From the texts covered so far in this book a reader might not guess one of the most distinctive features of the environmental crisis. All across the world groups of people have come together outside the normal frameworks of politics to protest local outrages or environmental threats. The Indigenous Environmental Network, for instance, is ‘A network of Indigenous Peoples empowering Indigenous Nations and communities towards sustainable livelihoods, demanding environmental justice and maintaining the Sacred Fire of our traditions.’ Together with the proliferation of various non-governmental bodies, such movements now form a kind of cosmopolitan politics, its actions and concerns unconfined to the boundaries of the nation state.

The environmental crisis, Ulrich Beck argues, is itself inherently a delegitimation of traditional political structures:

> In terms of social politics . . . the ecological crisis involves a *systematic violation of basic rights*, a crisis of basic rights whose long-term effect in weakening society can scarcely be underestimated. For dangers are being produced by industry, externalized by economics, individualized by the legal system, legitimized by the natural sciences and made to appear harmless by politics. That this is breaking down the power and credibility of institutions only becomes clear when the system is put on the spot, as Greenpeace, for example, has tried to do.

In such a context, it is no wonder that critics concerned with the US wilderness tradition have sometimes come to look like defenders of outdoor leisure pursuits. Purist notions of the environment as pristine wilderness may seem complicit with an essentially contemplative privileged attitude to the natural world – after all, by such a definition, wilderness is not where anyone actually
lives. Even the notion of ‘purity’ can have uncomfortable social overtones. Cinder Hypki, an urban environmental activist, recalls: ‘It suddenly became very clear to me that the real purist notion of environment – that it is just the natural world – just can’t work in today’s world. It doesn’t work for peasants in Costa Rica, and it sure doesn’t work for people living in inner-city Baltimore.’

The injustice of such things as locating a waste plant near people too poor to oppose it is evident. There may also be elements of racism. To associate some people with filth or the unclean has been a recurrent feature of social bigotry: issues of communal hygiene may merge with notions of a more figurative purity that cast some people as supposedly polluting presences. To work in the field of ecojustice is to question the boundaries between recognised environmental issues, matters of public health and social discrimination.

Responding to criticisms of its implicit cultural politics has profoundly affected twenty-first-century ecocriticism. Firstly, there have been continuing attempts to expand the scope of ecocritical readings. Can ecocriticism ‘be usefully applied to texts beyond the study of nature writing – to the novels, say, of Henry James?’ Secondly, there has been a striking turn to issues of environmental justice. This is instantiated in work collected in *The Environmental Justice Reader* (2002): ‘We define environmental justice as the right of all people to share equally in the benefits bestowed by a healthy environment. We define the environment, in turn, as the places in which we live, work, play, and worship.’

Environmental justice primarily names a social movement, plural and engaged in the urgency of local campaign work. In relation to literary and cultural criticism, its effect has been a proliferation of thought on just how varied and culturally complex ideas of nature have been. What links the turn to issues of ecojustice to efforts to expand ecocriticism beyond nature writing is that both usually focus on how conceptions of human identity relate to or vary with environmental contexts, rural or urban. For instance, answering their own question about reading Henry James, Armbruster and Wallace argue:

> Think of some of his more well-known works, such as ‘Daisy Miller’ and *The Portrait of a Lady*, that focus on young, female American expatriates who find themselves in environments where they are distinctly out of place. In our ecocritical analysis we would trace the connections between this lack of grounding in physical and cultural place and the misunderstanding, objectification, and alienation these young women experience.

Concern with ecojustice and cultural difference tends to align ecocritical arguments with the kind of left-progressive political stance that now passes
almost as the norm in the humanities. Greg Garrard describes a general tendency towards the stances of ‘social ecology’ in recent criticism: that is, arguments that human violence against the natural world is ultimately a product of oppressive structures of hierarchy among human beings. Nevertheless, while ‘social ecology’ is clearly relevant, the method of much twenty-first-century ecocriticism is effectively simply that of mainstream cultural criticism, that is, to map out the cultural politics of some issue or concern, usually from an implicitly liberal/progressive viewpoint. The distinction of ecocriticism becomes simply that it is concepts of nature that are so studied, delineating the different cultural contexts, presuppositions and exclusions of varying ideas of nature, or tracing how different conceptions of identity are enmeshed in varying notions of the environment. Such well-used procedures of reading usually treat fiction and non-fiction in the same way, as the arena of competing cultural representations and identity claims.

