

The Formation of a Field: Ecocriticism in America—An Interview with Cheryll Glotfelty

MICHELLE BALAEV

THE CLASSIC ANTHOLOGY *THE ECOCRITICISM READER: LANDMARKS IN LITERARY ECOLOGY* (1996), EDITED BY CHERYLL GLOTFELTY AND

Harold Fromm, was the first of its kind to bring together an array of scholarship that focused on a relatively unrecognized field of study: ecocriticism. This singular publication was the brainchild of Glotfelty, who worked with Fromm to produce a collection that stands at the gates of our contemporary era as a harbinger of the significant criticism and curricula that would shape literary studies in English departments across the country. *The Ecocriticism Reader* accompanied a new wave of interest in the field as seen in contemporaneous publications such as Karl Kroeber's *Ecological Literary Criticism* (1994) and Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* (1995).

Cheryll Glotfelty is an important figure in American ecocriticism for her publications in the field and her involvement as a cofounder of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE). Born in Bozeman, Montana, in 1958, Cheryll grew up in Palo Alto, California, where her mother, Evelyn Acton, was a public school district secretary and her father, Loren Acton, was a physicist and solar astronomer who flew on the 1985 *Challenger* space shuttle. She attended the University of California, Davis, as an undergraduate and Cornell University for her doctoral studies. As a graduate student at Cornell, she noticed that the existing scholarship on what we now call ecocriticism was not organized or even categorized under a single subject heading in the library catalog. She decided to bring together the most significant works in her anthology, thus inaugurating a new stage in our late modern ecocritical age. Fittingly, Glotfelty held the first assistant professor position in literature and environment in the United States, at the University of Nevada, Reno. She teaches today at UNR in the English department and is a core faculty member in the department's high-profile Literature and Environment (L&E) Program.

I wanted to sit down with Glotfelty to learn more about the origins of her coedited anthology and the formation of what is now

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critically recognized as ecocriticism. I first met her when I was a graduate student in the English department at the University of Nevada, Reno, in the late 1990s. Her dedication to the intellectual life of the graduate student community was inspiring to many. I remember her being tirelessly active in the department and in the Literature and Environment Program, which was composed of only a handful of graduate students at the time. This interview comes from our phone conversation on 18 March 2011, which stretched across the continent from her semirural ranch home in the high desert of Sparks, Nevada, to my urban subdivision home in Greensboro, North Carolina.

MB: How did you first become interested in ecocriticism?

CG: When I was at Cornell in the 1980s, it was an exciting center of developing contemporary literary theory, and I became interested in combining literary studies with environmental engagement. I started looking for scholars who were doing what I wanted to do: bringing literary-critical approaches or text-centered analysis to the study of landscape or place in a work. I started digging through paper copies of MLA bibliographic volumes and humanities citation indexes in Cornell's fabulous library. It was really a different kind of research that one did in those days without the Internet. I found so many examples of scholars in English departments doing research that retrospectively would be called *ecocriticism*. In fact, William Rueckert was the first to coin the term *ecocriticism* in a 1978 article, but this term was not shared by other scholars doing similar research. I discovered that there was already an existing body of work in this field—I didn't inaugurate it at all—going back to at least the early twentieth century. However, the authors of these works rarely referenced one another and appeared unaware that others were taking the same approach. I also found that this sig-

nificant body of work in ecocriticism was not identified in literary studies and lacked a cohesive terminology for use by academics and librarians. So I began to wonder, why didn't this approach (which was clearly there since my bibliography was already about twenty single-spaced pages long) have more clout? have more visibility? have more of an identity within the profession of literary studies?

MB: This was the main question that would lead you to identify the theory and field of ecocriticism that is widely accepted today. Can you talk more about how you moved from this initial question to the idea for the anthology *The Ecocriticism Reader*?

