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To cite this article: Nathaniel A. Rivers (2015) Deep Ambivalence and Wild Objects: Toward a Strange Environmental Rhetoric, *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 45:5, 420-440, DOI: [10.1080/02773945.2015.1086491](https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2015.1086491)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2015.1086491>



Published online: 03 Nov 2015.



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Deep Ambivalence and Wild Objects: Toward a Strange Environmental Rhetoric

Nathaniel A. Rivers

Carl Herndl and Stuart Brown argue that the complexity of environmental rhetoric is such that its concerns are embedded in both our lived experiences and across many intellectual endeavors. To think through environmentalism, they suggest, is to think through rhetoric, and both entail crossing boundaries. Environmentalism and its concomitant rhetorics, however, frequently draw a bold line between humans and nonhuman nature, and so long as rhetoric remains wedded to the human and the human alone, environmental rhetoric will continue to miss the mark. A strange environmental rhetoric, which blurs the line between humans and nonhumans, calls for more relations and not less—not a removal of humans from the environment, but another way of comporting ourselves with environments.

If living in history means we cannot help leaving marks on a fallen world, then the dilemma we face is to decide what kinds of marks we want to leave.

—William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness”

In his essay “Burning the Shelter,” Louis Owens, environmentalist and one-time United States Forest Service ranger, reflects on his assignment to burn a shelter (the White Pass shelter in Washington’s Glacier Peak Wilderness) as “part of a Forest Service plan to remove all human-made objects from wilderness areas” (211). It was a plan Owens “heartily approved.” For five days, Owens “dismantled the shelter and burned the old logs, piling and burning and piling and burning until nothing remained” (211–212). “At the end of those five days,” Owens writes, “I felt good, very smug in fact, about returning the White Pass meadow to its ‘original’ state” (212).

Returning from Glacier Peak, Owens encountered two old, Native American women hiking up the mountain. They were headed to the shelter Owens had just finished destroying. Their father built the cabin when he himself worked for the Forest

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Service. The old women were neither upset nor shocked by the cabin's destruction. As Owens describes it, taking the time to detail the two women's things ("thick wool caps," "small backpacks," and "staves"), they were prepared with a plastic tarp, which they "would put inside the hemlock grove above the meadow, and the scaly hemlock branches would turn back the snow. They forgave me without saying it—my ignorance part of the long pattern of loss they knew so well" (212–213).

For Owens, this episode and his own actions and attitude performs the current environmental crisis: the assumption that humans are separate from nature and that our chief ethical, environmental task is to remove ourselves as much as possible. "Gradually, almost painfully," he writes, "I began to understand that what I called 'wilderness' was an absurdity" (213). He goes on, tracing the historical precedent of his smugness: "In embracing a philosophy that saw the White Pass shelter—and all traces of humanity—as a shameful stain upon the 'pure' Wilderness, I had succumbed to a 500-year-old pattern of deadly thinking that separates us from the natural world"—a pattern of thought deeply rooted in the Western tradition—"that sees humanity and 'wilderness' as mutually exclusive" (213). Owens argues that such thinking grounds "the global environmental crisis that sends species into extinction daily and threatens to destroy all life" (213).

Owens' story succinctly captures and critiques a troubling environmental rhetoric that places humans *outside* of nature. Owens concludes, "Our native ancestors all over this continent lived within a complex web of relations with the natural world, and in doing so they assumed responsibility for their world that contemporary Americans cannot even imagine" (213–214). Owens' insistence on complex relations gestures toward the kind of strange environmental rhetoric I want to mark. Its strangeness lies in the call for more relations and not less—not a removal of humans from the environment, which is the value underlying much contemporary environmentalism, but another way of comporting ourselves with environments. However, a call for renewed, complex relations may not be enough anymore. What might Owens mean by "assume responsibility" when the form of our responsibility is precisely what he is calling into question? For instance, the National Climate Assessment (NCA), released in 2014 by the U.S. Global Change Research Program, summarized "the impacts of climate change on the United States, now and in the future" (iii). Drawing on an impressive array of sources and vetted by an extensive public review process, the ultimate aim of the report is to advance "understanding of [the challenge of climate change] and the need for the American people to prepare for and *respond to* its far-reaching implications" (3, emphasis added). We are in a moment when fully thinking through response-ability is a pressing national and international need. Recent theoretical work inside and around rhetorical theory pushes even further than Owens, intensifying the very idea of relations to a stranger place.

We need to think about rhetoric (and relations) more intensely both in the practice of rhetoric and in our study and theorizing of it. What is the place of rhetoric, who engages in rhetoric, and what exactly counts as rhetoric or as an effect or

product of rhetoric? My argument is that environmentalism specifically needs a more intense rhetoric—one engaged not simply in human discourse, but in the nonhuman, in the object. As Bruce Folz remarks in his Heideggerian analysis of the current environmental crisis, “it is . . . pertinent to speak of a genuine *krisis*: a deciding, a judgment, a sentence in which not only our future survival, but our comportment toward nature in general is called into question” (324). A crisis for Folz is not a problem to be solved, but a kairotic opening through which we shape the world to come. We cannot decide once and for all what our responsibility is. Not everything we have built should stay; not everything we have done is wise and good. But the questions of what is done, what is not done, and what is undone require a more complex decision-making process.

Environmentalism and its concomitant rhetorics, however, frequently draw a bold line between humans and nonhuman nature: the animate and inanimate, and the animal, vegetable, and mineral. Nature, it is presumed, is that which is free from human contact and intervention. The way forward for environmentalism, then, is to lessen the impact and amount of human intervention: environments need to be preserved and/or conserved; wilderness areas need to be reclaimed or left apart from what humans have settled. We see this particular line of environmentalism at work in calls to reduce our footprint. Countering such environmentalisms, the environmental historian William Cronon, in his (in)famous “The Trouble with Wilderness,” writes,

the trouble with wilderness is that it quietly expresses and reproduces the very values its devotees seek to reject. The flight from history that is very nearly the core of wilderness represents the false hope of an escape from responsibility, the illusion that we can somehow wipe clean the slate of our past and return to the *tabula rasa* that supposedly existed before we began to leave our marks on the world. (16)

The flight from history Cronon describes echoes what Owen calls a troubling pattern of thought: the ontological fissuring of the human from the nonhuman.

