

Lousley, Cheryl. *Subject/Matter: Environmental Thought and Contemporary Literature in English in Canada*. Thesis (PhD [Environmental Studies]), York University. Ann Arbor: ProQuest/UMI, 2006. (Publication No. NR19807)

Abstract

The study undertakes a comparative analysis of four genres to show how narrative approaches to subjectivity shape the presentation of environmental degradation in contemporary texts written in English in Canada. The four narrative forms discussed are environmental non-fiction, realist regional fiction, writing in the feminine, and postmodern meta-narrative.

The study argues that the way a text configures the problem of environmental degradation is not only to be found in its representations of nature, but also in the role or capacity given the human subject. On the level of character, narrative voice, and the positioning of the reader, each narrative form relies on a particular conception of human subjectivity, which serves to authorize its account of the material world. There are environmental implications to all conceptions of the human subject because the category of the “human” is demarked in relation to the “non-human,” and subjectivity is embedded both in narrative and in materiality. Moreover, particular conceptions of the human subject underlie articulations of the political contexts and ethical obligations associated with environmental degradation.

The relationship between subjectivity, discourse, and materiality is a contested topic within environmental thought and ecocriticism because the identification of environmental degradation seems to require a material notion of nature. Feminists, poststructuralists, and environmental justice advocates, however, argue that the representations of nature that circulate in environmentalism are not universal, but particular to specific class, cultural, gender, and national traditions. English-Canadian literary critics similarly demonstrate the danger of naturalizing identity, whether by reference to the universal (or human), the nation, the region, or the body; however, they have generally not considered the corollary implications of how constructions of identity and subjectivity frame environmental issues and position the non-human.

This study contributes to these two sets of debates about subjectivity, materiality, and the politics of representation by comparing narrative approaches to subjectivity in select works of environmental fiction, poetry, and non-fiction written by Farley Mowat, Sharon Butala, David Adams Richards, Matt Cohen, Daphne Marlatt, Thomas King, and Robert Kroetsch.