Social ecology

This is a term largely associated with the work of Murray Bookchin, and, more loosely, with arguments that violence against the natural world has its origins in human social and economic institutions based on oppressive systems of hierarchy and élitism. In books such as *The Ecology of Freedom* (1985) and *Post Scarcity Anarchism* (1971) Bookchin argued that ‘The objectification of people as mere instruments of production fostered the objectification of nature as mere “natural resources”’ (*Ecology of Freedom*, 240). Bookchin sometimes argues by means of a broad historical overview of human development since prehistory, tracing the loss of small organic communities without hierarchies of power, the gradual change of communal relationships into market relationships, effectively converting people into commodities. The loss of conditions of wholeness and freedom in society led simultaneously to people regarding all natural entities in the same acquisitive and instrumentalising way.

Bookchin argues – dubiously some think – that a wild, unaltered ecosystem is itself ‘libertarian’, ‘an image’, that is, ‘of unity in diversity, spontaneity and complementary relationships, free of all hierarchy and domination’ (453). An organic human society, for Bookchin, would thus be one in harmony with nature as a space of ‘symbiosis and mutualism’ (460). The modern ‘seemingly autonomous ego’ that now serves as the ideal self in western society would be replaced by a more ‘natural’ one, an ‘individual whose very completeness as an ego was possible because he or she was rooted in a fairly rounded and complete community’ (211).

Questions arise here of whether a certain romantic-anarchist political ideal is not being projected on to nature and this model of ‘nature’ then used supposedly to ground or validate that specific political programme.
Take, for instance, a reading of *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) from the collection *Beyond Nature Writing* (2001). Just as mainstream critics concerned with issues of social justice and representations of identity might analyse how, for example, concepts of manhood play out in Douglass’s writing, relating it to issues of racial identity and the authority of authorship, so a concern with environmental justice leads Michael Bennett to subject the idea of nature in *The Narrative* to a similar kind of scrutiny. The association of rural landscapes with the hated cotton plantations is seen to inform an element of anti-pastoral in African American writing: ‘The definition of the slave as property makes it difficult for Douglass to have a positive relationship with the Southern landscape since he is legally part of that landscape.’

Inverting idealisations of wilderness, it was the city that offered a space of freedom and self-realisation.

**A reading: *A River Runs Through It* (1976)**

The best way to explore how environmental justice issues can inflect literary criticism may be through staging a specific reading. The stakes can be further highlighted by choosing one of the classics of US western writing, Norman Maclean’s *A River Runs Through It*.

This lucid and poignant novella of 1976 was a favourite of the first generation of ecocritics in the United States. It is a semi-autobiographical account of the Macleans, a family of Scots descent living in early twentieth-century Montana. The men in this family, whose head is a Presbyterian minister, have a kind of private cult of fly fishing. The text is formed from the memories of the older brother Norman, whose narrative as an old man focusses on his younger brother Paul, a man who made fly fishing an art but whose obscure life as a gambler and heavy drinking journalist led to a violent death. Norman’s attempt to understand his lost brother, become now the epitome of a vanished way of life, has the poignancy of recognised failure: ‘Now nearly all those I loved and did not understand when I was young are dead, but I still reach out to them.’

*A River Runs Through It* adds itself to that distinctive minor tradition of literature that idealises fishing as a blend of the contemplative and active lives. Fishing becomes an art form almost, combining the suspense and skill of hunting with the meditative intensity of a religious exercise. In Maclean’s novella fly fishing has a role that some have ascribed to the aesthetic in modern society more generally: to go fishing is to open a temporary utopian space that is at once a form of escapism from daily society and its implicit if limited critique.
The most challenging scenarios of environmental justice lie in the neocolonialism that still structures relations of North and South, the topic of a later chapter. However, questions of environmental justice already bear on Maclean’s idealisation of fly fishing. First, it is solely the reserve of male members of the Maclean family, Norman’s mother, mother-in-law and wife all being cast in the role of admirers and supporters. An intense misogyny even emerges in the way the brothers mistreat the figure of ‘Old Rawhide’, a prostitute that Norman’s clueless brother-in-law (a mere bait fisherman) brings fishing with the Maclean brothers. The place of fishing as an exclusively masculine ritual also informs the stress on Paul Maclean’s toughness and his conformity to a certain recognisable ‘western’ outdoor type, self-reliant (even to the point of self-destructiveness), taciturn, but committed absolutely to his own particular code of honour. Fishing forms a space for values outside the shady realms of journalism, gambling and alcohol abuse that eventually destroy him. Paul’s half-Indian girlfriend, whom the narrator had romanticised as ‘Mo-nah-setah’ but who is otherwise unnamed, shows a similar kind of displacement. Her life of tawdry bars and inciting men to fight for her finds a redemptive outlet in dancing: ‘She was as beautiful a dancer as he was a fly caster’ (26). The elegy for Paul as symbol of a lost frontier ethos aligns with many elements of the wilderness tradition. At the same time, the novella’s restriction of the place of the frontier ethos to a symbolic re-enactment in a leisure pursuit already shows its fragility as a cultural legacy.

