
Ecocriticism and Gender/Sexuality Studies: A Book Review Article on New Work by Azzarello and Gaard, Estok, and Oppermann

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Volume 16 Issue 4 (December 2014) Book Review Article 13**Keitaro Morita,****"Ecocriticism and Gender/Sexuality Studies:****A Book Review Article on New Work by Azzarello and Gaard, Estok, and Oppermann"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss4/13>>

Contents of ***CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 16.4 (2014)**Thematic Issue ***New Work in Ecocriticism***. Ed. Simon C. Estok and Murali Sivaramakrishnan<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss4/>>

Keitaro MORITA**Ecocriticism and Gender/Sexuality Studies:****A Book Review Article on New Work by Azzarello and Gaard, Estok, and Oppermann**

As stated in the Call for Papers for the thematic issue *New Work in Ecocriticism* issued in 2014 by *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, ecocriticism "has evolved into full-fledged critical theory and practice in multi-, inter-, and transcultural scholarship with its own conceptual tools of reference and theoretical frameworks." Two such new developments are feminist ecocriticism and queer ecocriticism, fields which are growing in importance and that supply indispensable concepts and theories. If ecocriticism is to be the enterprise that reverses the impact of environmental destruction, then it must also take into consideration the injustices of discrimination based on gender and sexuality.

Ecocriticism was born when literary criticism took an ecological turn in order to "redress the historic neglect of setting relative to plot, character, image, and symbol in literary works" (Buell, Heise, Thornber 420). Meanwhile, ecofeminism, a term coined by Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974, has lost its appeal to some extent, but found a stage in ecocriticism. Feminism addresses androcentrism, ecocriticism addresses anthropocentrism, and feminist ecocriticism (or ecofeminist literary criticism) addresses both together. Nevertheless, as Linda Hogan observes in the "Foreword" to the 2013 volume edited by Greta Gaard, Simon C. Estok, and Serpil Oppermann, *International Perspectives on Feminist Ecocriticism*, ecocriticism has been "dominated by white men; rarely offering a feminist ... perspective" (xvi). However, are the "White men" not, rather, "White, cisgender, straight men"? "Cisgender" is, in some ways, opposite to "transgender" and refers to people whose gender identity conforms to that traditionally associated (in heteronormative terms) to their biological gender. And I submit that this is where queer ecology comes in play. "Queer ecology" dates to Volume 6 (1994) entitled *Queer Nature of UnderCurrents: Journal of Critical Environmental Studies* and one of the latest statements on the field is found in *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* edited by Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, a collection that is a sign of maturity of the field. The editors define queer ecology as the interrogation of "an ongoing relationship between sex and nature" (5). In line with the development of queer ecology, queer ecocriticism was not only born, but has been developing well. Feminist and queer ecocriticisms, nonetheless, have been neglected in scholarship to a cer-

tain degree. For instance, referring to Lawrence Buell's 2005 *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*, one of the best-read books on ecocriticism, Terry Gifford takes Buell to task stating that ecofeminists will "feel that Buell ignores new developments such as the work of Catriona Sandilands on ... queer ecology" (20). Beyond such neglect, two currents of feminist and queer ecocriticisms are of note: Robert Azzarello's 2012 *Queer Environmentality: Ecology, Evolution, and Sexuality in American Literature* and the 2013 collected volume *International Perspectives on Feminist Ecocriticism* edited by Greta Gaard, Simon C. Estok, and Serpil Oppermann.

I begin with Robert Azzarello's 2012 *Queer Environmentality: Ecology, Evolution, and Sexuality in American Literature*, in which Azzarello reinterprets from a queer ecocritical perspective the canons of four major US-American writers: Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville, Willa Cather, and Djuna Barnes. According to Azzarello, queer environmentality is broadly defined as "a habit of thought that conceptualizes human beings, other life forms, and their environments as disregarding ... the ostensibly primary, natural law 'to survive and reproduce'" (4). The narrow definition is to problematize "conventional notions of the strange matrix between the human, the natural, and the sexual" (4). His work is "not only for queer persons, but for other types of creatures, as well" (19) who feel that "reading environmental literature is like watching a spectacular dramatization of heterosexual teleology" (3). Thus, Azzarello facilitates an exchange between environmental studies and queer studies, two disciplines which have not interacted much in the past and some might wonder how the two can have a confluence and Greg Garrard is one such skeptic. He (in)famously claims in his *How Queer is Green?* that "while it is clear that queer needs green ... it is not obvious that green needs—or indeed stands to benefit from—queer" (78-79), a remark which Estok in *International Perspectives on Feminist Ecocriticism* I review below suggests resembles "queer theory bashing" (74). Still, Azzarello asserts that "queer theory needs ecocritical insight just as much as ecocritical theory needs queer insight" (5). I concur with Estok and Azzarello, because queer and green, both of which are inclusive and emancipating enterprises, work in concert and should be discussed and analyzed as such.

