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Review of *Material Ecocriticism*. Ed. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Opermann. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014. Print.

The windshield wipers are frozen solid. I attack the ice with the scraper, chiseling around the wiper blades, but when I scoop away the ice chunks with my bare hand, the windshield wiper tugs back. The tip of my finger has become fused with a metal component of the wiper apparatus. The piece of metal, which I had taken for an inert object, has suddenly revealed its “agentic potency,” as if the substance itself were tugging at my sleeve to tell the story of how it was ripped out of some distant patch of the earth and forged into a part of a windshield wiper by forces of global capitalism. The tug announces that the metal and my flesh share an affinity rooted in our physical being; the substances of our two bodies are swept up together in the particular molecular rhythm known to humans as “cold.” The cold itself, as part of the wave of record-low temperatures besetting New England and therefore a signifier of off-kilter climate patterns, is semantically and, probably, systemically, bound up with the gasses chugging out of the other side of my car. In my new identity as a hybrid entity that is mutually *Homo sapiens* and windshield wiper, I experience the vibrancy of matter, I perceive myself as part of the “mangle,” I am entangled in the web of stories that holds the universe together. It is a moment rife with the principles of material ecocriticism.

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Moments such as this one occur frequently throughout Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann's brilliant collection, *Material Ecocriticism*, from the surprising emergence of a frog from inside a rock in Jeffrey Cohen's forward, to Jane Bennett's encounter with an invasive roadside tree, to Timothy Morton's contemplation of the landscape installation piece *Twilight Epiphany*, to David Abram's meditation on the meaning of a single breath of air in his provocative afterward. The intensity of such revelatory moments throughout the collection testifies to the fruitfulness and urgency of the critical perspective opened up by the particular reticulation of influences that characterizes the project of material ecocriticism.

Like the phenomena it examines, the material ecocritical perspective is an emergent blend of eclectic antecedents. Primarily, material ecocriticism represents a blend of postmodern ecology and posthuman theoretics, both of which reflect the wider "material turn" in cultural studies and literary criticism. Whereas the deconstructionist and post-Marxist critics of the late twentieth century tended to prioritize experiences of fragmentation and virtuality, twenty-first-century critique has tended to emphasize the evolutionary, neurological, and biochemical infrastructures in which cultural and literary behaviors are embedded. For Iovino and Oppermann, this material turn fits in naturally with an ecocritical perspective: human beings should care about the world not only because they depend on it to exist, but because "we *are* the world," we partake in its being, we "intra-act" with the world. Material ecocriticism supplies a narratological dimension to this point of view, moreover, proposing that "all life," as Wendy Wheeler explains in her contribution to the volume, "is semiotic and interpretive" and, moreover, that even inorganic matter constitutes "a meaning-bearing field of agency." The implication of this line of reasoning is that narrative is not some epiphenomenal gloss relevant only to a certain

class of primates, but that story-telling is the elemental property through which the cosmos comes into being.

The ultimate test of the value of any critical perspective is the same as the test for a scientific theory, that it provides a productive source of compelling interpretations and new questions, and, by this standard, material ecocriticism is certainly an unquestionable success. Oppermann's contribution to the volume challenges readers to conceptualize senses in which "material agencies" communicate their stories. Although many of the essays included in the collection offer insightful and persuasive interpretations of specific texts, such as Whitman's "Song of Myself," Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, and James Cameron's *Avatar*, the focus of the collection lifts the critical gaze away from manmade acts of expression and aims it toward the natural world itself. Iovino's chapter presents a geological history of the city of Naples, analyzing the manner in which the landscape and the city have cooperated in constituting one another. Catriona Sandilands's chapter examines evidence that human beings and bees share a common ontology, and Dana Phillips's chapter invites us to attend carefully to the way excrement asserts its own variety of "creative becoming." Some of the best essays open out into phenomenological examinations of the elemental coordinates of earthly existence—of rain (Lowell Duckert), air (David Abrams), light (Heather I. Sullivan), and beauty (Timothy Morton). Throughout all of these chapters, contributors challenge the conventional idea that attributing a narrational character to nonhuman life anthropomorphizes the physical world and thus falsifies the true nature of matter. Rather, these writers contend, recognizing a shared narrativizing impulse that is common to both human and nonhuman matter can help us to recognize our elemental kinship with the physical world, thereby advancing an "anthropodiscentered vision." Rather than imagining a world where human beings impose their own ideas of order on

incoherent matter, contributors to *Material Ecocriticism* such as Wheeler and Hubert Zapf consider the sense in which human creativity and linguistic interpretation are simply iterations of an underlying creative and interpretive urge that is immanent in all physical reality, from photons to genes to volcanoes to poets.