CG: A theoretical approach clearly existed, but it was not recognized, and I felt it needed professional acknowledgment. Cornell was a hotbed of literary theory, and I became very aware of the professional influence that an accepted literary theory could have—for example, that of feminist literary theory and criticism. I mean here was a body of work [feminist theory], and it had visibility in the profession. It was changing the canon. There were positions available for scholars in this field. It was actually doing political work to change the world. I just wondered why scholars who were interested in the environment and who also had done great work didn't have the same visibility in the profession that for example feminist studies did. Another field I became exposed to at Cornell was race theory and African American studies. I took a class there with Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and was influenced by him. He was a total dynamo! He was making things happen in African American studies, gaining visibility, publishing, producing journals, and having Oxford University Press sponsor a whole series that recuperated African American writers who had fallen out of print. I saw Gates as a person making an impact in the discipline and making a change in the world. And he was doing so from his position

in an English department in a field that was visible and recognized. What made his work in African American studies different from what would later be called literature and environment studies or ecocriticism is that his work was seen in a recognized discipline of study, resulting in a cumulative effect. I began to wonder, is there any reason this shouldn't be possible for literature and environment studies, for scholars who want to change the world by addressing environmental issues? In addition to race and feminist studies, why not have environmental studies visibly represented in the English department? I decided there was enough already published in the field that the approach should be recognized.

MB: Once you realized that literature and environment studies should be represented, what was your next step?

CG: What I did then was that I had all these names from my bibliography and I found where they worked. I wrote them all a letter printed on my old daisy-wheel printer and sent them copies of my bibliography on recycled paper.

MB: What year was it?

CG: I think it was 1989. I mailed about two hundred letters. In my letter I said, here we are all working in the same field—shouldn't we do something? shouldn't we work together? Basically: let's do something! [chuckles] And I received a bunch of replies.

MB: Do you have the original letter?

CG: I thought you would ask me that so I looked for it everywhere but I couldn't find it. That letter actually proved to be very important for me, personally, because I proposed a few things in that letter. I said that I would like to publish an anthology with some of these key pieces that I had discovered, and I likened it to Elaine Showalter's *New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory* [1985]. That anthology

was where I learned about feminist literary studies. From this I realized the power of an anthology to consolidate a field. So in the letter I said, would anyone like to do this type of anthology with me? One person who replied with interest was Harold Fromm, whom I had never met, but several of his essays were on my bibliography. He lived in Chicago at the time, and we started a correspondence by mail—postal mail because there was no e-mail. Eventually our correspondence and work together led to *The Ecocriticism Reader*. I think this helped announce the field and make the field visible, which was my goal.

The other thing I said in that letter was that I would like to be the first professor of literature and environment, and I wrote, would anyone like to hire me? [laughs]

MB: That was a bold move!

CG: Well, I also asked if anyone had any suggestions about how I could go about getting a job in this field because I felt that this was another step that was needed for the unrecognized field. For example, there were professors of feminist studies and there were positions announced in African American studies. I just wanted all these signs of institutionalization to be possible for the ecocritical field as well. So I thought one thing that I could do to increase recognition was to have a designated name on my academic title. Another person who replied to my letter was Ann Ronald, who was on my bibliography with her book *The New West of Edward Abbey* [1982]. What I didn't know was that Ann happened to be the new dean at the University of Nevada, Reno, at the time. She alerted me to a job opening in the English department and invited me to apply. In a way, I landed this job with the academic title of literature and environment directly because of Ann's support.

MB: This was the very first academic position in literature and environment in an English department, wasn't it?

Pages 610–11:
Harold Fromm's
copy of Cheryll
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posing steps toward
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field of ecocriticism.

CG: Yes, I believe so, and this was due to a shared desire to make the field visible.

MB: Were there other outcomes from contacting two hundred scholars across the nation through your letter?

