S. were either Americanists or Romanticists, so that their work was not applied to their national literatures and not read by people specializing in their national literatures. Also, they often published in English rather than in their native languages. That has most definitely changed, not only as a result of the spread of organizations devoted to ecocriticism around the world, but also due to efforts to look at the long literary histories of many cultures for the eco-aesthetics, as the Chinese call it, of various national literatures, as with *oikos* in India.

Now we see various nationalities represented at almost every ecocritical conference and through ecocritical panels at a variety of conferences. We have keynote speakers from Asia presenting in Europe and the U.S. nearly as often as the reverse, which was not the case a few years ago. With the appearance e of *Ecozon@*, we have an ecocritical journal that publishes articles in different languages; also multilingual comparative literature journals are showcasing special ecocritical and ecofeminist issues and with the guest editors from different countries.

We are moving toward a nuanced and differentially articulated transnational ecocriticism that would like to be de-centric in orientation. That is, not privileging one national literature or language, or one specific set of theories or methods, in determining an appropriate critical approach. In that way we are moving past a kind of tokenism and vulgar one-from-each category identity politics mentality about what theory to apply, what text to analyse, what genre to privilege.

The area where we have done the least work, I would say, is in translation studies and translation practice. That is particularly the case for poetry, which is so difficult to translate well. But it is also the case for fiction and nonfiction from what we call "the lesser taught" languages in the U.S. We may have to move to an online publication platform for translations of nature-oriented literature that will not appeal to commercial or academic publishers because the sales volume will not be sufficient for print profitability. Who translates Indonesian literature, for instance, into western languages, and who would publish it?

Finally, I think we need to make better use of technology for virtual, rather than physical, participation in international conferences and symposia, and thereby cut our carbon footprint while expanding our intellectual traffic.

Many scholars define ecocriticism as a potentially interdisciplinary field and argue for a closer collaboration with the natural sciences, which also study the environment, although from a different perspective. Do you consider ecocriticism to be an interdisciplinary movement and, if so, what type of exchange do you think takes place, or must take place, between the humanities and the natural sciences?

I tried to establish that orientation from the start by naming the journal I founded, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*. I wanted to get people in other disciplines involved in writing for the journal, including the natural sciences, but that never really worked out. I ran into a fundamental and largely insurmountable problem: academic accountability. They couldn't get credit for publishing on literature, just as some faculties at research universities couldn't get credit initially for publishing in *ISLE*, since it was a new journal without reputation or standing. Now that Oxford University Press publishes it that is no longer a problem. So, while ecocritics often write about science and we have the whole interdisciplinary field of science studies, it is very difficult to get the science faculty to write to us or write about science in literature or culture.

Many of the decisions about the scope of research and study examples, whether literary or cultural, come down to an individual's own capabilities (grasp of chemistry, biology, physics), predilections (poetry rather than nonfiction, novels rather than short stories), personal reading habits (childhood and teen reading), unconscious motivations (trauma, family dynamics, personal experiences, physiognomy, health), life histories (religion, schooling, locales, cultures, languages) and job classification. I think our interdisciplinarity in terms of homework in the natural sciences and the social sciences ought to be guided in part by the research and knowledge that literary and cultural figures bring to their work.

The closer authors are to natural history, the more obvious and easier it has been for ecocritics. But environmental justice writing often calls on us to learn about toxic chemicals and carcinogens. Some of my recent research, for instance, has taken me to *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, which I didn't even know existed a year ago. Climate change fiction calls on us to study a host of fields to understand and evaluate the scientific credibility of the content, whether it is scientific or pseudo-scientific. How does one debunk Michael Crichton's *State of Fear* without doing the research to show how he cherry-picked his examples and timelines from the scientific articles? The ending of the film *2012* with John Cusack is a good example here. The closing moments show a disparate group of wealthy preparing to land on a relocated African continent to sow the seeds of a new humanity. But what seeds did they bring with them? Did they bring the insects necessary to pollinate those seeds as well, a point made by Barbara Kingsolver in her novel, *The Poisonwood Bible*? Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* also requires knowledge about genetically modified food and seed banks to understand fully the implications of a major component of its plot.

