
Editors' Introduction

Howl

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Howl, howl, howl, howl. A coyote raises its muzzle to the night sky and bays, his body small in a blankness of snow. Though the sky is black and starless, white radiance pours from above. The bare branches of trees shimmer against the encircling dark. The scene is primal. On closer examination, however, the thin trees are in chains, fastened to the frozen ground, guaranteed a straight growth. Telephone lines glimmer in the void of the scene's edge, along with dim city lights. The yellow of a fire hydrant glistens in discordant hue. The aerial luminescence for which the coyote gathers its brown body into a territorial howl is not the moon but a halogen light, so high above the animal that we glimpse only its concrete base and straight-as-a-trained-tree metal (Figure 1).

Howl, howl, howl, howl. A coyote bays at an artificial light mistaken for its lunar companion. Culture intrudes into nature, overwrites primeval forest with modern parking lot, a pathetic scene of environmental devastation. Such an invasive human act is matched only by nature's own incursion: a coyote passes into a den of motorized things. Even the picture's near-symmetry seems to support this division, the lamppost a grey line driven straight down the middle attempting an impossible demarcation, trying to *fix* things.



Figure 1: Amy Stein, *Howl*, 2007; photograph courtesy of the artist.

Yet the image on closer look will not sustain such division. When we observe that the coyote has been perfectly arranged, that no footprints in the snow mark its progress toward participation in this strange still life, then we realize that this animal is as much the work of taxidermy as the Wild. Nature and culture supposedly reside in distinct ontological realms, set across from one another like trees staked into the frozen earth. They never, however, stay still. Hybrid and impure things disrupt any wished-for symmetry, cross over and furtively collaborate, eroding fantasies of environmental separateness. Amy Stein's *Howl* is a brilliant meditation upon how the natural and the cultural have so encroached that they have become intractably entwined, or perhaps they have always been intimates, despite our dreaming separate worlds. Taken from a series called 'Domesticated,' the image of the coyote beneath the lamp suggests that home (the *oikos* in ecology, an encompassed expanse as well as a mere house) is a mixed and difficult space. With its Ginsbergian title invoking the Moloch of industry yet complicating his poetic narrative of lambs and simple ruin, Stein's *Howl* makes a sophisticated visual argument through the powerful deployment of the elements: the dark stillness of night air, the vibrancy of gelid water, a quietly blanketed yet far from dormant earth (its pockmarking by weeds is evidence enough of the activity that unfolds at its surface), the fire of what should be natural luminescence transmuted into a lamp for finding cars.

No facile narrative of a nature/culture divide here, only imbrication, maybe partnerships. The coyote's howl resounds across the crowded lots of the world, conveying what Bruno Latour calls the principle of asymmetry.¹ The elements and the roiling phenomena they create through promiscuous embrace might have become participants in a predictable narrative of human agency terraforming the world's materiality, but *Howl* reveals a choreography more complicated than assimilation into anthropomorphism. Even in the form of this parking lot tableau, earth, air, fire and water are more than a passive component of some merely human story. *Howl* is a tale of ecomaterialism, of a realm that at evening's advent includes the shimmer of stars and distant urban lights. The elements transmute but remain constant in their agency, constant in their companionship.

¹ See, for instance, Chapter 4 in *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993).

This special issue of *postmedieval* derives from a long conversation in which many humans and nonhumans have had their say. The discussion began, for the two of us, in Barcelona. The lithic undulations of Park Güell, the Mediterranean under lunar white and the prism of Sagrada Família conspired with nights that lengthened into mornings. We spoke of how the heft of rock and turgidity of water become aerial and igneous when their restlessness finds striking expression. We wondered about an elemental materiality that was not ponderous, that exerts relentless aesthetic and ethical weight. Our conversations continued in Washington, DC, as one of us worked on a project about early modern waters, the other on a book about the liveliness of stone. We found inspiration in Jane Bennett's political ecology of matter, which acknowledges the agency of inhuman things as they enter into assemblages with humans. How might such a dispersed yet inherently communal notion of environmentality intersect with ecologies modern and premodern? What might medieval and early modern studies bring to this conversation? Who else might be given a seat at this gregarious colloquy?

