The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture by Lawrence Buell, Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995.

Reviewed by mark meisner

In the past few years, a new field of study – "ecocriticism"– has been developing to consider the relationships between literary theory and environmental concerns and thought. Since 1993 it has had its own journal: *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment.* However, as a new field, it includes only a small handful of book-length monographs. This alone makes Lawrence Buell's new book, *The Environmental Imagination*, an important contribution to the field.

Buell is an amateur naturalist, an editor, a literary critic, and a professor of English at Harvard University. What is even more interesting, however, is his claim to be participating in a project of social change. Buell is apparently not just another English professor concerned exclusively with the analysis of texts; he's an informed and critical ecocentrist, for whom ecocriticism is the "study of the relation between literature and environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis."

Accordingly, Buell explicitly situates this book within the understanding of a need for cultural transformation. For him, the "environmental crisis involves a crisis of the imagination the amelioration of which depends on finding better ways of imaging nature and humanity's relation to it." To that end, he suggests that we need to "investigate literature's capacity for articulating the nonhuman environment." And he says that such "environmental interpretation requires us to rethink our assumptions about the nature of representation, reference, metaphor, characterization, personae, and canonicity." An ambitious project indeed, which comes down to a two-pronged approach that questions literary theory and its use in order to look at how nonhuman nature may be ecocentrically rendered.

Unfortunately, this book does not deliver quite what the introduction implies it will. This seems to be because these broader goals only emerged after Buell began with his original idea of "a history of Thoreauvian writing about the American natural environment." At times, I felt I was reading somewhat more literary history and analysis than seemed necessary, and not enough about ecocriticism per se or about the textual representation of nature. In other words, I found it heavy on examples and light on ecocritical theory, but that is probably partly due to my wish to see more explicit theory in that area. This concern aside, the book does offer a substantial analysis and some useful ideas, not to mention an impressive inquiry into Western environmental non-fiction.

The book is organized into three parts. The first deals with the "historical and theoretical contexts" of the project; the second with "forms of literary ecocentrism;" and the third with a consideration of Thoreau as a possible literary ecocentrist. In the first part of the book, Buell makes the general argument for environmental nonfiction's potential as a form of advocacy writing. Because of its "ideological multivalence," he argues, it can create positive and ecocentric representations of nature.

In the second section, Buell sets about identifying some specific ways in which texts can "act as carriers or agents of ecocentricity." For example, he suggests that one technique is that of telling stories of relinquishment: of either material possessions, or more interestingly, of the self-encapsulated egotism and anthropocentrism that gives the illusion of human autonomy from nonhuman nature. In the latter case, Buell wonders about literature's ability to question its conventional focus on character, personality, and narrative. In other chapters he looks at how the personification of nature has the potential to evoke an ethic of care, the role of a sense of place in such writing, and the use of seasonal and excursion narratives in environmental literature. He concludes the section with a chapter that probes what he sees as the master metaphor of the environmental age, that of apocalypse.

The final section is devoted primarily to a consideration of Thoreau. In turn, Buell deals with Thoreau's pilgrimage to Walden, his canonization into literary and environmental fame, and how his Walden itself is a testament to Thoreau's life. I found this section less interesting and relevant than the second one because the momentum of Buell's argument seemed to get lost. His thesis that literature can be re-read (and written) from an ecocentric perspective and that this in turn can serve an agenda of change is persuasive enough to the converted. However, my sense is that it needs to be made more explicitly, and the third section does not really do this. It is really the second section of the book that does the most in that respect, and for that reason, I found it the most engaging.

On the whole, *The Environmental Imagination* is robust. Buell's synthesis of current environmental thought with both literary theory and his own analysis is impressive. I was pleasantly surprised at how well-informed he is by recent work in environmental ethics, ecofeminism, environmental history and deep ecology, even though he does not foreground them as much as seems necessary to advance the field of ecocriticism. For Thoreauphiles and students of American nonfiction environmental literature, the book has much to offer. Furthermore, it should give credibility to the growing study of environmental fiction and literary nonfiction, subjects that have not been considered 'serious' within many English departments. Finally, although it is not a 'popular' book, for those interested in literary nature and the representation of the non-human world generally, *The Environmental Imagination* is essential reading.