For Azzarello, one proof of the need for above referred to discussion is that the popular terms describing environmental crisis are the exactly same as those historically used to stigmatize sexually "abnormal" beings, the examples represented by words such as "unnatural," "pathological," "risky," and "contaminated." The second proof is that the naturalization of heterosexuality has propagated homophobic violence. The third and final proof is that there should be no such thing as environmental destruction if "reproductive heteronormativity"—a rather oxymoronic, but still scandalous term—is valid, for the world has to be replicable in reproductive heteronormativity. In order to examine these points, Azzarello chooses the four writers who demonstrate that "the queer project and the environmental project are always already connected" (4) or, to put it differently, "the questions and politics of human sexuality are always entwined with the questions and politics of the other-than-human world" (4). Azzarello's book consists of six chapters: Chapter 1 Nature and Its Discontents, Chapter 2 Thoreau's Queer Environmentality, Chapter 3 Melville's Apples of Sodom, Chapter 4 Cather's Onto-Theology of *Oikos*, Chapter 5 Barnes's Queerly Nietzschean Nature, and Chapter 6 The Philosophical Upshot. The most thought-provoking is Azzarello's queer environmental and ecocritical analysis in Chapter 2, which revolves around Thoreau's works and Thoreau himself, a man who, along with Ralph Waldo Emerson, is one of the early nature writers of U.S.-American literature. By citing Richard Lebeaux (who touches upon Thoreau's sexuality characterized by increased fear of emasculation and infertility) and Walter Harding (who mentions that Thoreau's passionate love of nature derives from sublimation of homoeroticism), Azzarello agrees with the two to the effect that "Thoreau looks to the other-than-human world for alternative, queer models of reproductivity" (48).

On the other hand, relying on Michael Warner (who speaks about Thoreau's desire of new sensuality for yet unimaginable libidinous relationships, especially with other men, as well as about his erotics being equivalent to political liberation from the economic orientation of productivity) and Henry Abelove (who suggests that Thoreau's *Walden* is void of love, marriage, and domesticity and hence an antinovel never catering politically to reproductive heteronormativity), Azzarello argues that "Thoreau's turn to 'queer nature' is motivated more by political commitments" (48). Based on these previous studies, Azzarello proceeds with his argument that Thoreau's senses of eroticism and sensuality are embedded in his sense of theology, or the animal-human-divine matrix, and investigates "the the-

ological implications of this political turn to a queer other-than-human world" (48). Here, and throughout the book, Azzarello's use of "queer" is often too broad. Queers strategically readopted the term by reversing the negative connotation attached to it to a positive one. Azzarello, using the term beyond its original intention, broadens the possibility of the term while dispersing its meaning, which might undermine queers' endeavoring such a reversal.

During the writing of this review, I re-read Bob Johnson's review of *Queer Environmentality* where he begins by stating that "Queer Studies and Environmental Studies have not always been ready bed-fellows" and ending by concluding that "given the book's overt orientation to that relatively rarified readership, I suspect that it will have trouble finding traction or making waves in the broader environmental community" (122). The opening remark seems to suggest a kind of homophobia supposing that queers are promiscuous and have sex all the time, whereas Johnson's concluding discourse is simply a travesty characterizing the very problem Azzarello attempts to address—namely, that heterosexuality has been regarded as the only form of sexuality in modern society as substantiated by Michal Foucault. However, Johnson is not self-reflexive in these regards. Be that as it may, Azzarello's *Queer Environmentality* is outstanding scholarship centered on queer ecology and queer ecocriticism.

