

# Donald Wesling

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## Placing the Work of Timothy Morton Within Material Ecocriticism

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DONALD WESLING

University of California

## Placing the Work of Timothy Morton Within Material Ecocriticism

Timothy Morton has some excellent remarks in passing on the relationship of humans and animals in his two books from Harvard University Press (2007, 2010), amounting in total to about two dozen pages, and I will survey those in a moment. Morton's two more recent books (both 2013) show him coming forward as an object-oriented ontologist, with the sole focus of his attention on nonhuman objects and not nonhuman beings<sup>1</sup>. The value of his writings for animal studies, concern of this journal, is to call forth a preliminary mapping of networks of affiliation within material ecocriticism, including animals on one side of my attached diagram; and to notice in Morton a strong critique of ecological theory from within, along with proposals for an ecology-

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Morton is British by birth, and trained as a scholar of Romanticism, a literary-historical era where one main organizing idea is the concept of nature. He has taught at the University of California, Davis, and now teaches at Rice University, Houston, Texas. My report is based on the four books as noted, and on two essays in anthologies published in 2014. Books: *Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Harvard UP, 2007); *The Ecological Thought* (Harvard UP, 2010); *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013); *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality* (Open Humanities Press, An imprint of MPublishing, University of Michigan Library, Ann Arbor, 2013). Articles: "The Liminal Space between Things: Epiphany and the Physical". In: *Material Ecocriticism*. Ed. SERINELLA IOVINO, SERPIL OPPERMANN (Indiana UP, 2014); "Deconstruction and/as Ecology". In: *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*. Ed. G. GARRARD (Oxford UP, 2014). The diagram attached to this report is also a record of interpretive reading, but I leave to others the job of verifying whether my placement of names and of arrows between names is accurate. The third paragraph below will help in this endeavor. Especially on the animals side of the diagram, other names might be added.

-to-come. For myself, I consider Morton (after non-literary Bruno Latour) the most brilliant of the theorists and stylists of the larger field. However I would like, at the end, to raise questions about recent definitions of eco-writing that come from him and from others, like Serinella Iovino, the writer and anthologist, who sponsor him.

Morton has written earlier books, but if we keep our attention only on the programmatic eco-studies, he began in 2007 in the middle of the diagram, with lively awareness of recent debates in animal studies, and has now moved to the other side as a member of the object-oriented school. Strong hints of his fascination with nonhuman objects were there in the two Harvard books. So he has a place, unusually, across all three horizontal categories of the diagram. I take this as a sign of his range, his ability to adapt, not of his frivolity. (However: we shall see that while he is always consciously a literary person doing something like philosophy, always on point and eloquent, nonetheless he is very willing to hook the reader by a repertoire of flashy effects). From the evidence of passages I will quote and summarize below, I want to claim that there is no one like him on the more traditional, intensely moral and even dour animal side of the grid. (Should more of us be sparking ideas and writing speculatively, even excessively, like him?). Also the questions that come from reading him are questions for animal studies too.

A word on the following diagram. Reading top to bottom, clearly the major influence on this generation's scholarly writing on eco-topics is Bruno Latour's repeated and forceful insistence that nonhuman animals and objects insert themselves (note the ascription of agency) into all our knowledge of reality; and his account of action-networks, which Latour said provide connections, but no structure: networks have no inside, only radiating lines of linkage. Along with the editors and the many writers in both 2014 eco-anthologies listed in Note 1, Morton in his books explicitly cites Latour as the origin, so we place Latour in the center and write his name largest. Deleuze, Whitehead, and Lingis are eccentric, outside the most traveled arrows of transmission, but powerful for those who refer to them.

Martin Heidegger on tools was a leading thinker for Graham Harman as he was developing object-oriented ontology in two early books, but mostly as a figure to contend with. On the left or animal side, Heidegger's much-cited 1930 assertion that animals are "poor in world" was one source of Jacques Derrida's philosophical anger, which resulted in field-foundational theses on animalist perception in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* and in Derrida's late lectures published as *Beast and Sovereign*. Reading from left to right, I do not find many responses to Latour on the animal studies side, and rightly so, because Latour has never given much thought to the nonhumans that are animals. But the links between him and general-topic eco-critics in the middle and the object-philosophers on the right are multiple and very direct: for example Harman has written a book on Latour, *Prince of Networks*, and another book, *The Wolf*

*and the Prince*, records a Latour-Harman public dialogue at the London School of Economics<sup>2</sup>.

