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The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment edited by Louise Westling

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The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment edited by **LOUISE WESTLING**

Cambridge UP, 2013 \$30.95

Reviewed by **RANDY LEE CUTLER**

The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment has so much to recommend it. The range of subject matter and discourses illustrate the evolving interdisciplinary field of environmental literary criticism with essays that engage the pastoral, Romanticism, wilderness, post nature, ecofeminism, postcolonial criticism, foodways, animal studies, environmental justice, environmental crisis, and the genre of wildlife films. Within these subject areas, issues addressed include the fraught dynamics of nature/culture, the emergence of biosemiotics, the role of metaphor in thinking through materiality, the devastation of the anthropocene and its relationship to posthumanism, the effects of dispossession on indigenous cartographies, as well as the role of phenomenology and embodiment in working through these diverse theoretical engagements. And while pleasure is an odd word to use in this context, I was indeed pleased to discover many new ideas such as the Sixth Extinction. According to Jeff Corwin, “The fifth extinction took place 65 million years ago when a meteor smashed the Earth, killing off the dinosaurs and many other species and opening the door for the rise of mammals. Currently, the sixth extinction is on track to dwarf the fifth” (230).

This compendium, organized around four sections, “Foundations,” “Theories,” “Interdisciplinary Engagements,” and “Major Directions,” highlights not only the

relationships among different disciplines but also the progressively blurred boundaries between areas of study. As natural history and human history become increasingly indistinct, the physical transmogrifies the theoretical and visa versa. Current ecoliterary criticism and studies of literature and the environment represent the intersections of interspecies experiences, perspectival multinaturalism, and ecocosmologies. This book celebrates interdisciplinarity with concepts such as “collective epistemology” (142), “situated connectivities that bind us into multi-species communities” (170) and “human nature is an interspecies relationship” (178). Through such literary examples as poetry, novels, short stories, wildlife film, and nonfiction essays, we are witness to a rich, complex, and entangled world. Indeed it was interesting to see certain authors repeatedly invoked in this cross disciplinary ecocritical discourse, such as Alexander von Humboldt, Jacob von Uexküll, Charles Darwin, Henry David Thoreau, Gregory Bateson, Rachel Carson, Margaret Atwood, and Rebecca Solnit.

Terry Gilford’s “Pastoral, Anti-Pastoral and Post-Pastoral” launches this guide with a consideration of the conceptual implications of the pastoral then, now, and the newly emergent. It offers an appreciation for literary analysis before ecocriticism, “when the countryside was not ‘environment’ and nature was not ‘ecology’” (17). Gilford maps the terrain by referencing some of the key (male) figures from Virgil, Thoreau and Shakespeare, to Leo Marx and Greg Garrard. The few women ecocritics that are mentioned include Mary Collier and Donna Potts. Women writers make a stronger presence in the Post-pastoral discussion with Cormac McCarthy, Margaret Atwood, and Maggie Gee. In this first section on

“Foundations,” it was encouraging to read Shari Huhndorf’s “‘Mapping Worlds’: The Politics of Land in Native American Literature,” where she calls attention to the centrality of land in indigenous colonial contexts. By placing this study here at the beginning of the collection, the editor Louise Westling ensures that this analysis inflects subsequent essays intersecting the plight of peoples with animals, concepts, epistemologies, and the environment. The ongoing dispossession and assimilation of lands by late capitalist logic is contextualized within a longstanding and ongoing disenfranchisement via colonial spatiality. Through a reading of D’Arcy McNickle’s *Wind from an Enemy Sky* (1977) and Linda Hogan’s *Solar Storms* (1997), we learn about indigenous senses of space, indigenous cartographies, and the intersecting sites of land and women’s bodies. As with the majority of the essays in this collection, “Mapping Worlds” marks continuities in literature, politics, and the foundational role of land in the ongoing colonial and corporate conflicts.