After feminist ecocriticism analyzed predominantly Western environmental literature from an ecofeminist/gender perspective, feminist ecocritics reflected upon their Euro-American centered perspectives. As ecocritics started to turn to non-Western environmental literatures in what has controversially been called "third-wave ecocriticism" (see Adamson and Scott), the necessity of international perspectives in feminist ecocriticism became apparent. The "wave" metaphor might not work as the third wave implies the completion of the first two. A different metaphor would be necessary, for the first two major interpretive approaches continue to develop. In this sense, contributors to *International Perspectives in Feminist Ecocriticism* stress the necessity for developing international perspectives alongside (rather than in succession to) previous developments in ecocriticism. The book contains references to various nations such as Italy and the U.S., but goes beyond Western societies and shows an attempt to address global issues through the inclusion of discussions about Taiwan, Costa Rica, Mexico, and Haiti, thus a welcome global approach. Looking at the many topics juxtaposed in the volume, the reader notices that there is no subject that feminist ecocriticism cannot analyze, ranging from posthumanism, ontology, violence, the rainforest, (de/post)colonization, dog mothers to queer vegetarianism, vegan sexuality, eugenics, antinatalism, (post)apocalypse, toxic bodies, reproductive justice, species/ism, landscapes, and fireworks. Importantly, given ecocriticism's origins, it is difficult to justify an ecocriticism that lacks a feminist perspective and the volume is based, indeed, on such an assumption and approach.

Gaard, Estok, and Oppermann organized *International Perspectives in Feminist Ecocriticism* into four sections: Part 1 Feminist Ecocritical Theory, Part 2 Feminist/Postcolonial/Environmental Justice, Part 3 Species, Sexualities, and Eco-Activisms, and Part 4: Apocalyptic Visions. Part 1 is comprised of four papers and starts with Serpil Oppermann's "Feminist Ecocriticism: A Posthumanist Direction in Ecocritical Trajectory." In the lead article, Oppermann presents with numerous citations of related articles and books a well-traced genealogy of ecofeminism and feminist ecocriticism useful not only to those already in the field, but also to those who are unfamiliar with ecofeminist thoughts, theories, and criticism. As Oppermann moves into the emerging field of posthumanism, the author proposes a new feminist ecocriticism which "would connect literature with the insights of the nascent posthumanist philosophies" (27). This is because feminist approaches are profoundly vital in posthuman thinking, both of which can alter the reader's thoughts about the relationship of culture to nature. The next article is Serenella Iovino's "Toxic Epiphanies: Dioxin, Power, and Gendered Bodies in Laura Conti's Narratives on Seveso." Iovino offers a material feminist investigation of the narratives of scientist, writer, and environmental activist Laura Conti, who witnessed the first huge ecological disaster in Italy in 1976. Next, in "Treating Objects Like Women: Feminist Ontology and the Question of Essence," Timothy Morton employs object-oriented ontology and proposes what he calls a "weird essentialism," urging that ecofeminism reconsider the term "essence." In the last article of Part 1, in "The Ecophobia Hypothesis: Re-Membering the Feminist Body of Ecocriticism," Estok discusses the concept of "ecophobia" (see David Sobel's 1995 *Beyond Ecophobia: Reclaiming the Heart in Nature Education*). Estok expands upon and redefines ecophobia as a "way of thinking about humanity and nature that of-

ten isn't rational" (76), that is, similar in some ways to and certainly confluent with homophobia, sexism, speciesism, classism, and racism. If, as Estok contends, the mandate of ecocriticism is to make connections, such connections need to be made with queers, women, other species, other classes, and all races. Here, logically, ecocriticism, as well as feminist ecocriticism, requires the concept of ecophobia.