However, Cronon’s critique of “wilderness” is not full-throated. In the conclusion of the same piece, he notes that he is “forced to confront [his] own deep ambivalence about [wilderness’s] meaning for modern environmentalism” (22). On the one hand, he argues, the notion of wilderness disconnects humans from their environment and thus often produces irresponsible behavior. The split between wilderness areas and settled areas works to activate all sorts of irresponsible behavior. For instance, we pick-up after ourselves at Yosemite and then spray our sidewalks with Roundup. That is, we let ourselves off the hook when we imagine ourselves as out of nature. “On the other hand,” Cronon writes,

I also think it no less crucial for us to recognize and honor nonhuman nature as a world we did not create, a world with its own independent, nonhuman reasons for

being as it is. The autonomy of nonhuman nature seems to me an indispensable corrective to human arrogance. (22)

Thomas Birch's treatment of wildness, which predates Cronon's ambivalence by a few years, resonates with Cronon.¹ Birch responds to the trouble with wilderness by stressing wildness. For Birch, wilderness areas become places where wildness is incarcerated. Birch aims, "to expose the bad faith that taints our mainstream justifications for wilderness preservation and to sting us out of it toward a more ethical relationship with wild nature, with wildness itself, and thereby with one another" (446). The move from wilderness to wildness and the chorus of calls for relations work to re-place the human and the nonhuman on equal and agonistic footing.

Cronon's and Birch's critiques of wilderness are where I begin to trace a strange environmental rhetoric that gives wild objects their full due (in their withdrawn strangeness and vitality). There is the beginning of the strange environmental rhetoric implicit in Owens' reflection on his own actions. I build from the assumption that much environmental rhetoric overemphasizes human agency. By giving ourselves the responsibility to save or fix the planet, we have over-invested in our own agency, enacting the same hubris that results in dispositions toward the nonhuman nature that environmentalists themselves might very well (and rightly) condemn. Drawing on work in new materialism and object-oriented ontology, I suggest that we can neither fully understand nor determine the environment and that we need a strange environmental rhetoric alive to this suggestion. Rethinking environmental rhetoric in terms of the nonhuman also requires a shift in how we think about rhetoric more generally.

Specifically, I hope to complicate environmental rhetorics that continue to reinscribe an unnecessary division between human and the nonhuman nature. To this end, I employ work in object-oriented ontology (OOO) and new materialism. In his review essay of philosopher Graham Harman (a key figure, along with Ian Bogost, Levi Bryant, and Timothy Morton, in OOO), Scot Barnett summarizes the OOO position:

the project of object-oriented philosophy involves two key moves: first, the recognition of the ontology of individual objects or tool-beings and their perpetual withdrawal from other objects in the world; and second the attunement to the reality and implications of these objects coming into relation with one another and how those relations in turn produce new objects whose depths, like any other object, can never be fully known or expressed in language.

¹The main forum for the "wilderness debate" takes place across two volumes edited by J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson: *The Great New Wilderness Debate* (1998) and *The Wilderness Debate Rages On* (2008). Cronon's essay is reprinted in the 1998 collection, which also houses Thomas Birch's essay. There is of course no way to here thoroughly engage the "wilderness debate." I focus on Cronon because of the terminology he uses to express his frustration and because, as the editors remark, "Cronon's essay, though largely unoriginal, is a forcefully written summary and crystallization of the case against the received wilderness ideas made piecemeal by" the other authors in the collection (*The Great New* 12). Cronon's article was likewise the launching pad for a debate in the pages of *Environmental History* 1(1).

Object-oriented philosophy is part of a broader trend which seeks the reality of objects without reifying or reducing them. OOO walks the narrow path between scientific realism, which undermines objects into their component parts, and social construction, which overmines objects into their significance for humans—between equally untenable realism and idealism. Countering the philosophic project of criticism that reduces objects to either their features or to the human fetishists behind them, OOO invites wonder, which entails both astonishment and puzzlement.

New materialism is a project distinct from OOO. Describing her own brand of new materialism as “a kind of vitalism, an enchanted materialism” (447), the political theorist Jane Bennett articulates her own ontology this way: “I mean the ability of bodies [human, nonhuman, animate, inanimate] to become otherwise than they are, to press out of their current configuration and enter into new compositions of self as well as into new alliances and rivalries with others” (447). Bennett describes this ability as *thing-power*. Both OOO and new materialism posit a world full of vibrant objects with their own material-rhetorical agency that exceeds our particular abilities as humans to either describe or delimit.

Object-oriented ontology and new materialism can thus complicate and invigorate environmental rhetoric.² Individual objects, which I read broadly to include both the animate and inanimate, and the animal, vegetable, and mineral, perpetually withdraw from us and each other—they remain wild in never being fully known or controlled by us. And those *wild objects* relate with one another in ways unknown to us (as wild objects ourselves) and produce effects we cannot codify and might very well find threatening. Objects do not need to be kept wild; objects remain wild even in the midst of interaction. Wildness is inherent in them and is present even when we are. Such wildness is *everywhere*: Antarctica, Yellowstone, a city playground, the air ducts in my house, my desk drawer, and my large intestine. “Nature is wild, always wild,” Birch argues, “in the sense that it is not subject to human control [H]umans are participants in a wildness that is far larger and more powerful than they can ever be, and to which human law bringing is so radically inappropriate as to be simply absurd” (460).