Another aspect of an environmental justice reading would relate more directly to the Montana environment as one of the last parts of the West to be colonised by Europeans. At issue here is a stereotyping, not of the Indians but the Scottish immigrants or rather their American descendants, on whom are foisted a great many supposedly typical ‘Scottish’ characteristics. The reason, perhaps, this seems unmarked by readers is that the stereotyping is applied to Maclean’s own family and is no sort of vilification but rather a fondly indulged practice, even a kind of boasting. This kind of minoritarian narcissism is very common, especially in countries that result from settler colonisation, such as the US and Australia. This widely indulged kind of atavism celebrates supposedly ancient cultural roots, but, in this case, as part of an aged Norman’s intense nostalgia for a recently conquered and occupied part of North America, it may seem a striking kind of self-legitimating double-think, projecting a long-imagined settled ancestry into a landscape whose settlement was very different. Robert Redford’s 1992 film of the novella, starring Craig Scheffer and Brad Pitt, even includes the scene of a man in a kilt playing the bagpipes while looking out over the mountains of Montana as a kind of ultra-Scotland. Of Norman’s mother-in-law, also ‘Scottish’, we read: ‘More than most mothers,
Scottish mothers have had to accustom themselves to migration and sin, and to them all sons are prodigal and welcome home. Scotsmen, however, are much more reserved about welcoming returning male relatives, and do so largely under the powerful influence of their women’ (11).

The crudeness of Norman’s generalisations about Scottishness is a mark of their fragility: who would dare speak that way in Scotland itself? However, an untold story may lurk in the reference to the trials of migration, though there is no overt sign of it in the novella beyond a reference to ‘the original family home on the Isle of Mull in the southern Hebrides’ (27). This story is that of the brutal ‘clearances’ of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that dispossessed so many Highland families to make room for sheep, driving thousands of people across the Atlantic. The brittleness of the Macleans’ vaunted Scottishness seems in any case a mark of displacement and insecurity. The act of clinging to an increasingly self-caricaturing ‘Scottish’ identity suggests the same kind of inner fragility as Paul’s code of a masculine self-reliance, a code that succeeds only in the realm of sport. Even the novella’s assurance about trout and trout fishing is fragile, with the narrator at one point making what seems an elementary mistake about the natural history of the fish.

A kind of cultural displacement applies even to the trout. There is a hierarchy of species of trout in the novella. To catch a Rainbow Trout is admirable, the Eastern Brook Trout is mentioned (39) but the real prize is the Brown Trout. This fish is ‘mythological’. ‘[S]ome of those Brown monsters’ are what Norman feels he must catch if he wants to equal his brother (40; also 45). It is presumably this species Paul catches dramatically in his final fishing trip with his father and brother. The phrases ‘mythological Brown Trout’ and ‘mythological fish’ are repeated in Norman’s reveries while fishing (40–1) and suggest some kind of timeless spirit of the landscape. In fact, however, like the people themselves, the Brown Trout is an introduction, a fish native to Europe and Asia but not to North America, as the Rainbow and Brook Trout are. Montana received its first Brown Trout in 1889. A similar story applied in nineteenth-century Australia, where many animals (such as the red fox) were introduced to enable colonising Europeans to continue with inherited customs of hunting and fishing. People even lined the harbour in Hobart, Tasmania, to welcome the first successful shipment of salmon ova.

Issues of environmental justice clearly arise in the effect of such introductions on the native animals and their place in the culture of the indigenous people. The Brown Trout, in fact, is a predator that has done untold damage to the river ecosystems where it has been introduced.

The issues of introduced species and ‘Scottishness’, then, may inform an ecojustice reading of Maclean’s novella, attentive to the social and psychic
Environmental justice effects of both literal and cultural displacement. What might seem in some ways merely reactionary in Norman Maclean’s nostalgia for a Montana of the frontier, crystallised in the elegy for a lost brother, also re-enacts the personal and familial defensiveness of a settler society, its self-image and self-evasions.

