Culture, Creativity and Environment

New Environmental Criticism

Bonny Cassidy[1]

Fiona Becket and Terry Gifford (Eds.)
Amsterdam, Rodopi
2007
258pp
ISBN-13: 978-90-420-2250-8

It's refreshing and timely to encounter movements outside the North American nexus of ecocriticism, a phenomenon to which the editors of *Culture, Creativity and Environment* point in their introduction. While the book grew from the 2002 ASLE conference held in Leeds, editors Fiona Becket and Terry Gifford have balanced its English majority of contributors by sourcing a combination of voices from institutions and projects in Australia, the USA, Taiwan, and elsewhere in the UK. In doing so, they've created a stimulating transnational shuffle of wombats and highlands, parterre gardens, German forest, and American "wilderness." It's hard, however, to ignore the Western contiguity among a selection of writers whose intellectual reservoirs differ, relatively speaking, in terms of degrees.

Previous volumes in the *Nature, Culture and Literature* series have begun to address this issue by focusing on trans-Atlantic and Australian ecocriticism. Unlike them, this book sets out an alternative response that recognises "green cultural critique" as progressive praxis rather than a static field or network. It claims to concentrate on the unique intersections taking place between creative practices and environmental criticism, and to highlight, Becket and Gifford write, "the opportunities ahead for the emerging field of ecocriticism in its heterogeneity, within

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and beyond the academy."[2] In keeping with the series' theme, the book prioritises literary critique; and yet I can't help but feel that this delimitation works against the broader "opportunities" suggested by both the editors and contributors. In his chapter on ecocriticism and postcolonial studies, Graham Huggan emphasises our place in a posthumanist era that demands academic and scholarly adaptation. Generally speaking, the capacity for adaptation seems to have become one of ecocriticism's self-definitions, as creative artists are welcomed into—and claim an active role in—its discursive expression. Research and creative collaborations, and the relaxing of scholarly expression have come to distinguish this critical mode.

Indeed, a traditionally academic collection of essays such as this one almost seems to be a step behind the sculpture, drama, fiction, film, painting and poetry that it spotlights. (Thankfully, the book's attention to an even spread of creative media rescues it from ecocriticism's ongoing preoccupation with poetry.) The two exceptions are essays by ANU's Val Plumwood and British painter Judith Tucker, which lead the book toward more original forms of criticism. Both essays are the more engaging for trying to form their excursions through narrative—although it's hard to tell whether Plumwood's piece is intended to be an illustrative excursion into the "eco-writing" she discusses. They seek a new workspace, (literally) outside of the academic one: "that fused space between internal and external,"[3] Tucker writes, which binds the experiences of art and place.

In Plumwood's "Journey to the Heart of Stone," colonial Australia typifies modernity's "instrumental culture" as the assumption of "terra nullius, a prior vacancy." Her revival of Romanticism is a welcome response. In American ecocriticism the invocation of Romanticism has not been especially problematic, as Hannes Bergthaller points out in the book's fourth chapter. In Australia, on the other hand, it's been treated as an undesirable recourse; and Matthew Jarvis's essay on contemporary poet Barry McSweeney suggests that this remains a problem for British poetics, too. I agree with Plumwood that, viewed thoughtfully, Romanticism "often represented a partial and limited challenge to dominant reductionist frameworks;" and that, therefore, it continues to be valid not only as a poetics but also in the critique of just about any aspect of modern culture.

Plumwood's focus, however, is on how forms of writing can be responsible for enacting anti-reductionist measures. For her, the aim of "eco-writing" is to re-access "the world of wonder." I like the idealism ("and why aim for less?" she asks at one point) of Plumwood's manifesto for "whole new interspecies dialogues,

2 "Introduction", p.9.

3 "Painting Landscape: Mediating Dislocation", p. 198.

dramas and projects previously unimaginable."[4] She navigates Romantic aesthetics by casting aside the sublime and reclaiming the force of small and silent things. The reverence for stone found in Chinese and Japanese philosophy and aesthetics, for example, is contrasted with the Western dismissal of stone as "nothing but meaningless coincidence." Plumwood suggests that, against the planet's stone skeleton and stone-dust flesh, humanity is "a microscopic flea," although I find this sadistic register somewhat unhelpful: not only does the vision of human smallness reinstate a sublime rendering of the telluric world, it also sets "us humans" back into a duality—albeit a pre/post/nonhuman one—with our environment.[5] As Gillian Rudd puts it, "vilifying the species and its integral components, like reason, will not mend matters."[6] But is reason particularly innate to human beings? As well as her idealism, I like Plumwood's tenacious mysticism in response to this question. She insists that the shaping and placing of stones can be appreciated as more than mere "jumble":