Extending object-oriented ontology and new materialism, I use Cronon’s deep ambivalence toward “wilderness” and build on Birch’s treatment of “wildness” to mark the strange environmentalism arrived at by Owens in the White Pass. Deep ambivalence names our agonistic entanglement with nonhuman nature that continually withdraws and resists human mastery. My argument necessarily traces a winding path. First, I explicate the environmental rhetoric I wish to complicate. Second, I articulate the OOO and new materialism I use to complicate this version of environmental rhetoric. Third, employing these ontological frameworks, I elaborate Cronon’s deep ambivalence as an alternative, strange environmental rhetoric. Finally, I return to Owens’ burning of the shelter asking how we might attend

²Additional work in this area includes: Timothy Morton (*Hyberobjects*), Joanna Zylińska, and Jeffrey Cohen.

to the attitude Owens arrives at only after having burned the shelter and subsequently encountering the two Native American women. Owens' story is compelling, but toward what kinds of new rhetorics does it push us? Speculating upon what a strange environmental rhetoric might look like, I turn to the film *Trollhunter*, which performs deep ambivalence as a strange environmental rhetoric. Ultimately, deep ambivalence means only that we leave open as radically kairotic, as rhetorical, the question of our responsibility to the wild objects with whom we inhabit the earth. As such, deep ambivalence is applicable to rhetorical theory more generally. As Carl Herndl and Stuart Brown argue, "the field of environmental rhetoric is immense and remarkably varied, so varied in fact that we think it connects almost every part of our social and intellectual life, crossing boundaries between various academic disciplines and social institutions" (4). To think through environmentalism is to think through rhetoric.

Reading and Writing Contemporary Environmentalism

No one knows what an environment can do.

—Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature*

Environmentalism has always been heterogeneous, and the contours of our responsibility have been (re)defined many times.³ Contention arises, then, in terms of how best to address the environment, to speak for or about it, to raise awareness, and to motivate action.⁴ Considering the state of the planet, it should come as no surprise that achieving stasis is a problem for environmentalism. This section addresses the contemporary scene of both environmentalism and its rhetoric as well as scholarly discussions of environmental rhetoric—both rhetors and rhetoricians. This section sets the scene for the intervention of deep ambivalence. For some time there have been preservationists and conservationists, deep ecologists, and those calling for sustainability, efficiency, or sufficiency. Although spanning the globe, environmentalism is intensely local and personal, and so emerges movements like environmental justice that address not simply preservation or conservation of "wilderness," which are seen as preserving it only for a privileged few, but also urban environments where humans live as well. The concerns of environmentalism are present in all human agoras. Environmental rhetoric, then, addresses people and their relationships with both the humans and nonhumans who inhabit the global agora. It also concerns the future of that world and, by extension, everyone and everything in it. Given Herndl and Brown's observation, it is clear that I am not the

³So much so, that I cannot hope to provide a full accounting of it here. Even within environmental rhetoric there is much ground to cover. Stellar work includes: Tarla Rai Peterson, Craig Waddell, W. Michele Simmons, and Sidney I. Dobrin and Sean Morey. For a more comprehensive history of environmentalism, see Leslie Paul Thiele.

⁴For instance, see the acrimonious debate in and around "The Death of Environmentalism," an essay (and now book) by Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus (<http://grist.org/article/doe-intro>).

first to contend that environmentalism is *the* issue for all time: no other issue could be more pressing. No issue could matter more.

If ever rhetoric were to work then surely it would be for the environment—its survival and thus our own. In traditional terms, environmental rhetoric attempts two things: convince an audience of the connection between human agency and efficacy and current environmental events or conditions. In other words, it hopes to demonstrate that humans have some definite effect through some concrete and identifiable means. Employing rhetoric, however, is never so clear-cut. Debates and questions of strategy and tactics loom large, and it is on these questions that rhetoricians have largely focused. Should we call it global warming or climate change? Should we stress economic incentives? Should we privilege human concerns over the value of wildlife itself? It is a difficult challenge: just ask Al Gore on a good day. Second, such rhetoric must persuade the same audience that other human agencies must be employed to produce amelioratory effects. Much scholarship on environmental rhetoric explores how this is or can be done and how it is (frequently) countered or resisted. These are good questions in pursuit of a worthy goal, but they are not the only questions nor the only goals.

We can see these questions at work in discussions of science and technology relative to climate change. This resonance makes explicit some of the tacit assumptions in environmentalism. While arguing, “It would surely be irresponsible to question the reality of climate change, to vacillate at the point of action,” sociologist Bronislaw Szerszynski writes, “it is the dominant technological framing of climate change that ultimately constitutes a more radical evasion of responsibility” (22). In other words, the problem’s framing puts humans outside of the environment.

To frame our predicament in this way is already to approach the weather with a very narrow set of questions. “Is it changing? How fast? Are we to blame? Can we alter it?” This way of reading propels us inexorably towards a calculative technological response of which the hubris of geoeengineering is only the most blatant, emblematic form. We are also being drawn to forms of mitigation that presume to calculate the weather and promise to make it stable, and forms of adaptation which have at their heart a soteriological dream of security which can only ever be within the reach of the fortunate, and only then through its own forms of externalization. (Szerszynski 23)

This “framing of our predicament” Szerszynski refers to as reading and writing the weather, and “[i]t is too early to know if it is too late” (11). The idea that we are too late in reading our impact is troubling, but Szerszynski nevertheless describes it as “reassuring”:

first, we unknowingly marked the climate; then we learned to read those marks, to turn them into meaningful signs; through learning to read them we learned the laws governing our marking; and through learning to read the marks well, we are thereby learning to control our marking. (11)

While I am not dismissing such a course of action, I would like to suggest that there is a larger problem afoot here: the stress on and drive toward human mastery of the environment.

That detachment and alienation result from hubris is perhaps unsurprising—that such hubris pervades opposing sides of the debate about the environment perhaps is. “Fix” and “Save” resonate with “Slash and Burn”—both reduce environments to what we can say and do about them. “Our relation with the weather has been pulled towards a certain kind of reading that constitutes it as a code that can be mastered and controlled” (Szerszynski 19). The ideas of control and calculation built into our efforts to save the planet are the very same motives that move so-called exploiters of the environment. In much the same way that rhetoricians have drawn from critiques of technical reason (notably Andrew Feenberg), which is very much at play in the environmentalisms Szerszynski critiques, I am suggesting that rhetoricians should critically attend to environmentalisms that implicitly privilege human control. That is, rhetoricians focused on environmental matters should mark stranger environmental rhetorics that do not remake (even perhaps unwittingly) the sorts of ontological presuppositions that currently short-circuit environmentalism.