Part 2 opens with Chiyo Crawford's "Streams of Violence: Colonialism, Modernization, and Gender in María Cristina Mena's *John of God, the Water-Carrier*." As a Japanese citizen who grew up in north-eastern Japan, the area devastated by the Great East Japan earthquake on 11 March 2011, I was naturally drawn to Crawford's work on Mena's novel, which begins with the scene of an earthquake. Crawford contrasts a natural event (the earthquake) with the unnatural devastation caused by ongoing environmental injustices (colonialism, racism, and sexism) to the poor, people of color, and women and thus displays how the natural and the unnatural are interlinked in the novel. In Mena's novel Dolores and her mother are two Mexican women who face three-fold discrimination by colonialism (Spanish colonialism and U.S. neocolonialism), racism, and sexism, suffering far more than protagonist Juan de Dios, who survives the quake, and Dolores's mother eventually dies in the wake of it. With this, Crawford claims that colonialism is "arguably the central ecological and social problem for indigenous women" (88). While testifying to how those women are relegated to unseen, invisible spaces in the text, Crawford concludes that Mena blurs the line between natural disaster (an earthquake in this case) and "man-made" (91) disaster (neo/colonialism, in this case) and hence showcases "how the disastrous effect of the earthquake is rooted not simply in 'nature' but also in the hegemonic social structures of society as a result of colonial rule" (91). In Japan, numerous novels have been produced following the disaster. Crawford's interpretation of the novel makes Japanese (ecofeminist) ecocritics, myself included, feel the need to analyze such "earthquake literature" in the light of feminist ecocriticism. Next, in "Saving the Costa Rican Rainforest: Anacristina Rossi's *Mad about Gandoca*" Regina Root interprets the novel by Anacristina Rossi, a writer known for her environmentalism and for her works that combine biodiversity and gendered mindscapes, which Root calls "literary ecofeminism" (118). In "The Poetics of Decolonization: Reading *Carpentaria* in a Feminist Ecocritical Frame" Kate Rigby discusses the trilogy of Indigenous culture, nature, and feminism in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* and invites the reader toward a postcolonial, postanthroparchal, and postpatriarchal world. Part 2 concludes with "Re-Imagining the Human: Ecofeminism, Affect, and Post-colonial Narration" by Laura White. White integrates ecofeminist scholarship and affect scholarship into postcolonial narrative strategies through a reading of Thea Astley's 1999 novel *Drylands* and enables the re-conceptualization and re-imagination of the human.

Part 3 is a conflation of attention-garnering studies starting with "Women and Interspecies Care: Dog Mothers in Taiwan" by Chia-Ju Chang and Iris Ralph. As a citizen of the country that once colonized Taiwan, I had a personal interest in this chapter that pertains to species and ecoactivism and examines the problem of abandoned dogs and focuses on *gou mama* women (dog mothers) taking care of such dogs. These women are interspecies caregivers who defend approximately one million stray dogs in the country of 23 million people, a movement initiated in the 1980s. They face discrimination on two fronts: the first based on gender and the second based on the fact that the dogs they defend suffer the people's speciesist attitudes, both of which constitute "the denigration of women and animals" (152). Here, the society animalizes the women as much as it feminizes the dogs. Because of this formula, paradoxically, the women care for the dogs. The typical *gou mama* is a 40- to 60-year-old woman who did not go to high school or even middle school and receives little to no financial support from the government. Even so, they take care of hundreds of dogs in their small homes or shelters which they build and maintain with their own money. Chang and Ralph also look at similarities and differences between the *gou mama* women in the East and (mostly) female animal collectors in the West. One intriguing difference is that Buddhism plays a critical role in *gou mama* women's ecofeminist activities. Despite such differences, Buddhist women share a profound commitment to the environment and animals with their Western ecofeminist counterparts. This is an example of East meeting West, as opposed to "East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet" as composed by Rudyard Kipling. In addition, Taiwan's economy has had an impact on the treatment of dogs. While the recent economic development has damaged some natural environments of Taiwan, it has al-

so allowed dogs to become disposable commodities. This has led Taiwanese people to abandon dogs. What links the discrimination against the financially and educationally disadvantaged *gou mama* women and the discrimination against stray dogs is male chauvinism and speciesism that ecofeminism has attacked. By taking care of stray dogs, the *gou mama* women's "courageous challenge of male chauvinism and species hierarchy is making an immense contribution to ecofeminism in Taiwan and powerfully supporting ecofeminist efforts elsewhere in the world" (163).