> what we call "chance" is usually the intersection of multiple narratives far too intricate and complex for us humans ever to know—for example, the narratives of pre-history and geology that could explain how a certain stone came to be in the place where it lies.[7]

The need for us to accept "intention" in the geosphere—and, by extension, in Earth's other elements—will make perfect sense to anyone who's spent time in the kind of stone environments traversed by Plumwood. Of course, her flatly logical approach can hardly be called mystical, which is why Plumwood emphasises the experience of "wonder" rather than that of faith, belief, or revelation. In her argument, the separation of reason and enchantment is unjustifiable.

How to express wonder, then? Writing on American author Marilynne Robinson's 1982 novel *Housekeeping*, Bergthaller offers a new logic similar to Plumwood's: "that to those who are willing to hear, the natural world can speak for itself."[8] The passages Bergthaller quotes from *Housekeeping* give a rich insight into what Plumwood is trying to get at conceptually and formally, but they question her defence of anthropomorphism. I'm certain Plumwood knows there are more possibilities for language and hence for ontology, than resignation to old, tired

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4 "Journey to the Heart of Stone", pp. 18-19.

5 "Journey to the Heart of Stone", p. 20.

6 "In the Mirror of Middle Earth: Langland's use of the world as a book and what we can make of it", p. 112.

7 "Journey to the Heart of Stone", p. 23.

8 "Like a Ship to be Tossed: Emersonian Environmentalism and Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*", p. 81.

tropes that require defending in the first place—the lyricism of her essay is a case in point. Bergthaller puts it well when he concludes (hinting that the reality of his argument only begins *beyond* his essay) that language is the most appropriate tool for "defining and sustaining a meaningful relation to our natural environment…precisely because its meanings are of a different order than the material world."[9]

Both Bergthaller and Plumwood believe that we can sustain human culture by distinguishing the intentions and voices of our environments from our own. For "a biological organism," writes Bergthaller, "to refuse exclusion and to become 'coextensive' with its environment is synonymous with dying."[10] But does Plumwood's prescription of "wonder" really stave off the pitfalls of deep ecology's "co-extensive" program? As Gillian Rudd discovers in a fourteenth century text, William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, we continue to face:

> a question about the consequences of attempting to maintain an affective relation to the world through cultivating a sense of wonder. Does such an endeavour retain a sense of being part of it, or does it simply bring home to us our innate anxieties? [11]

Judith Tucker engages with this dialectic by articulating her own painting practice in "Painting Landscape: Mediating Dislocation." Her combination of critical commentary, affective observation and statements of process tackles the fragmented nature of enjoying a deep connection with an aesthetic work without yet knowing the reason for that connection. By working through a series of experiences as a viewer, Tucker spells out why, as a twenty-first century artist, she has chosen the landscape mode for her work. It's a question for many contemporary landscape painters, and for green writers in general; and one that Tucker has answered precisely and lucidly. "The way I experience the landscape through drawing and painting," she writes, "is an active experience/relation, rather than a passive, reflexive one. It occurs through a panoply of bodily sensations."[12] This theory also deals with the question of why she and others choose the medium of paint, and how its materials contribute to eco-aesthetic affect. Tucker engages with the argument for a subject/environment dialectic by linking her migrant background with landscape.

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9 "Like a Ship to be Tossed: Emersonian Environmentalism and Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*", p. 96.

10 "Like a Ship to be Tossed: Emersonian Environmentalism and Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*", p. 95.

11 "In the Mirror of Middle Earth: Langland's use of the world as a book and what we can make of it", p. 111.

12 "Painting Landscape: Mediating Dislocation", p. 203.

In defining her landscapes as a reply to her mother's refugee experience, Tucker's preoccupation with the experience of quite literally "rebuilding" place through paint is, she feels, an exercise in "an aesthetics of postmemory"—"meditations of a sense of absence and longing" that could not occur without recourse to other-than-human and other-than-self environments.[13]

