

Heather Houser. *Ecosickness in Contemporary U.S. Fiction: Environment and Affect*.
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For Heather Houser contemporary fiction's ability to make us feel about our bonds to the environment is central to its ability to make us *act*; it can 'ferry us from awareness to an obligation to respond' to our 'environmentally precarious present' (24). This stirring to engage is peculiar to what she terms 'ecosickness' fiction, a strand of recent literary texts that document the interdependence of somatic and ecological sickness through the hazardous but productive realm of affect. Hazardous because, as Houser is at pains to note, 'the same emotions that bring us to awareness might orient responses in uninvited ways' (16). Affect, in other words, is as likely to stymie as it is to inspire environmental action. Yet 'as sandboxes for ideas of agency rather than fixed treatises on it' (18-19), works of ecosickness are a valuable laboratory in which to test, interrogate and transform attitudes towards what Houser, quoting David Foster Wallace, describes as "'today's diseased now'" (228).

Houser proposes that ecosickness fiction can augment scientific research with a 'more broadly humanistic knowledge' (7) of environmental injury; as such, it contributes points of relatability to a field which, in its statistical detail and planetary focus, can often elide the everyday person. In a sense this argument fits smoothly into calls that the humanities now justify its 'contribution' (and, implicitly, its eligibility for funding) to public knowledge, but there is no doubting the brio with which Houser probes her selected literary works. Some of these, like Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac for the Dead*, have attracted ecocritical analysis before. Elsewhere, however, Houser is treading exciting new ground, as in her reading of Wallace's *Infinite Jest* and its presentation of disgusting bodies. That ecological concerns are

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also bodily ones is central to her notion that, in an age when biomedicine ‘change[s] the very matter of being’ (5), somatic and earthly sickness cannot be considered separate.

Ecosickness is at its strongest when Houser fleshes out her theoretical statements with close readings of what she calls a ‘*fin de millenaire* literature of sickness’ (8). Chapter two’s analysis of Jan Zita Grover’s *North Enough* and David Wojnarowicz’s *Close to the Knives* stands out in particular for its incisive reading of how both AIDS memoirs disrupt the links between nature, beauty and health. Grover and Wojnarowicz’s ‘sick’ texts offer discordant views on this entrenched mode of thought, calling ‘out normalized patterns of apprehending bodies and environments [and so] severing the conceptual chain that binds them around an idealized harmony’ (65). As an affect, ‘discord’ leads to suspicious readings of how regimes of nature and health marginalize people with AIDS, whose presence can challenge ideas of ecological purity. That Houser notes how her ‘sanguine picture of suspicion’ (69) here clashes with how theorists like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick conceive of it is a testament to her willingness to reconsider influential affect theories in relation to ecological concerns.

Houser’s following chapters display equally astute readings of ecosickness fiction in relation to various affects. In a chapter on Richard Powers’ *The Echo Maker*, for instance, she notes how the novel explores wonder as an affect which, despite its pedigree for eliciting awareness of human and extra-human connectivity, risks invoking a paranoia that forestalls ‘getting outside of the self to care’ (101). Significantly Houser also makes a point of placing her texts within a wider discursive field of environmental activism. So, before discussing how *Infinite Jest* uses disgust to forecast bodily and ecological vulnerability, she identifies similar techniques in campaigns by the WWF and the ‘Plane Stupid’ anti-aviation group. On the question of how effective fiction (and given her focus on Wallace, Wojnarowicz, and Powers, *experimental* fiction) can really be at catalysing environmental sentiment compared to such organizations, Houser is forthright: this action ‘will require much more than literature and literary analysis alone can accomplish’ (228). Indeed, contemporary fiction offers ‘a point of departure’ (228) for this larger task, not a political framework of its own.

Consequently works of ecosickness are exploratory rather than programmatic. As Houser explains, these texts are not interested in specifying ‘the “right” narrative affects for articulating an environmental politics,’ (27) but in testing the manners in which emotions might ‘carry us from the micro-scale of the individual to the macro-scale of institutions,

nations, and the planet' (223). Such provisionality will frustrate the dedicated activist, but Houser never lets her commitment to raising awareness of environmental issues straitjacket her receptivity to the literature under consideration. Nonetheless, if she resists an 'activist agenda' (225), Houser is still 'cautiously optimistic' (223) that ecosickness fiction can make a worthwhile contribution to environmental debates. In its analytical poise and sharp close readings, *Ecosickness in Contemporary U.S. Fiction* itself is a valuable addition to affect studies and ecocriticism. Houser makes a convincing claim for fiction's power to stoke readers to awareness of our 'continually weirding world' (227) and, in doing so, potentially inspire ethical projects that will help prevent ecological and bodily degradation.