CG: Many other scholars struck up a correspondence with me after I mailed out my query letter. Alicia Nitecki was an early and important contact. I first met her when I attended a special conference session she organized, "Beyond Thoreau: American Nature Writing," at the 1988 MLA convention in New Orleans. During the Q&A session I piped up, lamenting that so few people at the MLA conference were paying attention to the environment. After the session Alicia told me that she was planning to start a newsletter, the *American Nature Writing Newsletter*, and asked if I wanted to help. I eagerly accepted, becoming assistant editor, and we used my mailing list along with her contacts as the initial subscription list. The first issue was published in spring 1989. Patrick Murphy was an early contributor to the newsletter, which, after ASLE was founded, was adopted by ASLE and eventually renamed the *ASLE Newsletter*. Patrick was thinking of starting a new journal entitled *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* (the first issue was Spring 1993). We collaborated, and I joined him as associate editor with funding from his university and mine since I had tremendous support from UNR and the dean. Once ASLE had some stability and infrastructure, it adopted *ISLE* as its journal.

In mailing my letter, I also came into contact with Mike Branch, who was working on a similarly themed bibliography, and Scott Slovic, who had been working with the term *nature writing* to carve out the field. Scott had been communicating with Glen Love and David Robinson at the annual American Literature Association conference, and they were thinking of starting up an academic association devoted to nature writing, based

on David's suggestion. There were several of us out there working in this field at the time and thinking that there should be a group, regardless of what it would be called, because people needed to work in concert to try to become more influential in literary studies.

Eventually the three of us—Scott, Mike, and I—met, and we decided there needed to be an academic association to focus on the field. Scott Slovic had first suggested starting such an organization. We began meeting at the annual Western Literature Association conference with several others to strategize the future of the field (I presented under the surname Burgess) because the WLA maintained a focus on environmental approaches due to the leadership of active scholars in the association such as Tom Lyon, Laurie Ricou, Michael Cohen, Ann Ronald, and Glen Love. They all had done pioneering work in literary studies with an emphasis on nature and the environment. Since there was already a critical mass within the WLA conferences addressing environmental literary criticism, it made sense for us to convene there. Other scholars began attending the conference and meeting with us, such as Ian Marshall, Sean O'Grady, SueEllen Campbell, Don Scheese, and many others who had already been attending the conference and working in this field, like Tom Lyon. In fact, Tom Lyon, a scholar of John Muir and the editor of the journal *Western American Literature* at the time, had published one of the very first anthologies of nature writing, called *This Incomparable Lande* [1989].

Then, at the 1992 WLA conference in Reno, we organized a meeting to discuss establishing a new group related to literature and environment studies. Gosh, there were about fifty scholars who showed up. I remember it was at the Sands Casino in downtown Reno, and we could hear the slot machines in the background. This would be the first organizational meeting for our new group, ASLE, the Association for the Study of Literature

and Environment. Scott Slovic was chosen as the first president. One of the first topics we discussed, at some length, was the name of the group. We chose *literature and environment* rather than *nature writing* because some felt it was a more encompassing term.

MB: I want to return to an earlier point you made about wanting the field to create social change. Do you feel that the field has changed the academic landscape and garnered the visibility that you hoped for, twenty-two years after you mailed that letter?

CG: Well, there is no doubt that ecocriticism has visibility in the academy today. No doubt. It is everywhere now, and everyone knows about it. There are tons of books in the field and major presses are publishing in this area. Oxford University Press is coming out with the *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*. This is ironic in a way because I sent them the manuscript for *The Ecocriticism Reader* about fifteen years ago, and they rejected it on the grounds that ecocriticism sounded faddish, like a new flavor of ice cream. [laughs]

MB: Really? [laughs]

CG: I remember the rejection letter, and the words “a new flavor of ice cream” are forever emblazoned on my synapses because it really stung. The field is mainstreamed now, and one could argue about whether this is good or bad, but there is no doubt it has become visible.

Regarding social change, it depends on how one measures social change. In terms of raising consciousness about the environment and ecological issues, I think that the institutionalization of ecocriticism has allowed the academy to create social change in the classroom. I feel optimistic [that academics can create social change]. Within one’s capacity as a scholar and professor of literature, I think social change can take place in the classroom. If you train graduate students in literature and

environment studies and these students are hired in this field, then they teach hundreds, thousands of students in their careers. And who knows what types of professions their students go on to; perhaps they will later have jobs in national policy making. I don’t think we can know as teachers how we will influence students, who are not all English majors by any means. Maybe we introduced them to a book that shifted their consciousness, who knows? But I can think of many instances in my own classroom when I introduced a student to a book—usually a particular book—and essentially it is the book that taught them.