It's precisely in relation to Tucker's achievement that I feel *Culture, Creativity and Environment* is limited as an exploration of environmentalist criticism. Most contributions to the book are rigidly structured as numbered segments, a style that not only makes for visual and rhythmic monotony but that seems to work against the common argument of the essays for the dissolution of divisions, borders and delimitations. Offering welcome breaks from homogenising academic discourse, black and white reproductions of work accompany Tucker's essay and Judith Rugg's piece on British women's land art. Unfortunately, however, it's just the one image that Tucker includes and, like Rugg, places after her essay. These decisions hinder the reader's active participation with the aesthetic objects being critiqued, particularly in Rugg's simplistic ("all gardens are a metaphor for Eden") and galloping piece. A contrasting approach to the subject is Herman Rapaport's gripping chapter on Richard Long's land art forms, in *Is There Truth In Art?*[14] It would have been interesting if Rugg's rhetorical style had similarly allowed for a more affective investigation of her subject's complexities, such as the fact that while Anya Gallacio's floral sculptures might be about "merging back" into land and out of patriarchal order, one of her works was apparently "allowed to exist for six weeks" only. [15]

There are some exciting moments of interdisciplinary discourse in Axel Goodbody's weaving of a history of European hunting into Otto Alscher's prose, and in Huggan's attempt to draw ecocriticism and postcolonial studies closer together on the very grounds of their unique claim to such interdisciplinarity. He qualifies, however, that this remains more an idea than a practice undertaken by academic studies themselves. Accordingly, the book is, as the editors initially suggest, a collection of criticism in its conventional sense and not, as they later state, a juxtaposition of critical and creative work in "a model from the sciences for bringing diverse specialisms into productive dialogue."[16] We know forms of eco-

13 "Painting Landscape: Mediating Dislocation", p. 208.

14 H. Rapaport (1997), *Is There Truth In Art?*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca.

15 "Fear and Flowers in Anya Gallacio's *Forest Floor, Keep off the Grass, Glaschu and Repens*", p. 62.

16 "Introduction", p. 9.

writing exist because of the fascinating range, particularly contemporary, of creative work cited and celebrated in this book. If we could only see more evidence of formal possibility in the criticism itself, and a genuine commitment to crossover between scholarly and creative expression, Plumwood and Bergthaller's call to the voices of the earth would be more persuasive.

Between the diverse chapters of time, place and text explored in *Culture, Creativity and Environment*, fascinating conversations occur around the problem that has and continues to be central to ecocriticism: how exploring and embracing the nonhuman is often, in fact, to keep it at physical, linguistic or metaphysical arm's length. As a whole, the book works toward Huggan's ironic stance, that "the production of a nonhuman 'ecological subject' by no means precludes human social and political concerns."[17] As Tucker argues, an audience's participation in this rebuilding process makes for a "transsubjective" aesthetics. This differs from a co-extensive relationship; the notions of "transaction" established in John Dewey's aesthetic theory and Poland's Konstanz school of hermeneutics, provide a basis for extending Tucker's theory from painting to eco-writing. Tucker herself reflects on this mergence, noting that the title of her series, "Caesura," "seemed to situate my activities in an appropriate field."[18]

Her allusions to phenomenological aesthetics create a link between transsubjective aesthetics and wonder, which is neatly highlighted by Louise Westling's closing essay on Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. Plumwood's call for Western culture to give up the metaphysical search echoes Heidegger's emphasis on *veritas*—"a searchlight piercing a dark formless universe"—in favour of *aletheia*—a single horizon of feeling and mood in which there is no division between beings and Being.[19] Her immediate turn to *poeisis* as the starting point of this project mirrors Tucker's practical approach to bridging the baffling, irrelevant and simply foreign "whole mind/body binary." Tucker's description of her work drawn from the folded "crevices and curves" of sketchbooks seems to illustrate the concatenated reality suggested by *aletheia*[20]—an epistemology of bunching and folding that other eco-writers like Paul Carter have developed from phenomenology. Tucker connects the nature of her materials with their ability to collapse time into metaphoric layers rather than a distancing hierarchy. In doing so, she underscores the state of "embodied being" advanced by Westling and Huggan's shared challenge to

17 "Postcolonialism, Ecocriticism and the Animal in Recent Canadian Fiction", p. 167.

18 "Painting Landscape: Mediating Dislocation", p. 210.

19 "Journey to the Heart of Stone", p. 19.

20 "Painting Landscape: Mediating Dislocation", p. 204.

humanism. Tucker argues that, while the production of the art object has a distancing effect, landscape paintings "do become places" if the viewer is re-conditioned to engage with them "as a space/place." Only then it is possible "for seeing to become feeling," and so for our critical voices to open:

> not movement and sight, but movement/sight; not thought and action, but thought/action; not seeing and feeling, but seeing/feeling; not material and affect, but material/affect.[21]

21 "Painting Landscape: Mediating Dislocation", pp. 210-211.