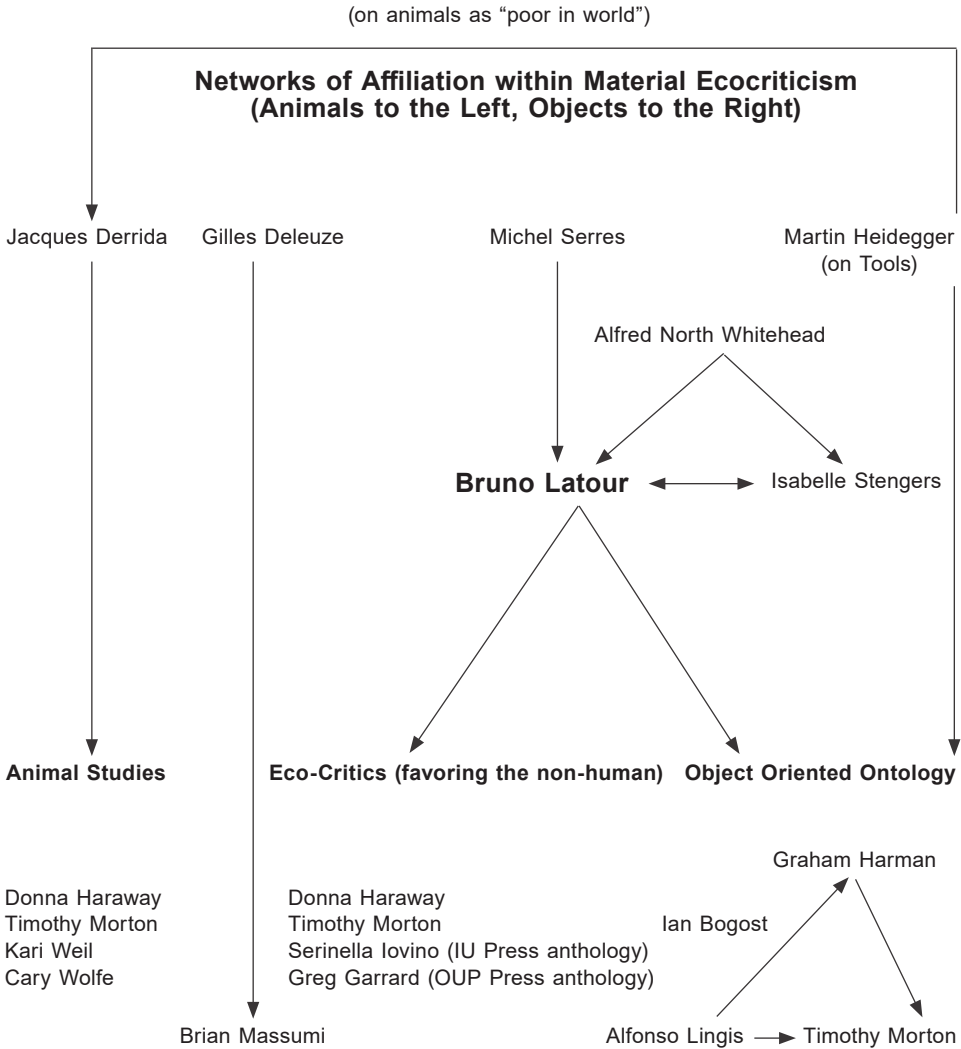


Figure 1. Networks of Affiliation within Material Ecocriticism

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In *Without Nature* and *The Ecological Thought*, Morton returns frequently to the human-animal relation. Rarely does he dwell for longer than a sentence,

<sup>2</sup> G. HARMAN: *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*. Melbourne, 2009; B. LATOUR, G. HARMAN, P. ERDÉLYI: *The Wolf and the Prince: Latour and Harman at the LSE*. Winchester, UK and Washington, USA, 2011.

paragraph, or page on the animals topic, but always he is decisive, memorable, sassy, and alert to all recent counter-currents of argument. Here in 2007 and 2010, as in his more recent books on hyperobjects, he intends to challenge conventional thinking, make huge the scale of the reader's imagining, and ultimately to redefine the entire relationship of science to the humanities, because of global warming. Climate change, the change that changes everything, is the cynosure of threat among all Morton's hyperobjects.