This special issue of *postmedieval*, therefore, takes up Bennett's challenge in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010) to explore the impress and agency of the nonhuman. We do so in a mode true to the study of early literature and culture, yet useful for contemporary ecological theory: by making interlocutors of the four elements and by plumbing the mixed spaces between each. The scholars who accepted our invitation to this interchange have created a forum where matter obtains its complicated agency; where humans are not simply called upon to save, preserve, or conserve a lifeless material world (what hubris), but to recognize the life that already pulses within inorganic forces, manufactured and found objects, nature, and things. We chose the primal elements as our focus not because they offer permanence but because they never cease to move. Unlike Lucretian atoms or empyrean forces (gods or physics) – one too small to be glimpsed, the other too vast – the four elements are easily apprehensible, the very fabric of mundane experience. Their scale is human, yet their visible agency profoundly challenges our anthropocentricity.



Mapping the elements as they move within their proper temporalities is sobering. Catastrophes precede and follow any stability; failures inevitably arrive. In such moments of perturbation we behold the web of interrelationships that constitutes and sustains our own worldedness. Cataclysms inevitably shatter such ecological meshworks, but failure is an invitation to dwell more carefully, fashion more capacious perspectives, and *do better*. Environmental criticism recognizes possibility in worldly enmeshment, calling upon us to work toward change, justice. Yet, this ecological entanglement can itself transform the ways we envision, experience and embody environmentality, especially when we realize the potent agency of the nonhuman. Recognizing what Stacy Alaimo (2010) calls ‘trans-corporeality’ and taking seriously its lived consequences is a ceaselessly difficult labor, but we have good maps. Sometimes the past offers a cartography for the future.

Humans have long been probing, dreaming, worrying over and renewing their elemental relations. Empedocles divided materiality into four turbulent components 2500 years ago, positing strife as entropic force and love as universal binding. The world, he held, is composed and constantly remade by co-minglings of earth, air, fire and water in admixtures cemented by *philia*. Inspired by classical, medieval, early modern and postmodern elementality, the contributors to this volume focus upon the living elements earth, air, water, fire and their medial instantiations: cloud, road, glacier and abyss. None of these phenomena are passive or inert. Ecomaterialism is a study of inhuman agency. This special issue of *postmedieval* acknowledges this autonomy in its arrangement, unfolding in four movements, with four interstices. Our doubled quadricameral scheme demonstrates the impress of the Empedoclean elements – but not, we hope, too neatly. Any closed structure awaits its own disruption: a taxonomy built against disorder only awaits the entrance of some elemental, combinatory force.

That advent can be destructive. It can also offer an invitation to unexpected imaginings. Empedocles offered a structure for the elements that like all systems is insufficient, and yet powerful enough to inspire the philosophy and poetry of Plato, Lucretius, Boethius, Chaucer and Shakespeare. Despite their four-part division into seeming solitariness, the elements never neatly align, never segregate, never settle, and that restless impurity is their strength, a constant source for renewal. The essays that follow offer not a system bounded by hermetic totality but a world constantly in motion; not an environmental ethics forged of fixed connections and injunctive chains but an ecology of precarious bonds and vibrant intermixtures, a *kakosmos* of connectivity, constellations of confluence and collapse.²

Elements are humanly visible. They resonate with our ordinary experience. Empedocles saw the world through elemental eyes, as a strangely disanthropocentric place. The elements – tangible, desirable – offer a queer yet pedestrian ecomaterialism, one that views the world askew ‘from ground level,’ a

2 See Latour (2004, 99) and Latour (2010, 481).

horizontal or planar wandering *through* and *with* that engendered in the Middle Ages and Renaissance new narratives, possibilities and futures. Deviating connections. Not a return to Gaia or our revenge against it, but a turn to composing anew: mystery over mastery, assemblages over solitude, sudden interlocutors, wanderings, unlooked for companionships that reconfigure worldviews. Empedocles spoke of pervasive disordering force only to move to an emphasis on that which binds. We likewise dwell upon the impurities that the forces of love and strife engender, a kind of wilderness posthumanist ethics where the elemental is not something only ‘out there,’ but also within, a wild mess of multiplicity. This elemental ecomaterialism demands something of us. It compels us to think of our own existence as interstitial beings. It asks us to hear the *howls* of heterogeneous life forms – everywhere and from every thing. Is it one or several coyotes? The *oikos* is our home, but our home is not ours alone.

Do not ask what the coyote does on the paved side of culture. Attend to what it does. Howl back. Respond. Our elemental litany: earth, air, fire, water, abyss, glacier, road and cloud. A world where strife is endemic, but a world composed and held together through love.

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