In Szerszynski’s terms, the problem with something like Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* is that it operates within the same logical parameters as its opposite. Gore suggests that with the right amount of data and the correct political will, humans can reverse the trend of global climate change and save the earth. Through our awesome technological might we have rewritten the face of the Earth. Through our awesome scientific might we can now, finally, read the earth and see the true effect of our awful agency. But, fear not, for it is that agency that will allow us to re-write (or right) the earth again. “Firstly,” Szerszynski writes, “there are approaches which try to modulate the metabolism of the human–technology ensemble with its environment by reducing anthropogenic CO₂ emissions, typically by either reducing the amount of energy used or reducing its carbon-intensity” (17). Szerszynski continues:

Secondly, a rather different set of climate technics work by intervening in the Earth’s wider metabolic processes. They seek in a more direct way to make the weather an object of technological control, in an echo of the cold-war, military origins of climate change science. Such technocratic approaches, more favoured in the USA, are framed in terms of “geoengineering” or “global environmental management.” (17)

This environmentalism is at work in *An Inconvenient Truth*. As Laura Johnson argues, *Truth* performs a “tempered apocalypticism, one that mixes apocalyptic appeals with scientific rationalism” (31, emphasis in the original). Such a mixture, however, leaves unchallenged the primacy, uniqueness, and universality of human agency. Gore’s faith in human agency is a mirror image of the faith of the robber baron and the oil magnate.

In 2002 atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen proposed that the current geological epoch be designated the “Anthropocene” to mark its status as “in many ways

human-dominated” (23). Crutzen does so without obvious pride. He remarks: “A daunting task lies ahead for scientists and engineers to guide society towards environmentally sustainable management during the era of the Anthropocene” (23). This admonishment is built on an unsettling amount of hubris. Humans have overstepped their bounds and now dominate the environment; never fear, though, for this self-same domination is likewise the cure. It is telling that Crutzen sees the anthropocene as daunting only for scientists and engineers who will lead the rest of us, we assume, to safety. If the environment is a code that can be read, mastered, and controlled, then the environmentalism suggested by this understanding will be anything but fully democratic or agonistic (much less object-oriented). And so we send Louis Owens up the mountain to remove our presence. Rather than acknowledging our place alongside other wild objects within an environment—which is agonistic by virtue of its contact and contingency—we see the maintenance of our disconnect from nature in order to save it: a failure to acknowledge not simply the limits of human agency, but that human agency emerges with, alongside, and sometimes against the agency of others.

There are, then, forms of environmentalism that, despite the best of intentions, nevertheless adopt positions that undermine their own goals. The presence of such environmentalisms suggest that many views of the environment (at times seemingly at odds) are often different sides of the same coin: the coin that privileges the human, which almost always results in what Jimmie Killingsworth and Jacqueline Palmer describe as “humankind’s ‘alienation from nature’” (4). To return to Owens and the burning of the shelter, however, we see how such alienation can operate within environmentalism itself. Owens suggests that our efforts to save the wild are a kind of alienation. My response to such detachment and alienation is another kind of detachment altogether: Cronon’s “deep ambivalence” or what is in object-oriented approaches called *withdrawal*. Not detachment but ambivalence: not alienation but the alien. The environment is finally not a problem to be identified and then solved, but a fundamental agonism (a *krisis*) that we must always work through—rhetoric’s work is never done.

New Ontologies for a Strange Environmental Rhetoric

Behind every apparently simple object is an infinite legion of further objects that “crush, depress, break, and enthrall one another.”

—Graham Harman, *Tool-Being*

While there are a range of thinkers I could employ in articulating the object-oriented and new materialist thought I am bringing to bear on contemporary environmental rhetoric, I highlight two particularly accomplished thinkers: Graham Harman, a philosopher, works on what he calls OOO, which is a primary strain of speculative realism, while Jane Bennett, a political theorist, works on what she calls vital materialism, which is a major strain of new materialism. Harman admonishes us

to consider objects in and of themselves—he articulates objects as wild even in the midst of relations—and Bennett’s project maintains wild objects as vital while pulling them into relations (or what she, working from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, calls assemblages), arguing that it is only through such relations that any thing has agency. I should make it clear here that Bennett and Harman represent distinct projects that might very well be at odds: the relationship between speculative realisms such as OOO and new materialism has yet to be fully articulated. Harman, invested in the complete autonomy of objects, allows us to focus on them as strange. Bennett, focused on relations, allows us to place objects into assemblages that in turn produce unexpected outcomes. OOO attends to the strangeness of objects while new materialism increases the viscosity of their relations.

Both Bennett and Harman enunciate a response to the human-centrism of much contemporary philosophical and the political thought. Harman and his allies argue that philosophy (and its Kantian legacy) largely concerns itself with the problem of access (epistemology) rather than things in and of themselves (ontology). Bennett’s new materialism (of which there are other flavors) advocates “the vitality of matter” on behalf of a more overtly political project. For example, Bennett examines the 2003 power blackout that affected large parts of North America. Calling the blackout a “cascade of effects” (37), she attributes the power outage not simply to human faults and failures but also to, for instance, electricity itself. “Electricity sometimes goes where we send it, and sometimes it chooses its path on the spot, in response to the other bodies it encounters and the surprising opportunities for actions interactions that they afford” (28). Whereas OOO privileges the autonomy of objects, new materialisms want to trace the work of all actors in assemblages. Despite their differences or, more accurately, because of them, both serve environmentalism in attending to *both* the irreducible wildness *and* fundamental entanglement of objects.