In addition to using the insights of material ecocriticism to develop new perspectives on literary and extra-literary phenomena, several of the essays in this volume analyze the process through which matter communicates its own meanings. Timo Maran's essay traces the successive steps through which landscapes and their resident biota conspire with one another to shape the world into semantic patterns, while Cheryll Glotfelty uses the landscape photography of Peter Goin to examine how a specific image of a specific part of the world can suggest intricate webs of association and affect. Jane Bennett's essay on Paracelsus and Whitman, one of the highlights of the book, considers the various affinities and sympathies that are expressed in the posture of human and nonhuman entities, and Morton's essay elaborates this point of view to demonstrate that reality itself is inherently relational, that each thing is "a meeting place of other things," and that storytelling is the medium through which reality relates to itself. The contributors also express hope that the project of listening attentively to "storied matter" will facilitate an advancement in ecological sensitivity and awareness, whether through a critical examination of the roots of ecophobia (Simon C. Estok), a reassessment of the way we use words like "natural" and "normal" (Eli Clare), or an enhanced appreciation for the eco-wisdom expressed in indigenous ways of seeing. In a "coda" to the collection, Kate Rigby and Greta Gaard consider the sense in which a rigorous materialism can be conceived as a "pansychist postmaterialism" (in Rigby) or as a rediscovery of the core principles of Buddhism (for Gaard). This final pair of essays expresses the discursive ambition of Iovino and Oppermann's book to

cover the entire range of universal extants from the photon to the plenum. In between these two registers, the book's contributors celebrate the diversity, the creativity, and the eloquence of the animals, plants, and minerals that arrange themselves into the world and with which own bodies and minds are co-emergent.

Material Ecocriticism has a level of continuity that is rare in a multi-contributor volume. It helps enormously in this regard that all of the contributors seem to have been working from the same reading list; references to writers who have played a crucial role in the emergence of material ecocriticism such as Bruno Latour and Karen Barad are invoked regularly throughout the essays, and other key theorists such as Jane Bennett, Timothy Morton, and Stacy Alaimo are both cited throughout the essays and also represented in their own original contributions to Iovino and Oppermann's collection. Although the essays consider a diverse array of phenomena, all of the essays are unified by their alignment with a specific constellation of critical perspectives, and the editors' skillful arrangement of the chapters enables the essays to coalesce into something resembling a narrative. The editors' use of two particularly memorable essays as forward and afterward contributes to the collection's sense of cohesion and definitiveness. At the same time, this adept configuration of the material also allows room for differences of perspective and emphasis. In an early essay, Hannes Bergthaller raises questions about "the ethical implications of the material turn," contending that the priority placed by material ecocritics on all-inclusiveness threatens to disregard important distinctions and imbalances that characterize our relationship with the physical world. This question of how literally to take the thesis of "storied matter" recurs throughout the collection. Although Alaimo strives to listen to the stories that a plastic bag has to tell, she questions whether plastic bags can be considered part of an "ethical constituency," and although Phillips is able to use the precepts of material

ecocriticism to address important concerns about the global sanitation crisis, he sardonically questions whether excrement qualifies as “vibrant matter.” In his afterword, Abrams recommends that theorists who embrace the material ecocritical worldview should remain wary of any critical discourse that threatens to replace the direct experience of the physical world with academic formulations. The interrelatedness of the essays in *Material Ecocriticism* constitute a “poly-vocalic” dialogue that both takes place among the essays themselves and also opens out to engage a literal universe of possibilities for further examination.

Material Ecocriticism is sure to prove worthwhile to anyone who is interested in the latest developments in literary and cultural criticism. Iovino and Oppermann’s collection provides a generative framework that invites readers to build on, flesh out, and contest the perspectives it encompasses. As a piece of “vibrant matter” in its own right, the book exerts gravitational forces that reach out toward other texts, other objects, and other stories. Under the spell of the book’s thesis, a reader can’t help seeking out the stories of intra-connectedness that bind human reality to the reality of nonhuman actants, from bacteria to oceans to windshield wipers. The essays in this collection demonstrate that material ecocritical perspectives can stimulate a re-enchantment of the physical world and a reinvigoration of ecological mindfulness.