. . . **mark meisner** has published some articles, presented some papers, and helped initiate some projects. Now he just wants to cash in his ideological investments and go out and play. His Ph.D. work is supported by an Eco-Research Doctoral Fellowship from Canada's Tri-Council Secretariat. . . . .

Futures by Design: The Practice of Ecological Planning by Doug Aberley (ed.), Gabriola Island, BC and Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers, 1994.

Reviewed by Brian Milani

The great joy in being an activist these days is the growing wealth of literature on change which is both visionary and practical, particularly in the crucial areas of economics and design. I'm thinking of books by Wayne Roberts, Paul Hawken, Delores Hayden, John Todd and Thomas Greco, and others. But we must certainly include publications from the bioregionalists of Cascadia – the New Catalyst bioregional series published by New Society Publishers.

This book is the second one on planning edited by Doug Aberley, a Hazelton BC planner and bioregional activist. It is a general collection on ecological planning, and is a worthwhile read for anyone interested in a transition to sustainability. A word of warning: it is not for people interested in regulatory tinkering. It is for those, in the words of Hawken, who see our social and environmental problems primarily as questions of *design* not management. Not content with lip service to entropy, environmental protection or unspecified new economic paradigms, bioregionalists are looking to human economic organization modeled on, and integrated within, healthy ecosystems. The jacket describes the book as "both primer and reference for everyone interested in self-reliance and self-government, improved quality of life, wise use of technology, absolute social justice, and ecological health."

Because design, in its broadest sense, is at the core of all real radical change today, compiling a book on "the practice of ecological planning" is a tall order. There are certainly important issues missing from this book. The book ignores a growing literature on "gendered spaces" and feminist design perspectives. Little attention is paid to the *process* of organic design, as in the "pattern language" process pioneered by Christopher Alexander. And the *depth* dimension of design, involving questions of more subtle energies (like in Celtic geomancy, Chinese Feng-Shui, or sacred architecture) is not even mentioned.

But, despite these gaps, there is a fair amount that the book does deliver, in theory and practice. There are a number of brief articles by eco-heavyweights, like Jane Jacobs, Gary Snyder, Bill Mollison, Murray Bookchin, Raymond Dasmann and Donella Meadows – mostly in the section on "contemporary conceptions of ecological planning." But there are also good basic articles in several other sections by less well-known writers. Those sections include "Inventing the Sustainable City", "Ecoregional Stewardship in Action", "Ecological Planning for Wildlife"' and "Ecological Planning for Human Use."

The "ecological stewardship" section was one of the most interesting – four ar-

ticles specifically on the bioregion of Cascadia (in the Pacific Northwest), including one by Tony Pearse on the Nisga'a band's use of advanced information technology, especially Geographical Information Systems (GIS), to map their land claims, monitor resource use, and devise ecological management strategies.

The cities section was a little sketchy, with the previously mentioned gaps, but it stands as a useful introduction to some important themes of Green City design. I particularly liked the "ecological planning for wildlife" section, which was a single long article by Reed Noss. It described "systems of interlinked wilderness areas and other large nature reserves, surrounded by multiple-use buffer zones managed in an ecologically intelligent manner." True to bioregional priorities, this section came *before* the section on "ecological planning for human use", a single article which I felt was less substantial, more like conventional planning, than the rest of the book.

Futures by Design, complete with its introductory blessing by David Suzuki, is a worthwhile read. It's subtitle – "the practice of ecological planning" – may be a little ambitious for such a short book. And Aberley's introduction may be a little presumptuous in insisting that bioregionalism is a complete and ready-made umbrella philosophy for all other social movements to rush under. But it is a fine introduction to some important dimensions of bioregional design.

. . . **Brian Milani** is currently pursuing a Master's Degree in Environmental Studies at York University. . . . .

Boundaries of Home: Mapping for Local Empowerment

by Doug Aberley (ed.), Gabriola Island, BC and Philadelphia PA: New Society Publishers, 1993.

Reviewed by Jennifer Morrow

This slim volume attempts to do two things. First, it tries to bring mapping into the bioregionalism discussion, presenting it as a tool for carrying out local initiatives. Second, it tries to be a how-to book for people interested in mapping their bioregions. The premise appears to be something like this: mapping has been appropriated by the military-industrial complex for "more and more sinister" ends. But in fact, "maps hold some primal attraction for the human animal" and if we draw our own maps and close our eyes and spread around a little good will, we will solve all of the world's problems. Space constraints, vagueness and contradictions cause the book to fail in its first task, to bring mapping and bioregionalism together. The "how-to" part, therefore, is severely weakened in its practical intent and implementation.