Harman’s core argument is that *all* objects withdraw from *all* relations, and that human beings do not exist on some distinct ontological plain. Harman writes, “object-oriented philosophy holds that the relation of humans to pollen, oxygen, eagles, or windmills is no different in kind from the interaction of these objects with each other” (*Guerilla* 1). All objects attempt to reduce other objects but ever fail to fully capture or know them. Fire reduces cotton to its flammable features; humans reduce hammers to tools; hammers reduce nails to hammer-able objects. “The fact that humans seem to have more cognitive power than shale or cantaloupe,” he argues, “does not justify grounding this difference in a basic ontological dualism” (83). For Harman everything is an object, and objects are not finally reducible, knowable, or exhaustible. All we ever know of objects are their surface features. Although, and lest we re-inscribe Plato’s allegory of the cave, these surface features are not to be gotten behind to find the real object underneath, even within the object there is wildness, as objects withdraw even from their own features. Inside objects there are only other objects just as withdrawn. There is for Harman an infinite regress of objects inside of other objects. Objects cannot be discovered in the traditional sense, not because of some practical limit that humans face, but because the

object is in itself strange and withdrawn. “Objects,” Harman argues elsewhere, “are units that both display and conceal a multitude of traits” (*Quadruple* 7). Withdrawal moves in both directions, and withdrawal is a feature of humans and nonhumans alike.

The structure of all relations that emerges from Harman is predicated on this withdrawal. We only ever glance off of other objects, which in turn only ever glance off of other objects. Objects know one another only by their exhaust: those parts of them that escape into our view. This is the speculation of speculative realism: objects are real not because they are fully present, but are real because they are constantly withdrawing. It is in light of withdrawal that Harman writes, “Contrary to the usual view, what we really want is to be *objects*—not as means to an end like paper or oil, but in the sense that we want to be like the Grand Canyon or a guitar hero or a piece of silver: distinct forces to be reckoned with” (*Guerilla* 140, emphasis in the original).

To flesh out what it might mean *to be reckoned with*, I turn to Bennett’s work on “a political ecology of things,” and her focus both on the philosophical project of countering “the idea of matter as passive stuff, as raw, brute, or inert” (viii) and the political project of encouraging “more intelligent and sustainable engagements with vibrant matter and lively things” (viii). Like Cronon, Bennett is concerned about our relations with other things, and she too wonders, “whether environmentalism remains the best way to frame the problems” (110). Also echoing Owens, Bennett notes that as she moved from standard environmentalism to what she calls vital materialism, “from a world of nature versus culture to a heterogeneous monism of vibrant bodies, I find the ground beneath my old ethical maxim, ‘tread lightly on the earth’ to be less solid” (121). The crumbling of this ground owes itself to a position not unlike Harman’s. This is the vitalism of her vital materialism, which sees vitality as “the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (viii).⁵ Bennett is after what she calls “a primordial swerve,” which

says that the world is not determined, that an element of chanciness resides at the heart of things, but it also affirms that so-called inanimate things have a life, that deep within is an inexplicable vitality or energy, a moment of independence from and resistance to us and other bodies: a kind of thing-power. (18)

An object is wild not only in its ability to resist but also in its ability to do its own thing.

⁵Bruno Latour also contributes to the composition of what I am calling “wild objects”: “Actors are defined above all as obstacles, scandals, as what suspends mastery, as what gets in the way domination, as what interrupts the closure and the composition of the collective. To put it crudely, human and nonhuman actors appear first of all as troublemakers” (*Politics* 81). Latour’s focus on environmental has only grown more pronounced in the last several years. Again resonating with Bennett’s articulate of thing-power, Latour argues, “The point of living in the epoch of the anthropocene is that all agents share the same shape-changing destiny” (“Agency”).

But, unlike Harman, Bennett places things into constitutive relations: she removes them from the vacuum in which Harman places them. While OOO might portend inaction in the face of wildness, Bennett's new materialism emphasizes interaction. She is fully concerned with relations between vital objects with their own ontological weight. As we move away from the warrants of environmentalism that Owens, Cronon, Birch, and Szerszynski critique, Bennett persuasively argues that we must "Give up the futile attempt to disentangle the human from the nonhuman. Seek instead to engage more civilly, strategically, and subtly with the nonhumans in the assemblages in which you, too, participate" (116). The thing-power of all bodies is precisely what constitutes the world as we know it. To imagine ourselves apart from this, or to see disentanglement as the ethical way forward, is to mis-take not just some vague obligation to relate, but to a necessary participation in the agonistic assemblages that give life. We must also recognize that such assemblages are forever beyond our ability to name them, know them, control them, or correct them. Our obligation is shot through with risk, contingency, and strife: in short, agonism. With this recognition of thing-power as a constitutive force, we get closer to deep ambivalence.

Deep Ambivalence

the feeling of affirming life despite its ambivalent incomprehensibility.

—Rachel Greenwald Smith, "Materialism, Ecology, Aesthetics"

Vitality and withdrawal define wild objects in ways that allow us to reckon with them without reducing them. Deep ambivalence enacts the rhetoric of OOO and new materialism. "Ambivalence" derives from the German *ambivalenz*, which means equivalence or equivalency. In 1912, in the pages of *Lancet*, German psychologist Eugene Bleuler used *ambivalency* to name "a condition which gives to the same idea two contrary feeling-tones and invests the same thought simultaneously with both a positive and negative character" ("ambivalence"). Furthermore, the Latin root *ambi* means both or both sides, as in ambidextrous. In the oscillation of ambivalence, there is an attitude of equivalence. To feel ambivalent is to be equivalent. Deep ambivalence is thus an ontologically flavored rhetoric predicated on a kind of being in the world: being across a flat ontology in which all beings are equally emplaced. Deep ambivalence discloses the rhetoricity of all being in acknowledging the being otherwise of things in relations. Recall that the deep ambivalence I am describing here was born of an individual deeply committed to environmentalism. Cronon devoted considerable time to reflecting on the environment, about nature, and about "wilderness." That he arrived at "deep ambivalence," which he came to honestly, earnestly, and in light of the work he had done, is significant. A hard-earned and deep ambivalence is a worthy environmental rhetoric.

