

## Book Review

### *Elemental Ecocriticism – Thinking with Earth, Air, Water and Fire*

Edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert  
Minnesota University Press, 2015

Emma Davies

*Elemental Ecocriticism – Thinking with Earth, Air, Water and Fire* brings together an impressive collection of essays which through an engagement with the elements, both recognisable and forgotten, challenge the limits of anthropocentricity. Mobilising literature of the past, the contributors engage elementality to provoke a thinking through of present environmentality.

The collection as a whole serves as an important intervention in our cultural milieu where accounting for our human situatedness in geological time is increasingly urgent. The theme of temporal oscillation reoccurs throughout the collection, where elements and texts of the past are “re-activated” as “...a renewal of non/human ethical enmeshment, a transhistorical call for attention, in which lesson from the past are reactivated for better futures” (p6). This transhistorical approach is demonstrated at the outset by “Pyromena Fires Doing”, where Anne Harris offers an account of fire as vital, exploring its tendencies, conceptualised through a nonlinear ontology. Moving through diverse range of historical texts and contexts, Harris’s account situates fire as an actor of transformation and change.

The essays are rich and performative, like the elements they describe they resist delimitation, intervening in multiple discourses and debates simultaneously. This is evident in the relationships between the leitmotifs of transhistoricity, anti-anthropocentrism, and epistemic methodology that recur in the collection. Valerie Allen in “Airy Something” argues for the need for a genealogy of scientific ideas, to deepen an understanding of the theological and explore the limits of the secular as a category for considering the elemental. Simultaneously, Allen explores air as a holy presence, empty space and roaring wind, that highlights the mutual intractability of motionlessness and movement. In “Muddy Thinking” Sharon O’Dair calls elicits a call to stop “slinging mud” in academic discourse, and to reconsider approaches to scholarship and education.

Coming to this collection with a background in Philosophy, it struck me that readers outside of ecocriticism are likely find it challenging to situate the genre of this collection, particularly those who are accustomed to the strict policing of disciplinary norms. Ironically, thinking through what is at stake in such policing is one of the key questions explored throughout. This is a strength of the collection insofar as it adds to its performative force. In the introduction, “Eleven Principles of the Elements”, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert outline eleven principles that emphasise the dynamism of the elements, offering provisional “rules of thumb” to guide the reader through the collaboration’s elemental enquiry. These “rules of thumb” go some way to making the collection more accessible to a broader audience, for readers who are open to such dialogue.

The response essays bring to the fore the intervention the chapters make in contemporary scholarly debates. Cary Wolfe's "Elemental Relations at the Edge" stands out, contextualising the approaches taken in the essays with respect to what has come to be called object-oriented ontology (OOO) (exemplified by Graham Harman), and alternative approaches such as actor network theory (exemplified by Bruno Latour) and systems theory (exemplified by Niklas Luhmann). Wolfe explores the way the elemental enquiry of the collection contributes to this enduring tension between the "elemental nature" of things and relations.

*Elemental Ecocriticism – Thinking with Earth, Air, Water and Fire* makes for a dynamic read. The individual essays themselves explore the intractability of the elements, while the play between the pieces sedimented in the responses provoke new ways of thinking materiality.

Emma Davies