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The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism edited by Greg Garrard

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Barrier Breach: The Integrational Ambition of Ecocriticism

The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism

edited by **GREG GARRARD**

Oxford UP, 2014 \$165

Reviewed by **CAMILLA NELSON**

This text is a monster. The reading of it inspires a corresponding mixture of curiosity and horror. Horror because, at 577 pages and 2lbs 9oz, this hardback collection is heavy. And what can be said of such weight? It is oppressive, intimidating. But size (or weight) isn't everything. Edited by one of the leading academics in the field, the importance of this volume is established before you get to the contents page. An *Oxford Handbook* is a canonical statement: "this is what matters." I would usually argue for a book to be judged on what it includes rather than what it leaves out, but with a work like this it feels important to be aware of both. It is at this point that curiosity begins to curtail the horror.

The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism contains thirty-four chapters, each contributed by a different author. Sixteen of these authors are women and eighteen are men. The gender balance still needs work but it is almost there. Sixteen of these authors write from the US, six from the UK, four from Canada, two from Estonia, one from Switzerland, one from China, and one from Australia. From this view the text appears to be dominated by an almost exclusively Western perspective. However, geographical location cannot be conflated with racial or national identity, just as gendered pronouns can no longer be seen as markers of sex. We are all more plural than we once were, apparently, and the chapter contents are more varied than these statistics initially imply. Garrard

seems to have firmly addressed Sue-Ellen Campbell's complaint "that environmental literature in general . . . works partly by shutting out social and cultural complexities" (Campbell 24). The *Handbook* contains chapters on medieval, renaissance, and children's literature, modernism and postmodernism, music, comedy and film, religion, social justice, medicine, new materialism, biosemiotics, and queer theory (among many others). However, Harriet Tarlo's complaint, that "a search of the wider critical, academic sphere reveals a paucity of critical connections between the ecological or eco-critical world and literary criticism relating to postmodern or LIP [linguistically innovative poetry] poetry" (paragraph 3), unfortunately still stands. All references to ecopoetics are almost exclusively confined to Adam Dickinson's nineteen-page chapter. "Evidently there is [still] an ambivalence abroad" (Tarlo, paragraph 3) regarding the comingling of these two fields. Overall, however, this volume demonstrates a drive to pluralise the ecocritical field, not just in terms of genre and ideology, but in terms of geography too. The final section, "The Views from Here," deliberately pushes beyond the bounds of Europe and North America (although Axel Goodbody reminds us that a European ecocritical tradition can by no means be regarded as homogenous) to focus on what ecocriticism looks like in India, China, Africa and Japan. In questions of canon, it is important to note who speaks and from where, in order to acknowledge the silences, to consider why they exist and what might be done to address them. Statistically, Africa, Asia, and Indonesia are still massively underrepresented within the ever-unfolding scaffolding of the ecocritical project but this final section recognises this and marks these spaces as areas for ecocritical growth.

Although the majority of literary methods discussed in this *Handbook* are narrative, their critical approaches are varied. For Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee, illness becomes an alternative narrative strategy in examining the interrelation between people and places through the spread of microbes. Like the epidemiologists to which he refers, Mukherjee traces the narrative routes of these microbes, cataloguing “the spaces and interactions of global modernity” in the spread—“via the very material structures of empire itself—by its communicative networks of roads, railways, and canals”—of “disease” (83). In the final chapter, Rob Nixon reminds us that “Long before our ears, our eyes and our noses have begun to absorb information from the world, we have started leading sensuous lives through our porous, excreting breathing skins” (560). Adam Dickinson’s *Anatomic* project explores the relationship between self and non-self, or self and environment, in a similarly membranous direction. Dickinson aims to undertake a sustained period of body burden tests as a means of rewriting his biochemical makeup and monitoring the impact as a form of ambient poetics. The ambition of this poetic enterprise is to

defamiliarize the subjective emphasis on the body in order to underscore both the potency of seemingly innocuous environmental toxins and the ethical potential of locating personhood in the skin, in the membranes, at the threshold of the continuous interchange between self and environment. (148)

It is through an embodied investigation of writing as lived experience that Dickinson

aims to deliver on Timothy Morton’s call for a “dirtier” approach to ecocriticism, but he is not alone in his efforts to champion the development of a practice-based ecocritical method. Stacey Alaimo also argues for the benefits of “epistemological entanglement” (189) proposed by a “practice-based model of explanation” (211). Alaimo warns against the comfortable academic distance which seemingly “protects the knower from the realities, complications, and risks of the material world” (191) but which, in so doing, endorses the dangerous illusion of immunity from environmental impact. Whilst Richard Kerridge raises important objections to these more immersive understandings of human (or posthuman) intra-relations with environment—principally that dissolving human agency at the point when we most need to activate our sense of responsibility and embrace our capacity to take independent action, may undermine our efforts to effectively respond to environmental crisis—it is good to see not just the call for practice-based methodologies but the practical application of these methodologies forming a progressively significant part of the ecocritical canon.

This text marks a move towards a more diverse vision of what ecocriticism could and does look/sound/feel like, even as it emerges. And so I find myself wondering how much this ecocritical project should be wary of itself as a colonising force, not of one nation (or even ideology) over another, but of the all-pervasiveness of one theme or concern? If environment is “everything” (Clark), there may (and perhaps should) be no bounds to the domain of ecocriticism. Is there an insidiousness to this ambition or should such sustained and divergent ecocritical emergence be simply celebrated? This text opens up more than it shuts down.

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