Like Harman and Bennett, in *Ecology Without Nature*, Tim Morton helps us think through the implications of object-oriented and new materialist thought for environmental rhetoric, and does so through aesthetics. Whereas Harman is a philosopher and Bennett is a political theorist, Morton is a literary scholar concerned explicitly with environmental aesthetics. What I call wild objects Morton calls the strange stranger. Strangeness inheres even as we think of wild objects: “Life forms recede into strangeness the more we think about them, and whenever they encounter one another—the strangeness is irreducible” (“Here Comes Everything” 165). Morton argues, “ecological philosophy that does not attend to this strangeness is not thinking coexistence deeply enough” (165). The same is true for environmentalism, which often un-estranges the stranger in doing its work. Think again of how the rhetoric of *An Inconvenient Truth*—even in the title—is contingent on an accurate knowing of the environment in order to effect changes in behavior. As Szerszynski argues, “This story is one in which the diagnostic task of establishing the truth of anthropogenic climate change naturally gives way to the practical one of finding effective political and technical responses to it” (10). Is it possible to look into the eyes of a polar bear and see a strange stranger? A vital body with its own kind of thing-power? A wild object capable of making trouble, of biting back? A citizen-being who saunters into the agora making demands, making enemies, making friends? The reality of wild objects cannot be reduced, and it is in light of the irreducible strangeness of wild objects that we turn to deep ambivalence.

What Morton proposes with melancholia is a mode of engagement and intimacy predicated on strangeness. “Melancholia is precisely a mode of intimacy with strange objects that can’t be digested by the subject” (“Here Comes Everything” 175). Melancholia is neither the resignation of depression nor the euphoria of mania: melancholia resonates strongly with Cronon’s deep ambivalence, which is itself not resignation but recognition of and respect for strangeness. The consequences of shaking off our melancholia are dire, for it “starts to tell us the truth about the withdrawn quality of objects” (176). Read in concert with Morton, Szerszynski is confronting precisely those contemporary environmentalisms that attempt to shake off melancholia: “no decoding of [the weather] will tell us what we need to do, what level of emissions is safe, when we have ‘done our bit,’ when we have ‘fixed the climate’” (Szerszynski 24). If objects withdraw, as Harman argues, then a decoding that leads to salvation is out as a viable environmentalism.

The project of decoding that Szerszynski describes can be countered by the melancholic mode of Cronon’s deep ambivalence, which is neither the detachment of alienation nor the fantasy of decoding. Deep ambivalence, like melancholia, “is the default mode of [object-oriented] subjectivity: an object-like coexistence with other objects and the otherness of objects—touching them, touching the untouchable, dwelling on the dark side one can never know, living in endless twilight shadows” (Morton, “Here Comes Everything” 176). An inconvenient truth, we might say, that cannot be charted or fully digested. Deep ambivalence is wrapping your head, your hands, and your heart around that which you cannot completely wrap anything.

Such ambivalence, as a feature of all objects and their relations, is already a style of engagement.

The basic ontological features described by Morton and others suggest a strange environmental rhetoric of wild objects. To speak of ambivalence everywhere—to speak of an ambivalent polar bear, for instance—is no doubt strange. But recall Bennett’s claim that thing-power is both resistance and volition and Harman’s critique of any ontological distinction between humans and nonhumans. To say that ambivalence is a feature of all objects is not to say that a polar bear’s ambivalence is like mine. It is simply to acknowledge ontological equivalence. Wild objects are deeply ambivalent, but this does not mean disconnected. It means only that connections do not fully exhaust an object. Objects remain wild not in remaining untouched, but even in the midst of contact and of relations. In any relation there is excess, there is wildness unavoidably—a wildness we can neither preserve nor conserve, neither expend nor exhaust. Of course, this does not mean that there are not stakes or risks: a dead polar bear is wild, but it is still dead. The question, then, is what difference deep ambivalence makes in addressing the flight from history and evasion of responsibility that are at the heart of Owens’ and Cronon’s trouble with wilderness.

The challenge is thus operationalizing this ambivalence. How do we craft environmental rhetoric from this specific kind of ambivalence as an attitude? What sorts of agoras do we need? We must first recognize that ambivalence is not a solely human affair. “At some level,” Morton argues, resonating with Folz’s treatment of *krisis*,

respecting other species and ecosystems involves a choice. This choice is saturated with contingency (it is our choice) and desire (we want something to be otherwise). There is no place outside the sphere of this contingent choice from which to stand and assess the situation—no “nature” outside the problem of global warming that will come and fill us in on how to work. (“Here Comes Everything” 167)

We are stuck here and we have to act everyday as we live alongside an innumerable and unknowable number of species. We have to build shelters, we have to eat, we have to live and survive. “Coming up with a new worldview means dealing with how humans experience their place in the world. *Aesthetics thus performs a crucial role, establishing ways of feeling and perceiving this place*” (*Ecology 2*, emphasis in the original). Morton thus asks, “What kinds of political and social thinking, making, and doing are possible” (4)? The aesthetic, rhetorical work we must always do is to find ways to relate through deep ambivalence. In this passage Morton echoes Kenneth Burke and the latter’s treatment of literature as equipment for living. “One seeks to ‘direct the larger movements and operations’ in one’s campaign of living,” Burke writes. “One ‘maneuvers,’ and the maneuvering is an ‘art’” (cited in Morton 298). This talk of maneuvering is agonistic: campaigns and maneuvers, if perhaps too militaristic, certainly point up the confrontational nature of living. They likewise

attend to the emplaced nature of living: maneuvering takes place on the ground. And it is this grounded maneuvering toward which I now turn.

The Allegory of the Trollhunter

Everyday has been a struggle with and for trolls.

—Thomas, *Trollhunter*

A young Norwegian university student wearing a blue jacket is running into a forest. A camera and a boom microphone follow his footsteps. He has been brought here by a man claiming to be a trollhunter: someone who clandestinely manages trolls on behalf of the government. The young man and his friends, part of a crew filming a documentary on bear poaching, are running toward strange animal sounds and bright ultraviolet flashes of light. The trees and the underbrush slow them—there is confusion; there is darkness; there is noise. A man, the trollhunter, bursts into the frame of the documentary camera. He yells but one word: “TROLL!” It is equal parts surprising and hilarious.

The young man bolts, now following the footsteps of the trollhunter out of the forest. The young man, Thomas, is separated from the group, which hears him yell out in pain. Exhausted and terrified, the soon reunited group reaches the trollhunter’s vehicle. Thomas has been bitten by what he suspects is a bear. However, seeing their own vehicle flipped-over and gnawed-on, the group eventually acknowledges the possibility that they have just encountered a troll. In a state of disbelief, Thomas considers the implications of being bitten by a creature in which he does not believe. Deeply ambivalent, perhaps, describes his attitude, which is both the state of his mind and the orientation of his body in an environment. The previously snarky and self-righteous university student has been bitten back into a reality far stranger than the one from which he thought himself apart. It is an attitude adjustment for our age, and, for the purposes of this essay, a strange environmental rhetoric worth examining.