So I think that behind your question regarding if the field of literature and environment has created social change, there is a question: can books bring about social change? Because really what we do is that we give books to students and say, Read these. [chuckles] And I definitely believe that books can change and have changed the world. Then the question becomes what books get taught. If you can make this field legitimate, then you can teach books that formerly were not deemed worthy of being taught in an English department. And this is happening all over the country now. Although we might not be able to measure it, definitely consciousness has been raised and not just from the influence of environmental literary studies but from all these other fields too, such as history, for example, which has an environmental wing now. Meanwhile, problems get worse, actually.

MB: Do you mean that environmental problems continue to get worse? I’m thinking of the massive leak of radioactive materials last week from the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant that happened after the earthquake and tsunami. The nuclear reactor safety system failed, and among other problems the fuel rods are not being cooled down, and it’s being reported that at least one nuclear reactor is having a full meltdown. The radioactive material is still leaking.

CG: Yes. That's one example and also the massive oil spill disaster in the Gulf of Mexico by the British oil company BP that happened last year off the coasts of Louisiana and Mississippi. Oh, man, sometimes you can hardly turn on the news without hearing about another instance of environmental destruction.

MB: These examples lead me to wonder about the ability of literature and environment studies, the ability of education, to impact national and international policies in America because although the academic field has created a rise in consciousness about preserving the environment and reducing damage, we still have environmental disasters of epic proportions caused by humans. Do you think an even greater global disaster has to happen in order for people to finally say, "Enough is enough. We have to take care of our habitat"? Or will humanity continue to have an endless struggle between corporate desire for profit at all costs and an ecologically sensitive mind-set that says we need to live on this planet in harmony without destroying this earth?

CG: You're asking a really fundamental question. I'm always aware that even with people who are environmentally aware, we are still caught up in a resource-intensive lifestyle, including me. This is distressing, realizing how hard it is to not be part of the problem. It's almost impossible to function in our culture and have a job and a family and not be part of the problem. It's sort of depressing. Even though there have been important, positive changes and implementation of green technologies in society, there continues to be a fundamental problem with economic policies that damage the environment. Of course, all this is under the umbrella of capitalism and capitalist economic policies. Economic theory and practice impact environmental policies around the world. We have to change our economic policy to change our environmental practices. Ultimately, not to be a pes-

simist, but giant disaster can sometimes be the ashes out of which new forms arise. It has happened many times on smaller scales. Maybe that is where we are heading.

MB: I'm reminded of a central claim made by Bill McKibben in his book *Deep Economy* that we have a misguided economic model of profit at all costs, thus creating an ideology that more is always better. Would you agree with this point?

CG: There is no question that this US model is environmentally unsupportable.

MB: In your anthology coedited with Harold, you introduced the term *ecocriticism* to a wide audience. How did you decide to use this term to describe the field and method of analysis?

CG: The term *ecocriticism* is still not agreed upon by everybody, but this is fine by me, because I wanted to highlight the theoretical approach rather than a specific term in order to have the approach recognized in literary studies. Lawrence Buell, for example, likes the term *environmental criticism* better than *ecocriticism*. Some scholars use the term *green cultural studies*. For me, I like the term *ecocriticism* for a number of reasons. It's short. It can be made into adjectives and adverbs. Terms such as *environmental criticism* feel too long and clunky to me. Even more importantly and conceptually, the science of ecology examines the interrelationships in systems. That's how I view reality. The very term *environment* implies a separation from the subject. This term suggests a binary divide between humans and nature. I don't think that is the best way to conceptualize the universe. I think the model of ecology where everything interacts always is the model that makes sense. I like having the "eco" to imply a systems approach, and I still prefer the term *ecocriticism* today. However, many scholars do work that can be called ecocriticism but are not drawing from ideas derived from

ecology. In this sense, the term *literature and environment studies* is the broadest term to define the field.