At the outset of my answer I brought up institutional obstacles to collaboration and interdepartmental research. But in some places, ways are being found around this. At Florida Gulf Coast University, for instance, a conference that included

significant attention to the recent BP Gulf Oil Spill was able to have panels and keynote presentations that included participation from marine biologists alongside literary critics. At Arizona State University and other schools, interdisciplinary centres have been set up around issues and concepts that enable and facilitate cross-fertilization of the humanities and the sciences. Some of these are organized around sustainability, others around environmental justice, and still others around regional issues such as water rights. Tamkang University, which for about a decade had a conference on ecological discourse every other year, always invited scientists to present and participate. Here at UCF we have an environmental studies track within Interdisciplinary Studies that enables students to combine minors across colleges to create their own degree programs. So, yes, we need to be more interdisciplinary, but need to work harder to overcome the significant institutional impediments that we routinely face. Themed conferences with an organizing committee drawn from the humanities and the sciences are one way to go at this with roundtables and other forums for engagement across disciplines. The arts need to be brought in as well. I would think that a conference on floods, mitigation and the human creation of disasters out of extreme weather events would be a fruitful area this coming year in Europe. Critical race studies played an important role in the analysis of the Hurricane Katrina disaster in New Orleans, for instance. So, I wonder what humanistic fields could play the most vital role in understanding the human misery of Europe's current flooding and why the scientists warning about these disasters-in-the-making go largely unheeded by governments, as was the case in the U.S. with the vulnerability of New Orleans.

I think we are going to continue to expand the amount of scientific research that we bring into the humanities through ecocriticism. And I think people are going to find that promoting and explaining ecocriticism is one of the ways in which we can make the case for the relevance of the humanities to the huge push, at least in the U.S., of the STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). Or, at least I hope so.

The field of ecocriticism has undergone tremendous developments since its origin in the 1980s. Where do you think ecocriticism is headed?

Don't put me on the spot or anything here. One, I think that Ursula Heise, now at UCLA, and some others internationally are promoting the use of Beck's concept of "risk society" as a productive orientation for ecocritical cultural studies, and I think that is going to be debated. In particular, I think we are already witnessing some strong push back from environmental justice ecocritics on that score. So, I think that is going to be an area both of debate and increased scholarly activity.

Two, Heise is also promoting the concept of an "ecocosmopolitanism" and some

critics have taken up her definition uncritically and treated it as unproblematic, while others have adapted rather than adopted it, and yet others, including me, have raised some questions about its apparent urban and global North bias. So that will be another area that will see much give and take, especially as we look at the concept of cosmopolitanism from migratory, diasporic, nomadic, and peasant perspectives.

Three, special issues of journals and edited books in the discipline of comparative literature are appearing all over the place, particularly with transnational considerations, as well as literary texts from different languages. Invitations to contribute to some of these have certainly pushed me in new directions and turned me back to write about texts that I had taught but never included in an essay or book chapter. The field of postcolonial studies has been discussing how to integrate an ecocritical orientation into its theories and that is producing some very invigorating work and helping, I think, to get some novels and poetry in lesser taught national literatures and languages translated and brought to international attention.

Finally, real world events will push us into emphasizing areas we have not anticipated. How does Fukushima draw attention to literature about nuclear energy, for instance? How do we approach rising religious intolerance in terms of fundamental concepts about biodiversity and the health of ecological systems? Such questions require us to rethink continuously the frames that limit our interpretive acts. From the beginning of my participation in ecocriticism, I have encouraged an expansion of the parameters of the field through a praxis that pushed me into reading new and varied literary works, and seeking out theoretical and scientific materials that would help me understand such literature on the terms required by the ways those texts engage the world.

Patrick D. Murphy