Environmental criticism as cultural history?

What might this example show? Firstly, perhaps, that the procedures of this kind of reading differ quite strongly from those of the ecocriticism covered so far. In a nutshell, a previously dominant realist paradigm, that is, reading a text in relation to the ethical and cognitive challenge of its rendering of the natural world, is being displaced by a culturalist one, that is, reading a text’s stances in terms of the various kinds of cultural identity projected or at issue. Thus the Montana rivers and their fish are seen in relation to kinds of identity claim focussed in displaced conceptions of Scottishness and frontier authenticity. The question of whether fiction or non-fiction is at issue is now made irrelevant by the fact that either mode can be studied in terms of the kinds of cultural identity it projects.

Some questions may also be raised about such an approach. One issue is less that many ecojustice readings differ not at all in method from a conventional critic’s mapping out of the cultural politics of a concept, image or narrative, but that this method may itself be complicit with a destructive preconception of the human relation to the natural world. There may be a risk of reducing environmental debate to a function of competing identity and justice claims – for instance, the immigrant ‘Scottish’ idealisation of Montana’s rivers as set against the places known to earlier inhabitants or against the littered venue of recreational tourism they have in part become; or Douglass’s conception of the rural as imprisonment as contrasted to white idealisations, and so on. The natural world, in this kind of criticism, gets treated as a function of the various claims and conceptions of different and competing human groups. However, can environmental criticism, previously concerned with the ethical challenge of the non-human, be limited to the matter of an equitable sharing out of the earth’s spoils or ‘the right of all people to share equally in the benefits bestowed by a healthy environment’? After all, one of ecocriticism’s founding gestures was to reject the adequacy of reading ‘nature’ as no more than a function of cultural politics. The work of an older generation of ecocritics, celebrating Wordsworth, Clare or Thoreau and the US wilderness tradition, is now in turn being attacked as constructing nature in partial or contestable ways. Does this,
however, totally neutralise arguments against reducing the natural world to an ideological theatre?

Maclean’s novella may also bear out reservations about too instrumentalist and anthropocentric an ecojustice approach. An exclusive focus on the book’s constructions of identity, ethnicity and gender would foreclose attention to places and animals other than in relation to a human-centred cultural politics. The book is, after all, partly a celebration of the Big Blackfoot River itself, something whose understanding is a matter of long study and practice, what fishermen call ‘reading the river’ (63). If the novella celebrates the world of fly fisherman, it does so not only in terms of social ideas of manhood, status, ethnicity, but also in terms of skill, perceptiveness and habits of mind induced by hours in a complex non-human environment. It is also about the chastening discipline of learning to anticipate the perception and actions of a wary animal. Fishermen, one can argue, are subject to a process of identity formation in which the place is itself as much an agent as any social role, the rivers making their own obscure challenge to any overly human-centred sense of reality.

### Sixth quandary: the antinomy of environmental criticism

Overall, ecocriticism often presents the scene of an interplay – or sometimes stand-off – between work that stresses the cultural aspects of various concepts of nature, as in the reading of Maclean given above, and work that stresses the element of the natural within culture, as what culture overlooks, takes dangerously for granted or destroys. Thus, on the one side a large body of US wilderness writing becomes itself understood as the implicit self-assertion of the values and interests of a predominantly white élite. On the other side, defenders of Abbey, Leopold, Austin, Maclean and others will reaffirm the importance of trying to project in literature the intrinsic value of the natural world.

Any specific ecocritical reading could be situated in the space between the poles of a culturalist and a realist reading, in what might perhaps be called the antinomy of environmentalist criticism:

- What any writer calls ‘nature’ can always be read as a cultural/political construction.
  - But culture always depends on and is encompassed by actual nature, which requires recognition.
  - But that ‘nature’ can always be read as a cultural/political construction.
  - But etc.

For instance, Terry Gifford describes *Cave Birds* (1978) by Ted Hughes in a similar zigzag fashion, as ‘making a myth about the essence of material nature with
awareness that nature is mediated by culture. He is also using this myth to reconnect us to the nature in ourselves, knowing that culture is nature...[so healing] our alienation from nature and from ourselves." This interplay could itself be continued by observing how culturally specific Gifford’s own romanticism is here, with its familiar plot of alienation from and reunification with ‘nature’ as our true selves – yet in turn...