MB: What do you think is the most important aspect of ecocritical scholarship today?

CG: It is difficult to call anything most important without the benefit of hindsight, but I think that intellectual diversity and innovation are significant approaches and directions for ecocriticism. In the same way that diversity is important for healthy ecosystems and that monocultures are not beneficial, so too the field of ecocriticism must cultivate diverse ways of thinking. In terms of innovation, as scholars we must adapt ourselves to changing circumstances as time evolves so that our teaching, thinking, and criticism change as well. In terms of working within a diverse understanding of ecocriticism, my own recent work has changed from my first anthology. For the last decade I chose to work with the ideas of bioregionalism popularized by Gary Snyder. I wanted to take seriously the notion of reinhabitation by learning about the history, culture, and species of my home place, Nevada, and then try to give back to that place. I wanted to try, almost as a thought experiment, to see if this idea bears out, to see if I could live out the concept of bioregionalism. And so I spent over a decade learning about Nevada, and this culminated in the Nevada anthology.

MB: This was your *Literary Nevada: Writings from the Silver State*.

CG: Yes. I wanted to see what happens if one follows this idea, takes it seriously, and really does try it. I found it very rewarding. I loved learning about this place and genuinely wanted to give back. I think that the concept of bioregionalism is often not taken that seriously, but it is important to know and value our local places, especially for environmental policy makers. My current work deals with the concept of networked localisms, which

considers bioregionalism in a global context so that the local and the global are interconnected but not hierarchically positioned. I am recouping the work of Peter Berg [1937–2011], whom I find utterly brilliant. He is one founder of the bioregional paradigm and an innovative environmental activist, but his work is little known.

CONTRIBUTORS

CHERYLL GLOTFELTY is professor of literature and environment and director of graduate studies in the English department at the University of Nevada, Reno. Besides *The Ecocriticism Reader* (U of Georgia P, 1996), she is the author of the first anthology on Nevada literature, entitled *Literary Nevada: Writings from the Silver State* (U of Nevada P, 2008). Her most recent anthology, coedited with Tom Lynch and Karla Armbruster, is *The Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology, and Place* (U of Georgia P, 2012). With Eve Quesnel, Glotfelty is editing the unpublished work of Peter Berg and working to introduce bioregional perspectives to a wider audience. She has won many teaching awards, including the Nevada Professor of the Year Award, the CASE–Carnegie Foundation Professor of the Year award in 2006, an appointment as the Sanford Distinguished Professor in the Humanities in 2000, and the Susan J. Rosowski Award for Outstanding Teaching and Creative Mentoring from the Western Literature Association in 2010.

MICHELLE BALAEV is a visiting assistant professor in the English department at Wake Forest University. She is the author, most recently, of *The Nature of Trauma in American Novels* (Northwestern UP, 2012) and has published widely on American literature, ecocriticism, imperialism, and psychology and literature. Her latest op-ed article appeared in the *Guardian* (23 May 2012). She is completing a book manuscript tentatively titled "Trauma/Tragedy: Loss and Renewal in Modernity," which explores the ecological underpinnings of tragedy. With her coeditor, Barry Stampfl, Balaev is working on a collection of contemporary approaches to literary trauma theory, to be entitled *Parsing the Unspeakable: Trauma Theory for the 21st Century*.

NOTE

I would like to thank Harold Fromm for generously providing the original letter sent in 1989 by Cheryll Glotfelty.

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in an English department in a field that was visible and recognized. What made his work in African American studies different from what would later be called literature and environment studies or ecocriticism is that his work was seen in a recognized discipline of study, resulting in a cumulative effect. I began to wonder, is there any reason this shouldn't be possible for literature and environment studies, for scholars who want to change the world by addressing environmental issues? In addition to race and feminist studies, why not have environmental studies visibly represented in the English department? I decided there was enough already published in the field that the approach should be recognized.

MB: Once you realized that literature and environment studies should be represented, what was your next step?

