

Elemental Entanglements: A Study of Changing Environmental Landscapes in Scotland

Monika Szuba

In view of a renewed interest in the elemental, my project uses the opportunity to analyze and navigate narratives of geological, atmospheric, and marine entanglements. It is centered around questions about the ways in which “inhuman” and nonorganic dimensions of life inform our understanding of human-earth relations, materiality, and extractivism. I propose to investigate elemental entanglements in Scottish culture that resound with “stone voices,” which Neal Ascherson describes in his 2002 work as “the way in which human experience in this difficult northern place has been built so intimately into the geology and the post-glacial ecology of Scotland that a people and its stones form a single cultural landscape.” Its landscapes forged at the start of the Carboniferous period, Scotland has been the site of significant developments in geology, geotechnics, and geopoetics: The discovery the geologist James Hutton made in the eighteenth century created modern knowledge of deep time. Patrick Geddes’s geotechnics envision a renewed technology that would meet human needs and not exceed the limits of the planetary biosphere. Finally, geopoetics comes, as Kenneth White writes in 1989 for the International Institute of Geopolitics “from contact with the earth.”

In the light of recent theories of new materialism, which posit agency, or vibrancy of matter to use Jane Bennett’s term, the understanding of the natural elements has undergone considerable changes. This approach is represented by the editors of *Elemental Ecocriticism*, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert. The subtitle of the book, *Thinking with Earth, Air, Water, and Fire*, already signals the change in perception: the preposition “with,” which is now widely used in the environmental humanities—where “thinking with” echoes the notion of *Mitsein*, that is co-being or being with—and so the preposition shifts the focus from an objectifying approach to a view whereby there occurs an entanglement of consciousness with matter. Scottish authors and artists offer a manner of highly distinctive responding to a world in which people are inseparable from the elements. In their work, phenomenological experience emerges through sensorial interchange, combined with the need for groundedness in an active engagement with the landscape: focusing on the sea, stone, wind, and light, it mingles the atmospheric and chthonic powers.

The project argues that awareness of geological materialities in Scottish literature and the fine arts takes shape through stratigraphic imagination, stretching across the interface between earth and air as Scottish culture reveals a deep engagement that relies on not only thinking but also being with the elements. Demonstrating geophilic tendencies, phenomenologically immersed in the weather world, the project posits that the work of authors and artists offer a chance to move “towards a finer earth-living.”

I aim to investigate the manner in which inhuman and nonorganic dimensions of life informs our understanding of issues of fossil fuels, human-earth relations, and materiality, examining questions of subjectivity and materiality in various narratives and practices. Situated in and responding to the elemental, the literary and artistic production in question is characterized by a wide range of forms marked by a diversity of cross-media practices. In response to the social and natural worlds of the Anthropocene—in which humans constitute geological agents of change—the project aims to assess what “being geologically human” means for Scottish authors and artists.