One of the more challenging and therefore exciting pieces was Timothy Clark’s “Nature, Post Nature,” situated in the second section called “Theories.” Rather than, for example, locating a term within a larger trajectory as Gilford has done with the pastoral, Clark deconstructs the word “nature” to the point that the fragility of its physical correspondence is echoed in the language that represents it. Inherited concepts of “nature,” “natural,” and even “naturally” are unpacked, dismantled, dissected, and deterritorialized. At first, the experience is frustrating. Clark gives us evocative language with cogent analysis, and yet what remains feels like sand slipping through our fingers. Indeed, it is the slippery

nature of the term that is so intriguing, seductive, and baffling. As he states, “confronted with numerous television documentaries in which images of unspoiled nature now rarely appear without background music of heavenly choirs, it becomes hard not to think that green romantic humanism has now been thoroughly commodified” (79). The focus then shifts to the Anthropocene, which receives equal scrutiny: “The Anthropocene brings to an unavoidable point of stress the question of the nature of nature and of the human” (79). The increasing role of interdisciplinarity is central to how language is conjured in this essay. “What was once the nature/culture distinction becomes the incalculable interaction of imponderable contaminated, hybrid elements with unpredictable emergent effects” (80). Accordingly, physical systems and their laws break down in the Anthropocene. I enjoyed this roller coaster ride where language overlaps with geology and physical systems break down. Even his literary examples were playfully confounding, whether Sara Wheeler’s travel literature *The Magnetic North: Notes from the Arctic Circle*, Gary Snyder’s allegorical *Mountains and Rivers without End*, or Will Self’s short story collection *The Quantity Theory of Insanity*. “Nature,” constantly present and absent, general and specific, ensures our own affective engagement with what the author describes as “unpredictable nonhuman agency” (87).

I was also enthralled with Janet Fisko’s “Sauntering Across the Border: Thoreau, Nabhan and Food Politics,” one of the three essays in the section on “Interdisciplinary Engagements.” The discussion points to a significant motif in the collection, the increasing collision of the humanities and the

sciences. As she states, “Interdisciplinary Environmental work is frequently conceptualized through the metaphor of the ‘toolbox’ in which all disciplines are expected to contribute harmoniously to solving a common problem that has been previously defined within the framework of Western science” (136). And yet Fisko finds this model too predictable, preferring sauntering as a metaphor that is both playful and provocative. Drawing on Thoreau’s methodology of civil disobedience *Wild Fruits* (1862), sauntering across borders or trespassing material boundaries has theoretical and political implications. Similarly, disrupting conventional methodologies is celebrated in ethnobiologist and food activist Gary Paul Nabhan’s work across disciplines and the literal border zones of the Sonoran Desert between Mexico and the United States. Literal and figurative crossings are essential to environmental justice, community building, and challenging disciplinary entrenchments. The essay extends Thoreau’s already interdisciplinary work of scientific observation of the natural world with philosophical reflection. As is well recognized, Thoreau’s resistance of the structures of capitalism and private property allow for alternate modes of democratic practice, which might include walking, huckleberrying, and tasting undomesticated apples. “Sauntering thus serves as a figure for ‘extra-vagance,’ a travel exceeding predictable limits—geographically, politically and intellectually” (138). For Nabhan, sauntering takes the writer on rafting expeditions along the Rio Grande where he learns about local foods and the global forces that impact local food traditions.

Wendy Wheeler’s piece “‘Tongues I’ll Hang on Every Tree’: Biosemiotics and the Book of Nature” also contemplates the limits

of a unidirectional natural science. She offers a generative text that emphasizes relationships as well as the communicative gestures and languages in all living things. The term “natural metaphor” is used to describe how biological function or meaning are carried over from one site to another, emphasizing “the Batesonian and biosemiotic argument that nothing comes from nothing” (123). There is so much to appreciate in Wheeler’s text, including the idea of living metaphor, the role of creativity within the sciences, and the unity between the patterns that connect mind and nature. Before I conclude this all too brief review, I want to point to “Environmental Justice, Cosmopolitics, and Climate Change” where Joni Adamson discusses “seeing instruments” (172), the wide-ranging apparatus of traditional folktales, proverbs, trickster stories, and animal tales that can advance environmental understanding and justice. As Westling observes in her introduction to the collection, seeing instruments are relevant “for what they might reveal about linked biophysical and social processes in response to climate change”(10).

Westling has brought together a wonderful guide to the interdisciplinary field of environmental literary criticism. Professor Emerita at University of Oregon, Westling’s research focuses on ecophenomenology and literature, animality, and embodiment in language, interests that are reflected in this diverse collection of writing. I am sure that some readers will find gaps in the selections, but this is inevitable with such a quickly evolving field. Last but not least, the chronology of key publications that closes this publication is an added bonus to what is a thoroughly enjoyable saunter across the indiscipline of ecocriticism and environmental literary scholarship.

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