CG: What I did then was that I had all these names from my bibliography and I found where they worked. I wrote them all a letter printed on my old daisy-wheel printer and sent them copies of my bibliography on recycled paper.

MB: What year was it?

CG: I think it was 1989. I mailed about two hundred letters. In my letter I said, here we are all working in the same field—shouldn't we do something? shouldn't we work together? Basically: let's do something! [chuckles] And I received a bunch of replies.

MB: Do you have the original letter?

CG: I thought you would ask me that so I looked for it everywhere but I couldn't find it. That letter actually proved to be very important for me, personally, because I proposed a few things in that letter. I said that I would like to publish an anthology with some of these key pieces that I had discovered, and I likened it to Elaine Showalter's *New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory* [1985]. That anthology

was where I learned about feminist literary studies. From this I realized the power of an anthology to consolidate a field. So in the letter I said, would anyone like to do this type of anthology with me? One person who replied with interest was Harold Fromm, whom I had never met, but several of his essays were on my bibliography. He lived in Chicago at the time, and we started a correspondence by mail—postal mail because there was no e-mail. Eventually our correspondence and work together led to *The Ecocriticism Reader*. I think this helped announce the field and make the field visible, which was my goal.

The other thing I said in that letter was that I would like to be the first professor of literature and environment, and I wrote, would anyone like to hire me? [laughs]

MB: That was a bold move!

CG: Well, I also asked if anyone had any suggestions about how I could go about getting a job in this field because I felt that this was another step that was needed for the unrecognized field. For example, there were professors of feminist studies and there were positions announced in African American studies. I just wanted all these signs of institutionalization to be possible for the ecocritical field as well. So I thought one thing that I could do to increase recognition was to have a designated name on my academic title. Another person who replied to my letter was Ann Ronald, who was on my bibliography with her book *The New West of Edward Abbey* [1982]. What I didn't know was that Ann happened to be the new dean at the University of Nevada, Reno, at the time. She alerted me to a job opening in the English department and invited me to apply. In a way, I landed this job with the academic title of literature and environment directly because of Ann's support.

MB: This was the very first academic position in literature and environment in an English department, wasn't it?

Pages 610–11:
Harold Fromm's
copy of Cheryl
Glottfelty's letter pro-
posing steps toward
the formation of the
field of ecocriticism.

CG: Yes, I believe so, and this was due to a shared desire to make the field visible.

MB: Were there other outcomes from contacting two hundred scholars across the nation through your letter?

CG: Many other scholars struck up a correspondence with me after I mailed out my query letter. Alicia Nitecki was an early and important contact. I first met her when I attended a special conference session she organized, "Beyond Thoreau: American Nature Writing," at the 1988 MLA convention in New Orleans. During the Q&A session I piped up, lamenting that so few people at the MLA conference were paying attention to the environment. After the session Alicia told me that she was planning to start a newsletter, the *American Nature Writing Newsletter*, and asked if I wanted to help. I eagerly accepted, becoming assistant editor, and we used my mailing list along with her contacts as the initial subscription list. The first issue was published in spring 1989. Patrick Murphy was an early contributor to the newsletter, which, after ASLE was founded, was adopted by ASLE and eventually renamed the *ASLE Newsletter*. Patrick was thinking of starting a new journal entitled *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* (the first issue was Spring 1993). We collaborated, and I joined him as associate editor with funding from his university and mine since I had tremendous support from UNR and the dean. Once ASLE had some stability and infrastructure, it adopted *ISLE* as its journal.

In mailing my letter, I also came into contact with Mike Branch, who was working on a similarly themed bibliography, and Scott Slovic, who had been working with the term *nature writing* to carve out the field. Scott had been communicating with Glen Love and David Robinson at the annual American Literature Association conference, and they were thinking of starting up an academic association devoted to nature writing, based

on David's suggestion. There were several of us out there working in this field at the time and thinking that there should be a group, regardless of what it would be called, because people needed to work in concert to try to become more influential in literary studies.