In "The Queer Vegetarian: Understanding Alimentary Activism" Lauren Rae Hall brings to the table texts mainly from queer vegetarian blogs and promotes a queer vegetarian ecofeminism and looks forward to ecocriticism engaging more fully with ideas about vegetarianism. In "Sex, Population, and Environmental Eugenics in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*" Rachel Stein explores Atwood's work from the perspective of sexual and reproductive justice. According to Stein's analysis, Atwood's works show that the only way to protect nature is a world without humans, which argues against human reproduction for the sake of environmental conservation and therefore presents "misogynist, anti-sex, and anti-human environmental positions" (185). In "Down with People: Queer Tendencies and Troubling Racial Politics in Antinatalist Discourse" Nicole Seymour deals with antinatalist discourses of various sources from a queer feminist perspective. Contemporary antinatalism contradicts feminist environmentalism in that, for instance, the former does not distinguish "birth control as a reproductive right from population control as a coercive machination" (204) and based on this fact, Seymour argues for a justice-oriented approach that is "feminist, queer, anti-racist, -classist, and -ableist" (204).

Part 4 opens with Christa Grewe-Volpp's "Keep Moving: Place and Gender in a Post-Apocalyptic Environment" in which she analyzes Octavia Butler's 1993 novel *Parable of the Sower* and Cormack McCarthy's 2006 novel *The Road*. Grewe-Volpp maintains that the handling of a post-apocalyptic world varies by gender and that the construction of place is correlated with gendered relations. In order to free a place from such relations, Grewe-Volpp claims that it is necessary to re-appropriate the relations. In "Queer Green Apocalypse: Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*" Katie Hogan offers an analysis of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*. The play connects gay liberation with environmentalism. For Hogan, Kushner shows us such a connection in his assumption that "the mistreating of people is equivalent to the mistreating of the planet" (239). The play references environmental catastrophes such as the Chernobyl accident and the depleting ozone layer and climate change, as well as a legal case of two women whose children were blinded due to smoke from a toothpaste plant, which works as a silhouette of the play's queer, ungreen apocalyptic vision. In other words, Hogan observes the link between the poisoning of the Earth and the poisoning of marginalized groups (inclusive of LGBTQ people and people with AIDS) by queering and ungreening the apocalypse simultaneously. In describing the apocalypse, a term that evokes Christianity and thus heterosexism and homophobia, Kushner "sheds compassionate light on people with AIDS, LGBTQs, women, people of color—any group or community constricted as 'less than,' 'unnatural,' or 'disposable'" (244) and discusses both environmental and human injustices and promotes more justice for the Earth and its people.

International Perspectives in Feminist Ecocriticism closes with Gaard's article entitled "In(ter)dependence Day: A Feminist Ecocritical Perspective on Fireworks" in which she analyses fireworks from the Renaissance to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and their impact on the environment in the context of feminist ecocriticism. Gaard is right when she says in another study of hers that in the future of ecocriticism "feminism and ecofeminism have much to offer" ("New Directions" 660). This implies that the journey of feminist ecocriticism has not yet ended despite those who argue otherwise. As the editors articulate, the project is incomplete and there is "more to be written, spoken, [and] acted on issues such as climate justice, species justice, reproductive justice, food justice, and the globally unbalanced and unsustainable interrelations of population / production / (over)consumption / waste" (15). And as I posit above, *International Perspectives in Feminist Ecocriticism* is a truly international collection. A more regional book is Simon C. Estok's and Won-Chung Kim's 2013 collected volume entitled *East Asian Ecocriticism: A Critical Reader* that focuses on work done in the East Asian region and includes feminist ecocritical studies on Kazue Morisaki, Michiko Ishimure, Hiromi Ito, and

Ang Li. Accordingly, one can read *East Asian Ecocriticisms* as an important postscript to *International Perspectives on Feminist Ecocriticism*.

In conclusion, Azzarello's *Queer Environmentalism: Ecology, Evolution, and Sexuality in American Literature* and *International Perspectives in Feminist Ecocriticism* edited by Gaard, Estok, and Oppermann contain scholarship about recent developments of feminist and queer ecocriticisms and they are required readings not only for those interested in these two areas of inquiry, but useful also for those interested in literary criticism in general: they offer new perspectives and expand new horizons in relation to ecology, gender, and sexuality in the study of culture and literature.

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