



## LIVING LEXICON FOR THE ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES

# Edge

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Expressions such as “hard edge” or “on a knife-edge” link edges in the popular imagination to cognates like *border*, *boundary*, *frontier*, or *limit*. “Teetering on the edge” of climate change/extinction/famine could be a typical headline; it is also an inadequate way to explain the experience of disaster and catastrophe. As a concept, *edge* has multiple intellectual genealogies, from ecology to business studies and cultural theory.<sup>1</sup> In each field it has slightly different connotations, but it maintains a basic shared meaning: it signifies a transition zone between different systems. In this lexicon entry, we explore the edge as an intermingling of diverse elements. Attending to the rich possibilities resulting from such interactions is significant to interdisciplinary scholarship in the environmental humanities, and in this entry, we summarize edge as a traveling concept in ecology and cultural theory, providing examples to think about and work with edges.

### Thinking and Working with Edges

In ecology, an edge, or ecotone, is a transition zone between two ecosystems, such as the scrub between bush and grassland, the beach between the ocean and dunes, and the mangrove swamp between riverbank and river.<sup>2</sup> Because they are transition zones, edges create specific effects such as increased biodiversity: resources from both systems can be used, increasing productivity; species from both systems can thrive at the interface;

1. Krall, *Ecotone*.

2. Peters, Gosz, and Collins, “Boundary Dynamics in Landscapes.”



*Figure 1.* Banana rhizomes burrowing under a garden fence and producing suckers from lateral buds have created this urban edge between home gardens and a railway in Sydney. Bananas offer shade and create habitat for a dense recombinant understory, including taro, asthma weed, nasturtium, ivy, sweet potatoes, fennel, and castor bean plants. Image courtesy of the authors.

and edges can provide habitat to unique species, such as those found in mangroves.<sup>3</sup> But the creation of edges is also part of the colonial project. The extraction sites at capitalist frontiers generate new edges where local and global cultures are in friction.<sup>4</sup>

Edges are also sites where agency is not unidirectional. Like encounters, edges can create contact zones, described by Mary Louise Pratt as “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, contest and grapple with each other.”<sup>5</sup> Pratt’s strategy is to understand inverse movements of cultural exchange within asymmetrical relations by looking at how their peripheries influenced colonial centers of power—that is, how colonized people adapted to European culture and how European colonial powers were influenced and shaped by their subjects.

3. Cronon, “Why Edge Effects?”; Mollison and Holmgren, *Permaculture One*, 26; Turner, Davidson-Hunt, and O’Flaherty, “Living on the Edge,” 440.

4. Tsing, *Friction*.

5. Barua, “Encounter”; Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*.

Mestiza and Indigenous thinkers have explored the possibility of agency in edges. In Gloria Anzaldúa's work, the Náhuatl word *nepantla* (the space in the middle) describes both the marginalizing effects of diverse cultural systems colliding in a borderlands and a space where identity can be self-fashioned in multiple ways.<sup>6</sup> *Nepantla*, thus, is a state of being in-between of border people, especially artists: "that uncertain terrain one crosses when moving from one place to another, when changing from one class, race, or sexual position to another, when traveling from the present identity into a new identity."<sup>7</sup> In Australia, curator Brook Andrew, titled the 22nd Biennale of Sydney (2020) *Nirin*, a word from his mother's Wiradjuri language that translates as "edge." *Nirin* brought "edges to the centre" by recoding the Eurocentric exhibition format of the biennale to a platform for community collaborations "where diverse and often marginalized voices of the world converge and discuss issues that resonate today."<sup>8</sup>

We find physical examples of edges in the suburban nature strips and verges of cities: small-scale, localized gardens in between private and public spaces that can create and maintain recombinant ecologies (e.g., fig. 1).<sup>9</sup> These edges generate community collaborations among neighbors who garden together and inject diversity in the monotony of corporate plants in the urban landscape. Bettina Stoetzer tells the story of a migrant gardener who started a vegetable patch in the geopolitical edge between East and West Germany. With time, he created a Berlin version of a Turkish *geceköndü*, a small orchard of apricot, apple, pear, and plum trees, which also accommodates an invasive species, a tree of heaven.<sup>10</sup> For Stoetzer, this constituted a "ruderal ecology," a community that emerges spontaneously in disturbed environments.

Urban gardeners, often migrant, who green the edges in the spaces in the middle and in between buildings and the street inspire our work. In Sydney, the multicultural city where we live, these edges become contact zones where "human and nonhuman beings come together to foster everyday multiculturalism," bringing a "pluralism of environmental relationships" and recombinant ecologies to Australia.<sup>11</sup> For those of us committed to studying relationships between environment and society, there is a need not only for analysis but also for a practice to connect with the minute, everyday ecologies on city edges. We design artifacts and experiences to guide people to identify and care for the ecologies on cities' edges.<sup>12</sup> Street gardens, urban woodlands, green corridors in the middle of the built environment are sites where we can connect with the unexpected more-than-human worlds inhabiting our cities.

6. Allatson, *Key Terms*, 273–74.

7. Anzaldúa, *Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, 181.

8. Andrew, "Introduction to NIRIN."

9. Vanni and Crosby, "Recombinant Ecologies in the City."

10. Stoetzer, "Ruderal Ecologies."

11. Shan and Pierre, "Growing Everyday Multiculturalism"; van Holstein and Head, "Shifting Settler-Colonial Discourses of Environmentalism."

12. Mapping Edges, [www.mappingedges.org](http://www.mappingedges.org) (accessed November 3 2022).

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