Eventually the three of us—Scott, Mike, and I—met, and we decided there needed to be an academic association to focus on the field. Scott Slovic had first suggested starting such an organization. We began meeting at the annual Western Literature Association conference with several others to strategize the future of the field (I presented under the surname Burgess) because the WLA maintained a focus on environmental approaches due to the leadership of active scholars in the association such as Tom Lyon, Laurie Ricou, Michael Cohen, Ann Ronald, and Glen Love. They all had done pioneering work in literary studies with an emphasis on nature and the environment. Since there was already a critical mass within the WLA conferences addressing environmental literary criticism, it made sense for us to convene there. Other scholars began attending the conference and meeting with us, such as Ian Marshall, Sean O'Grady, SueEllen Campbell, Don Scheese, and many others who had already been attending the conference and working in this field, like Tom Lyon. In fact, Tom Lyon, a scholar of John Muir and the editor of the journal *Western American Literature* at the time, had published one of the very first anthologies of nature writing, called *This Incomparable Lande* [1989].

Then, at the 1992 WLA conference in Reno, we organized a meeting to discuss establishing a new group related to literature and environment studies. Gosh, there were about fifty scholars who showed up. I remember it was at the Sands Casino in downtown Reno, and we could hear the slot machines in the background. This would be the first organizational meeting for our new group, ASLE, the Association for the Study of Literature

and Environment. Scott Slovic was chosen as the first president. One of the first topics we discussed, at some length, was the name of the group. We chose *literature and environment* rather than *nature writing* because some felt it was a more encompassing term.

MB: I want to return to an earlier point you made about wanting the field to create social change. Do you feel that the field has changed the academic landscape and garnered the visibility that you hoped for, twenty-two years after you mailed that letter?

CG: Well, there is no doubt that ecocriticism has visibility in the academy today. No doubt. It is everywhere now, and everyone knows about it. There are tons of books in the field and major presses are publishing in this area. Oxford University Press is coming out with the *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*. This is ironic in a way because I sent them the manuscript for *The Ecocriticism Reader* about fifteen years ago, and they rejected it on the grounds that ecocriticism sounded faddish, like a new flavor of ice cream. [laughs]

MB: Really? [laughs]

CG: I remember the rejection letter, and the words “a new flavor of ice cream” are forever emblazoned on my synapses because it really stung. The field is mainstreamed now, and one could argue about whether this is good or bad, but there is no doubt it has become visible.

Regarding social change, it depends on how one measures social change. In terms of raising consciousness about the environment and ecological issues, I think that the institutionalization of ecocriticism has allowed the academy to create social change in the classroom. I feel optimistic [that academics can create social change]. Within one’s capacity as a scholar and professor of literature, I think social change can take place in the classroom. If you train graduate students in literature and

environment studies and these students are hired in this field, then they teach hundreds, thousands of students in their careers. And who knows what types of professions their students go on to; perhaps they will later have jobs in national policy making. I don’t think we can know as teachers how we will influence students, who are not all English majors by any means. Maybe we introduced them to a book that shifted their consciousness, who knows? But I can think of many instances in my own classroom when I introduced a student to a book—usually a particular book—and essentially it is the book that taught them.

So I think that behind your question regarding if the field of literature and environment has created social change, there is a question: can books bring about social change? Because really what we do is that we give books to students and say, Read these. [chuckles] And I definitely believe that books can change and have changed the world. Then the question becomes what books get taught. If you can make this field legitimate, then you can teach books that formerly were not deemed worthy of being taught in an English department. And this is happening all over the country now. Although we might not be able to measure it, definitely consciousness has been raised and not just from the influence of environmental literary studies but from all these other fields too, such as history, for example, which has an environmental wing now. Meanwhile, problems get worse, actually.

MB: Do you mean that environmental problems continue to get worse? I’m thinking of the massive leak of radioactive materials last week from the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant that happened after the earthquake and tsunami. The nuclear reactor safety system failed, and among other problems the fuel rods are not being cooled down, and it’s being reported that at least one nuclear reactor is having a full meltdown. The radioactive material is still leaking.