Editor Doug Aberley begins the book with a brief description of "aboriginal mapping," tossed in for "inspiration." Brief seems to be the name of the game, because the next section squeezes into twenty pages eight stories (some of which might actually have been interesting but for the space constraints) from people who have created maps of their own "bioregions." For instance, one good, concrete discussion about a British Columbia community whose map was an important tool in arguing for the public's inclusion in the area's management plan ends with this *deus ex machina:* "One final thought: no amount of mapping can be useful unless we talk with the spirits of the place before, during, and after the exercise in abstraction which a mapping project necessarily is." Fair enough, I guess, but nowhere else in the book do we get even a hint of what it means to talk to spirits.

It would be nice to excuse this text's endemic vagueness by the shortness of its sections. But I don't think it unreasonable to ask for a few lines' explanation of the word home. Used throughout the book, not to mention in the title, all the editor can come up with is that it is "that most fundamental aspect of life." Bioregionalism is better explained. Its goal is "to wed dynamic human populations to distinct physical territories defined by continuities of land and life." Fair enough. But what does "our bioregional future is based not on what has never been, but on that which is most familiar to our species" mean? A few pages later, that which is most familiar to us is defined as "a genetic memory of ancient skills" which aboriginal mapping should remind us of. Has the human genome project identified the mapping gene yet?

The book is wrought with contradictions, the most troublesome of which is between urban bioregionalism and escape-the-city bioregionalism. Aberley explains how aboriginal maps stored information on "where to hunt; where protection from invaders was best found; what plants were edible or medicinal, and where they could be reliably located; the location of trails, dens of dangerous animals, fords, lookouts, places of protection from weather, and fuel for heating." One wonders really how relevant this kind of information is to the book's contributors from the Chicago and Toronto bioregions.

Many other contributors evince an unexamined hatred of cities. Two writers describe their bioregion as being made up of "refugees from urban industrial centers." Another strives to "change from an urban to a wild region" without explaining "wild" (although he makes urban ills quite clear). Still another contributor describes an area of rural California which was "reinhabited by a flurry of people escaping the city." The use of the term "reinhabited" in this quotation is in itself interesting. Aberley uses "the reinhabitant movement" interchangeably with "bioregionalism" but in this context it implies that the people escaping the city are returning to a place they have left. By what right do these urbanites claim (reinhabit) the area to which they flee. With all these people fleeing cities, why would anyone stay? And what's to be done with all these people, should they decide to flee the city? The two urban contributors (one is local activist Whitney Smith) are in the distinct minority in this book.

Most of the book's contributors conveniently overlook the fact that many urban dwellers actually prefer to live in cities, citing reasons such as cultural expression and freedom from harassment. Perhaps the main flaw of this book is that while it offers some good pointers about mapping as a tool for specific local initiatives, it overlooks human cultural diversity within a given region. A community cannot only be defined by its biogeochemistry, its physical borders, or its animals' annual migrations. No quantity of locally harvested mushrooms is going to address such particular human concerns as sex, race and class inequities. When you celebrate those features of your locale which, in the words of one contributor, "make your place different from the next," what is to stop you from spitting on the next bioregion for its difference? This book's portrayal of bioregions seems to assume some homogeneity of culture which is not reflected in the real world. After reading this book, I am left with the nagging suspicion that Aberley's paradigm is really designed for Anglo-Saxon heterosexuals. Perhaps this is because of his nauseating but undefended repetition that social justice and environmental protection will simply fall into place once everyone has drawn a line around their "home" and traced its climate patterns and human settlements.

It is perhaps fortunate that bioregionalism has almost as many definitions as adherents. One's interest in the movement need not, therefore, be tainted by Aberley's unrealistically optimistic, but ultimately arrogant and unanalyzed, view of it. As with many other movements – most particularly environmentalism and the conservation movement – one must carefully sift through the rubbish and rhetoric before deciding how, if at all, to get involved.

. . . **Jennifer Morrow** studies at York's Faculty of Environmental Studies, from whence she looks northward. . . . .