These two books from Harvard are part of a single plan to call in question a naive or mimetic (his term) existing environmental aesthetics. In *Without Nature* he scorns "the *ersatz* primitivism of ecological writing in general" (133). In *Ecological Thought* he imagines different types and scales of interconnect-edness, and here starts a new synonym for this, *the mesh*, for frequent use: we humans are in the mesh with the cosmos, pollution, ebola, microorganisms on our eyelashes, in scales of nano and hyper, along with objects on a scale "vast yet intimate" (15). His question now will be: Why stop there?, and his typical stance will be: "Loving the strange stranger [animals being one main instance] has an excessive, unquantifiable, nonlinear, 'queer' quality" (79). Morton's pas-sages on animals occur as illustrations, problem-points, within these frames of the larger argument.

Here is Morton on animals as possible persons as he sets up his argument in *Without Nature*: "Chapter 3 demonstrates that the 'Aeolean,' ambient poet-ics outlined in Chapter 1—picking up the vibrations of a material universe and recording them with high fidelity—inevitably ignores the subject, and thus cannot fully come to terms with an ecology that may manifest itself in beings who are also persons—including, perhaps, those other beings we designate as ani-mals" (4). Co-existence, co-everything, is one of his major themes as he obses-sively works to define an ecology-to-come: "The idea of the environment is... a way of considering groups and collectives—humans surrounded by nature, or in continuity with other beings such as animals and plants. It is about being-with" (17). Morton at several points in this 2007 book develops a critique of the views of David Abram, a nature-writer in the phenomenological line of Merleau-Ponty, as "inverted speciesism" (99), namely wanting to forget about the differences between humans and animals. Against Abram he develops his own ideas of the *strange stranger* and the necessary *irony* of ecological thinking: "Animals bring up the ways in which humans develop intolerances to strange-ness and the stranger [...]. The only way to remain close to the strangers with-out killing them [...] [Morton refers here to Nazis who hated animal cruelty but murdered threatening human beings] is to maintain a sense of irony. If irony and movement are not part of environmentalism, strangers are in danger of dis-appearing, exclusion, ostracism, or worse" (99, 100). Further: "There is something *aporetic* in our uncertainty as to whether animals are human or not" (187). Further: "I often think that the trouble with posthumanism is that we have not yet achieved

humanity, and that humanity and posthumanity have no time for what Derrida called the animal that therefore I am” (195). There is space for one more vista-opening, self-questioning remark, this time from *The Ecological Thought*: “Denying that humans are continuous with nonhumans has had disastrous effects. Yet declaring that humans are ‘animals’ risks evening out all beings the better to treat them as instruments. Humans may be ‘animals,’ but ‘animals’ aren’t ‘animals’” (62). Plainly, in facing up to the logical-moral complexities which follow from any attempt to define the proper of human and the proper of animal, Morton manages to take a stand while refusing to take a side.

In addition to taking Latour and Derrida as warnings against naiveté and as sources of ideas, and in addition to using choice examples from discoveries in more than a few scientific fields, Morton has these habits as a writer. He banishes, for reason, the terms of an earlier generation in this still-emergent field: *nature, world, human, animal, environment*. His polemic in its positive phase involves neologisms (*mesh, hyperobject*), along with definitions to get back to root meanings in other languages than English, lists of objects only seemingly disparate, rhetorical questions, and constant requests to the reader to “Consider this...”, “Imagine...”. He has in one essay, often on one page, an array of references to Heidegger, pop culture, facts from scientists, Romantic poems, and sound-recordings of humpback whales. For him a text-for-analysis can be a science-fiction novel, a poem by W.C. Williams, a philosophical treatise, a work of eco-art on a site in Houston; I find that his readings are thoughtful, detailed. Sometimes he is making a clear, non-original point, but with huge elaboration, gaining drama with metaphor and anecdote. More than most ecological thinkers he is concerned with the suffering of all beings, and actually speaks of oppression and suffering; in the Harvard books his reports are shadowed by the Marxism of Fredric Jameson, but in the two books of 2013 the appeal is increasingly to Buddhism. The mantra of the first two books is *strange stranger*, but it signals some kind of shift that the repeated phrase of the latter two will be *future future*<sup>3</sup>.