Trollhunter—a tongue-in-cheek 2011 Norwegian film of the found footage variety (the title role is played by famed Norwegian comedian Otto Jespersen)—follows three Norwegian university students as they film a documentary about illegal bear hunting. The students are sure of themselves in their environmentalism and in their mission to protect bears, which is surely admirable. Following someone they believe to be responsible for a slew of poachings, the students discover that the individual is not hunting bears but hunting (or rather, managing) a population of trolls, which the government is keeping secret. It seems the trolls are moving beyond their traditional ranges: sheep are being killed, bridges are being damaged, and German tourists are being eaten. The trollhunter, an ex-soldier named Hans, is attempting to discern what is driving the trolls so that they can be controlled. Is it habitat destruction? Is it climate change? Is the cause ultimately human? The way this strange film

unfolds sheds new light on how we might answer these questions and whether or not they are the right questions after all.

Trollhunter can be viewed as the strange environmental rhetoric I am describing: it is a confrontation with our comportment toward the nonhuman, the wild. Deep ambivalence is performed in this mockumentary that begins as a student environmental exposé and quickly becomes a life-and-death crisis. The Norwegian government—via its Troll Security Service (TSS)—seeks to read and write the trolls. Throughout *Trollhunter*, we witness the trollhunter Han’s describing trolls, reading newspapers for unknowing reports of troll activity, sharing the forms he uses to document each encounter, attending to troll tracks, and looking for other signs of their presence and movement. It will turn out that one troll is responsible for the trouble: he has escaped his territory. In *Trollhunter* we see wildness escape the bounds of wilderness. The “rogue” troll is infecting other trolls with an unidentified illness or virus.

A blood sample is secured—an incredibly dangerous job that involves Hans donning an almost medieval suit of armor—and taken to a veterinarian, from whom we learn about the physiology of trolls: their metabolism, their sensitivity to light, and so on. The team soon departs from the veterinary clinic and continues their journey, backtracking the trail of destruction to its presumed source. Along the way (and set amongst the beautiful landscapes of Norway), we learn that humans have been attempting to control—by measures, preserving and conserving—the troll population in Norway for many years. For instance, the trollhunter recounts a terrible story of when he had to exterminate families of trolls as part of this government cover-up. The movie is not at a loss to condemn human beings when it comes to their relationships with the environment and its other inhabitants. Within the context of the film, then, strangeness and withdrawal are neither invitations nor excuses for anything and everything the human can do. Giving up mastery and control by no means entails an anything goes approach to environmental issues.

The film concludes with a series of intense events, starting with a phone call from the veterinarian who tested the blood sample Hans heroically obtained. The trolls are not responding to some direct, human intervention; the trolls have rabies. What the film suggests is that human beings are not the whole show—we are not the end all and be all of the earth. Trolls are not being driven by climate change or habitat destruction (these were, full disclosure, what I guessed, early in the film, as the cause of the trolls’ troubles—this increased my surprise, and later, interest in the rabies twist). They were being driven by another, nonhuman agent. The blood work that “determines” the cause does little to reduce the trolls’ status as wild objects; it simply reveals a whole wild and wide world of which we are only a small part. This strongly suggests a certain ambivalence built into the “nature of things” as wild objects. There is coexistence here, but it is not reducible to one kind of relation or one source of causation. As Morton writes, “The more we know about a strange stranger, the more she (he, it) withdraws” (“Here Comes Everything” 166). The wildness and strangeness of the troll are increased by the film’s documentary, found footage style.

Every move closer to the troll pushes the troll further and further away. “Bizarrely,” Morton argues, “increased access (technically possible or not, hypothetical or not) does not decrease strangeness” (“Here Comes Everything” 166). Ambivalence and wildness persist despite and through our attempts to read and write the environment. Morton describes this as “doubt—the effect of things ceasing to be what you expect” (*Ecology* 200). The rabies virus becomes the wild object that reveals the wildness of all other objects.

Trolls resist this control, but not simply as a response to humans alone. It is not revenge but rabies—another wild object—that moves them and shapes their own dynamic. Ascribing revenge as the motive positions humans right back at the center of the universe. There is hubris hidden in guilt. As Bennett might argue, the agency of the trolls does not lie solely in their ability to resist us, but in their ability to do their own thing. Dead German tourists and a rabid Norwegian university student are but unintended consequences of the troll’s own relation with rabies. We are not the only species with footprints. As Thomas remarks near the end of the film when he learns he too has rabies, “I don’t have rabies. Hello. Dogs have rabies.” “Humans encounter a world in which nonhuman materialities have power,” Bennett reminds us, “a power that the ‘bourgeois I,’ with this pretensions of autonomy, denies” (16).

With the now panick-stricken students demanding immediate medical attention for Thomas, Hans sets out to confront and kill the largest troll there is: the troll who has somehow contracted rabies and is the source of its spread throughout Norway’s population of trolls. Having previously heard from the vet about the pain experienced by trolls, there is more than an element of mercy when Hans kills the troll, but there is also an element of self-defense, of protection, and even of aggression. Like Thomas’ biting earlier in the film, it is a deeply ambivalent act shot through with ethical ambiguity that cannot be resolved ahead of time by concepts like wilderness or a harsh and asymmetrical boundary between the human and the nonhuman. The decision to kill the troll is kairotic, and the justness of this act must be determined on the merits of the case rather than some ontological dualism that establishes principles such as preservation, conversation, exploitation, hierarchy, which in turn demand axiomatic responses.

But the film does not end with the troll’s death. It concludes with Hans hiking off alone over the horizon and the documentary team running to escape the authorities who are desperate to get their hands on the footage. Hans, the last trollhunter, has done his final job, and the fantasy of control, of management, disappears over the horizon. We are told that no one has seen the students since, that the government continues to deny the existence of both trolls and the TSS, and viewers are then asked to contact authorities with any information about the students’ whereabouts. The film’s final scene depicts the prime minister’s press conference after the cover-up has been achieved. During the conference, the prime minister lets it slip that trolls do in fact exist. The press corps misses the admission, and the credits roll. As Birch argues,

wildness will always escape wilderness. The ambivalent conclusion of the film—the cover-up and the slip of the tongue—performs an attempt to exorcise wildness, which nevertheless escapes as exhaust in our anxiety about the environment.

“Han’s entire life,” Thomas remarks in a pause before the film’s dramatic conclusion, “has revolved around trolls. Everyday has been a struggle with and for trolls. In many ways, he is a superhero here in Norway. What would we have done without him? That makes it all the more important for us to make this movie.” A struggle *with* and *for* trolls. The trollhunter is positioned as largely ambivalent about his role. For example, he only begrudgingly allows the students to follow him because he is tired of keeping trolls a secret. He neither fully loves nor hates trolls, but he is at least equivalent with them. Trolls are not nature’s wrath, but simply wild and powerful objects to be reckoned with. It is this deep ambivalence that Thomas celebrates.

Conclusion: Rhetoric’s Footprint

Object-oriented ontology and new materialism are engagements (or re-engagements) with matter outside normal subject–object, human–nonhuman, culture–nature relationships that lie at the heart of much contemporary, common sense environmentalism. In suggesting alternate ways to relate to things, they are implicitly related to the concerns of environmental rhetoric. I began by outlining how contemporary environmental rhetoric follows the model we can see at work in something like *An Inconvenient Truth* and how this model is incomplete. To again borrow from Szerszynski, such a rhetoric “is one in which the diagnostic task of establishing the truth of anthropogenic climate change naturally gives way to the practical one of finding effective political and technical responses to it” (10). I applied new ontological frameworks to questions of the environment and linked them with arguments in and around environmentalism already leaning in such directions. I concluded with some tentative suggestions for how to develop and articulate a strange environmentalism built on Cronon’s deep ambivalence.

In cultivating an attitude of deep ambivalence in humans, *Trollhunter* enacts the deep ambivalence of wildness itself. Deep ambivalence is an ontologically flavored rhetoric predicated upon a kind of being in the world—not so much a position we can actively adopt as an attitude that shapes activity. Deep ambivalence is a basic condition of being we must honestly face. We each act in time and each act participates in the agonistic composition of a world. There cannot, finally, be a path laid out ahead of us that allows us to save and fix the world (the notion of “wilderness” and the nature/culture binary are such paths). There is only ever a series of agonistic encounters between wild objects. This might at times look like any number of contemporary environmental strategies, or it might also look like a Norwegian calcifying a giant, rabid troll. It might be the building of shelter or a burning of one. Here is the frustrating thing for those with the will to read and write the weather: we cannot fully know what our responsibility will look like. As even Szerszynski argues, climate technics can play a role so long as they are “grounded in specific

social projects that bind humanity together in new relations of interdependence” (25). Birch similarly argues that “even the preservation of wilderness as sacred space must be conceived and practiced as part of a larger strategy that aims to make all land into, or back into sacred space, and thereby to move humanity into a conscious reinhabitation of wildness” (464).

A strange environmental rhetoric troubles the means by which Cronon and Owens both argue we flee from history and escape responsibility. Far from advocating a hands-off or otherwise passive approach to nonhuman nature, a strange environmental rhetoric contends that all we ever do is interact with other, wild objects capable of acting back in strange, sometimes threatening ways. This is the agonism that constitutes environments over and over again. Deep ambivalence attends more earnestly to the environment as rhetorical in acknowledging its contingency and probability. A *krisis* demands deciding, which is conducted in conditions of uncertainty.

As rhetoricians complicate environmentalism, we might also introduce greater complexity to rhetoric more generally. Rhetoric has too long foregrounded epistemology at the expense of ontology. Deep ambivalence cannot be raised like awareness. Rhetoric has to be a comportment and not simply a call to action; there must be a clearing beforehand in which any such call can be voiced and heard. That clearing, however, will look different each time: the mechanisms of articulation will vary and evolve. For example, Lawrence Rosenfield helpfully points toward an epideictic rhetoric that, far from simply an act of reinforcing existing values, “suggests an exhibiting or making apparent (in the sense of showing or highlighting) what might otherwise remain unnoticed or invisible” (135). Epideictic rhetoric, to use the language of this essay, brings forth the strange. Summarizing Rosenfield’s articulation of the epideictic, James Jasinski notes, “The true function of epideictic, therefore, is to reveal or disclose something—to bring new truths out into the open” (211). *Trollhunter*, then, provides a service to both environmentalism and to rhetorical theory. It performs a strange environmentalism and strange rhetoric—strange because it is an epideictic gesture in the name of ambivalence. Predicated on ambivalence, such a rhetoric falls outside the realm of simply praising and blaming already established values.

Within deep ambivalence as environmentalism, rhetoric itself will necessarily be stranger. Hence the appeal to the epideictic rhetoric disclosed by Rosenfield: a rhetoric of bringing forth the otherwise. So long as rhetoric remains wedded to the human and the human alone, environmental rhetoric will continue to miss the mark. Rhetoric, to repurpose a common environmental trope, must be the footprint: *all* the ways we mark and are ourselves marked, bitten, or stung. All footprints must be recognized as rhetorical, whether they are discursive or non-discursive, human or nonhuman. Avoiding footprints is both impossible and ethically suspect; ethics is about relations, and relations are about living in the world. The very nature of a response presumes that we cannot know in any given situation what our responsibility will be. To leave no footprint is to not have lived with others, and we have already had quite enough of that.

Acknowledgments

I thank the editor and the two anonymous reviews for their help in revising this essay: it is stronger for their thorough and insightful comments. My thanks as well to Paul Lynch, Rachel Greenwald Smith, Katie Dickman, and Matthew Miller for their patient and generous readings of early drafts. Finally, thanks to Casey Boyle for his generous and productive feedback throughout the process of composing this essay.

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