Morton’s contributions to two prominent anthologies, both published in 2014, show different directions for material ecocriticism. In his essay in Garrard’s Oxford Handbook, he argues that literary/philosophical deconstruction is the “secret best friend of ecocriticism” (296) because both approaches “hold that meaning and unmeaning secretly depend upon one another” (295); both acknowledge “an irreducible dark side” (294) to texts including life forms. His current themes and styles are fully on display in the Iovino-Oppermann anthology, *Material Ecocriticism*, in a ten-page piece I will describe more fully, “The Liminal Space between Things: Epiphany and the Physical”. Here the argument, like the title, is chiasmic, putting the space of happening between the fixities of border-

<sup>3</sup> It is possible that with *strange stranger and future future*, doubling a single word and thus intensifying it with itself, Morton has invented a new subclass of neologism.

lines and of things. In his first two pages, Morton describes James Turrell's 2012 art installation, "Twilight Epiphany", "a large wafer-thin square of metal with a square hole in it" (269) resting on a grass pyramid at Rice University. From within the pyramid viewers look at the sky. Morton discusses the science behind this eco-art through the figure of a gathering of beings, the gathering/dispersal of light, ending a paragraph with the striking claim that logic itself is "the gathering of coexistent beings" (271). Next he moves to discuss art (Turrell's piece, and also part of a poem by W.C. Williams) as requiring a material basis in space, in time: always involving nonhumans, always a "conversation between entities" (272). He returns to Turrell to take up the artist's own title-term, epiphany; now Morton arrives at the philosophically important idea that in the experience of epiphany, "agency is on the side of the thing" (273): a recognition entirely in keeping with the premises of an emergent materialist criticism. Characteristically he concludes his account of the study-text with a general statement about the larger field: "*Twilight Epiphany* confronts us with the always already of actually existing, coexisting beings—which is just what ecological awareness... actually is" (275).

Moving toward his conclusion in "The Liminal Space between Things", Morton takes up "the Kantian experience of beauty—which is one thing that contemporary philosophy might want to salvage from... Kant's "correlationism" (276). He is thinking of the object school's critique of the Kantian tradition, which they say reduces things to the way they are correlated to the human subject. In salvaging Kant on beauty Morton may take back his allegiance to the object ontology group; or perhaps art-speech is one practice that separates him as a literary person from other school members like Graham Harman. As an outsider to the discourse, I leave this unresolved. However, I note how well this essay's constitutive metaphor, the liminal space or gap, has by the last pages taken on a philosophical guise in the idea of nothingness, as here in one of Morton's frequent lists: "Forest clearings, ecosystems, and biomes are all similar—they are made of nothingness" (278). The values Morton defends are betweenness, caring attunement, happening, becoming, being. He needs to show how object-oriented ontology fits the conception of the Iovino-Oppermann anthology, by ruling out naive usages of terms, and by bringing forth charming examples of the non-human on the object-side of the line. He needs to edge toward saying there is a glimmer of the spiritual ("Epiphany") in the way art can appropriate and show forth objects, turning them to beauty (his last sentence). Like others in the object school he must face the problem of causality: humans as objects are wrecking the earth by causing climate change, that hyperobject whose scale we begin to imagine, but ordinary or "clunk" (his word) causality will not fit such a scenario. These philosophers, including Morton, wish severely to reduce the human as causal in the universe, by promoting things as agents. The essay



ends with the usual-with-Morton appearance of global warming, and with further comment on nothingness and beauty as values.

After reading Morton, I have encountered general questions about ecocriticism that send me back, from the object-side of the diagram to the rest of it, including animal studies. Knowledge that I was pointing toward the questions has influenced the tone of respectful skepticism in my survey of Morton's works. I continue to be dazzled by his intellectual and stylistic resources, even as I worry that his cheekiness, his indulgences can harm his argument. So now I would move from a careful enthusiasm, where I know some of the answers, to a state of doubt where, briefly and bluntly, I admit what I do not understand.

**The Question Concerning Epiphany.** Morton's essay in the Iovino-Oppermann anthology comes at the break-point between the first seventeen essays on the narratives, politics, and poetics of matter, and the last two pieces in a coda which is titled "A Diptych on Material Spirituality". The trend of the anthology is increasingly to claim immanence in matter: rematerialization of religion and spirituality. It is an open issue whether this contradicts, or complicates, the title-premise of the anthology. Epiphany is a religious term that Morton takes over from Turnell's installation. Perhaps Turnell has earned the right to use a religious term for framed natural beauty, but has Morton earned this? Have Iovino-Oppermann earned this in their placement of Morton's essay and in their coda? Is this usage helpful? How might one validate it?

**The Question Concerning Narrative.** In his essay Morton refers to quantum physics, writing: "A molecule is a story about atoms" (275). This resonates with statements from most of the other contributors to the volume, amounting to a defining policy for the collection as a whole. As Morton phrases it in his second paragraph, programmatically, this is a project "to think how nonhumans are 'storied' in the way this volume at large addresses—and... how this storying is not just a candy coating on things, but the way causality is fueled and lubricated..." (269). There is a large metaphorical transfer going on when the lives of bees, rocks, icebergs may be told as stories: a transfer from literary and folk stories, those shapes, to the stories that (for example) John Muir read in unfamiliar characters to know that the Yosemite Valley was cut into earth by the convergence of five glaciers. Is this use of *story* helpful, or just hopeful? How might one validate it?

I find some help on this issue in an essay in the Garrard anthology, in Richard Kerridge's account of the New Materialist program<sup>4</sup>. Kerridge, perplexed that we would disperse and qualify "our notion of human agency at the very moment [global warming] we need to make an unprecedented demand upon that agency" (367), quotes Jane Bennett on a needed conceptual change. Ben-

<sup>4</sup> R. KERRIDGE: "Ecological Approaches to Literary Form and Genre: Urgency, Depth, Provisionality, Temporality". In: *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*. Ed. G. GARRARD, 361–376.



nett says people need “to rewrite the default grammar of agency, a grammar that assigns activity to people and passivity to things”; this change, for Bennett, “seems necessary and impossible” (quoted by Kerridge, 368). The implications of these quandaries for agency are yet to be worked out for story-telling, but for now we see as much logical trouble as we do imaginative promise.

**The Question on the Role of Scientific References in Ecocriticism.**

What do we want to do with the discoveries of big science? How much derived science is enough, in order to do responsible ecocriticism? And what kind of use do we make of these discoveries? Timothy Morton makes usually brief but extremely frequent references to recent work in many fields, from quantum physics to genomics to principles of mathematics to cosmology, and more, always as a reminder of hard facts we must face. These seem to me accurate, relevant, imaginative in phrasing, though as I look at his footnotes in these four books and two articles, there is no clue whatever as to where this information is coming from (his references are to conceptualists, not field-workers). I trust his science in the moment, for his purposes as a literary-philosophical writer, but his science has a look of partiality, of opportunism, if I compare him with a scientist who is also an intensive/extensive, elegant writer on a single phenomenon, like Carl Safina in his book on the leatherback turtle<sup>5</sup>.

Early in Morton’s essay on “The Liminal Space between Things”, he gives a definition of our task: “ecocriticism is just the thinking of relations between things as and in figurative language” (269). We might question the force of his careful word “just”. Are we to be the figurative-language experts as adjuncts to, explainers of, mitigators of big science? Will we develop meanings and metaphors from science as it discovers the threats and beauties of the earth?

What are the dangers of this definition of the task? I would say: the anecdotal as taking over the argument; quickness of reference, going for drama and energy rather than trying to get to the fullest relevance of one or two items; mingling the so-called scientific facts with persuasive metaphors. In large measure Timothy Morton avoids the dangers<sup>6</sup>.

On this showing, we might think of the writers of the two 2014 anthologies as grandly exhibiting the contradictions in this still-emergent field of study.

<sup>5</sup> C. SAFINA: *Voyage of the Turtle: In Pursuit of the Earth’s Last Dinosaur*. New York, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Allowing Morton to question my question, I would point to a passage in *Realist Magic* where he protests any return (in Spinoza or in quantum theorist David Bohm) to “pre-Aristotelian scientism (where you make a decision about what constitutes the world—some kind of flux or some kind of aetherion, fire, water and so on)—because such positions “can’t account for change in a thorough way” (164–165). He says scientism gets us back to the sixth century BC, then goes on to assert himself against big science. Let him have the last word on this topic: “It’s about time humanists started telling scientists how to think again, as science seems to be defaulting to some quite old stereotypes. Which brings us again to OOO [object-oriented ontology], the only non-reductionist, non-atomic ontology on the market, and one that is a lot more Aristotle-proof than the regular ones” (165).

These writers lead me to two ways to think of how to be an eco-critic in 2015, but there may be other self-descriptions, less discouraging. I could see eco-critics as the public translators of scientists without being scientists, and as quasi-philosophers with scant credentials in philosophy. Or, and this is my choice, I could see eco-critics as a new kind of scholarly writer, willing and able to use literature, science, philosophy, and politics to pursue a bravely ingenious rhetoric of cautions about climate change in the Anthropocene Epoch.

### Abstrakt

#### Timothy Morton w kontekście ekokrytyki materialnej

Krótki raport autorstwa Donalda Weslinga powstał w oparciu o cztery monografie i dwie antologie tekstów napisanych po 2007 roku. Timothy Morton to – zdaniem Weslinga—modelowy przykład teoretyka i stylisty działającego w obszarze stosunkowo nowej dziedziny, jaką jest ekokrytyka materialna. Wesling rozpoczyna omówienie od wprowadzenia diagramu obrazującego kierunki wpływu od filozofów po krytyków literackich. Głównym teoretykiem w pionowym wymiarze diagramu jest Bruno Latour kładący nacisk na sprawczość podmiotów nie-ludzkich (zwierzęta, przedmioty). W wymiarze poziomym kategorie oscylują pomiędzy studiami nad zwierzętami z jednej strony a ontologią zorientowaną na przedmiot z drugiej. Morton wiele uwagi poświęcił definiowaniu relacji pomiędzy człowiekiem i zwierzęciem, ale jego ostatnie prace i eseje sytuują go zdecydowanie w obszarze szkoły przedmiotu. Wesling formułuje trzy pytania dotyczące roli, jaką w ekokrytyce odgrywają narracja, język duchowy oraz fakt naukowy. Pytania te, które są wynikiem lektury tekstów Mortona, mają znaczenie również dla studiów nad zwierzętami.

#### Słowa kluczowe:

Timothy Morton, Bruno Latour, ontologia zorientowana na przedmiot, ekokrytyka materialna, ekologia

### Абстракт

#### Тимоти Мортон в контексте материальной экокритики

Настоящий текст Дональда Веслинга возник на основании четырех монографий и двух антологий текстов, написанных после 2007 года. Тимоти Мортон это, по Веслингу, образцовый пример теоретика и стилиста, действующего в области относительно новой дисциплины—материальной экокритики. Веслинг начинает обсуждение с введения диаграммы, представляющей направления влияния от философов к литературным критикам. Главный теоретик по вертикали диаграммы—это Бруно Латур, делающий упор на созидательность не-человеческих субъектов (животных, предметов). По горизонтали диаграммы категории колеблются между animal studies, с одной стороны, и объект-ориентированной онтологией, с другой. Мортон много внимания посвятил дефиниции отношений между человеком и животным, но его последние труды и эссе размещают его в группе исследователей с новым пониманием того, что такое объект. Веслинг формулирует три вопроса, касающиеся роли, какую в экокритике играет повествование, духовный язык и научный факт. Эти вопросы, которые являются результатом чтения текстов Мортонa, имеют также значение для изучения животных.

#### Ключевые слова:

Тимоти Мортон, Бруно Латур, объект-ориентированная онтология, материальная критика, экология