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Cultural Ecology and Material Ecocriticism

Within the previously described developments in recent ecocritical theory, cultural ecology resembles in some ways the “widescreen” version of ecological thought as advocated by Timothy Morton, which is not confined to the ecological sciences and to environmental issues in a narrowly thematic sense but which also “is to do with art, philosophy, literature, music, and culture” (Morton 2010: 4). In extending the meanings of “environment” to include not only external, natural environments but also cultural, urban environments, as well as the internal worlds of human beings and their interpersonal relationships, cultural ecology fully concurs with statements like the following: “Human beings need each other as much as they need an environment. Thinking ecology isn’t simply about nonhuman things. Ecology has to do with you and me” (4). At the same time, cultural ecology remains more consistently focused on the culture-nature relationship than such highly generalizing versions of ecological thought, when they claim that “[e]cology includes all the ways we imagine how we live together” (4). If ecology is everything that has to do with how human beings live together, it becomes difficult to distinguish it from other forms and directions of thought. Unlike such an all-encompassing eco-philosophy, cultural ecology is a concrete scholarly project, which examines the various ways in which the functions, structures, and evolutionary processes of human cultures as reflected in art and literature are interconnected with and dependent on processes of nature but also the ways in which they have gained a relatively high degree of evolutionary autonomy and of complex, *eigendynamical* (Berressem) forms of self-organization.

Like all ecological thought, then, cultural ecology emphasizes relationality and interconnectedness on all levels and in all areas of study. At the same time, it resists the tendency in recent versions of ecotheory to abolish all

boundaries and to highlight universal interconnectedness while neglecting the very real differences and boundaries that continue to exist both on the material-semiotic level between cells, organisms, and ecosystems, and on the cultural-semiotic level between cultures, social systems and subsystems, identities, forms of knowledge, and genres of texts. Cultural ecology is distinct from such universalizing ecocentric theories in that it thinks together the two axiomatic premises of an ecological epistemology, connectivity *and* diversity, relationality *and* difference.¹ This especially concerns the fundamental relation between culture and nature, which are seen to be inextricably interconnected but also cannot be reduced to each other. It does not seem helpful from this perspective simply to do away with the concept of “nature” altogether, as Morton proposes in his *Ecology Without Nature*, more or less absorbing nature into an ecocritically enriched discourse of deconstruction within the framework of a material object philosophy. In a way, Morton repeats the move which Paul de Man had already performed in the heyday of deconstructionism, when he criticized romantic nature poetry for reifying its textual signifiers into properties of the signified (de Man). Nor does it seem helpful, in an opposite move of establishing a body-centered “earthly cosmology” (Abram), to do away with the concept of culture and absorb it into the radical egalitarianism of an ecocentric phenomenology, as in Abram’s *Becoming Animal*, or indeed to discard human civilization altogether in favor of returning to a primordial state of “Uncivilization,” as advocated in such eco-apocalyptic manifestos as that of the Dark Mountain Project (2009). In both cases, the difference between nature and culture is dissolved into a space of undifferentiated (con-) fusion, in one case into the domain of mind and critical discourse, in the other into the domain of affective relations and elemental empathy.

To be sure, the opposition between culture and nature has served as central ideological underpinning not only of an anthropocentric dominance over the earth but of internal structures of civilizational power and repression in terms of gender, race, class, sexuality, or ethnicity. In this sense, the critique of such entrenched binaries and constructs of “nature” is both liberating and

¹ Some strands of material ecofeminist theory also advocate a similar, double approach. See Stacy Alaimo’s comment on Val Plumwood’s *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*: “By insisting upon both continuity and difference, Plumwood offers a philosophical frame to counter the system of dualisms that have undergirded a network of oppressions.” (Alaimo 1996–1997)

indispensable to any enlightened ecological thought. In their association with features like “hierarchy, authority, harmony, purity, neutrality, and mystery” (Morton 2010: 3), such essentializing concepts of a capitalized Nature easily lend themselves to ideology and reactionary politics. At the same time and for this reason alone, it seems necessary to include the critical reflection of the various cultural concepts of nature in human history, within and between cultures, in any fully self-aware ecocritical discourse. In Morton’s own ecological thought, nature as a signifier keeps reappearing in multiple places like a ghost that is haunting and undermining his argument, time and again surviving the attempt of its rhetorical exorcism. Indeed, the discourses of climate change and of the Anthropocene as a new geological era presuppose this very differentiation between human and nonhuman agency, and thus between culture and nature, since climate change is by definition anthropogenic and not “natural” in origin, even if the results of these processes are irreversible and endanger the survival of the human species whose historical-cultural agency has set them in motion. The discourses of climate change and of the Anthropocene presuppose the assumption that these phenomena are the result of human intervention in a prior, albeit dynamic and turbulent, but nevertheless precariously balanced state of relative equilibrium of the planetary ecosystem, which has been increasingly disrupted by human intervention in the course of unrestrained economic-technological expansion. As such, this assumed prior state of relative planetary equilibrium represents the point of departure and frame of reference for current observations on the scale and degree of climate change, as well as for potential measures to avoid the worst-scenario environmental catastrophes. Without this assumption of an always shifting but nevertheless *real* difference between human culture and nonhuman nature, the whole argument of the climate change discourse would not work, since it is precisely the difference between anthropogenic and non-anthropogenic factors that underlies the statistical trajectories of climate change science as well as the distinction between climate and weather put forward in popular climate change debates.

More generally speaking, historical and transcultural comparisons amply demonstrate that “nature” is by no means a monolithic ideological fabrication but that it has been constructed in manifold and indeed radically different ways in cultural history. In a critical archaeology of ecological thought, these

different lines of thought need to be retraced in order to gain an adequately complex picture of the ways in which human civilization has conceived of its relationship to the nonhuman world throughout different stages and courses of its evolution. Ecological thought in pre-classical or classical Greece, for example, or in the Middle Ages, or in romanticism, or indeed in modernism and postmodernism, fails to conform to any single ideological model but contains positions and ideas which can be the target of a critique of western anthropocentrism, or others that can be claimed for a continuity of evolving ecological thought that reaches back to the very beginnings of human civilization. David Macauley's *Elemental Philosophy: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water as Environmental Ideas* is an example of such an archaeology of ecological thought, which actualizes the rich potential of environmental philosophy since ancient Greece for an exploration of the significance of the four elements in ecological thought across historical periods and cultural spheres up to the very present (Macauley). Obviously, the same need for a differentiated approach applies to non-western cultures as well, in which the concept of nature likewise has been an omnipresent cultural signifier for the ways in which human culture and civilization defined itself in relation to the primary conditions of its emergence and possible survival; here, again, its meanings vary across a broad spectrum indicating relations of conflict or cooperation, separation or symbiosis, dominance or co-evolution between culture and nature.² What this means is that nature seems to be an inevitable notion through which human culture has and continues to define itself. Nature is an "other" that is also a vital part of human culture and the human self. But as such, it still is and remains an "other," something never fully available, never just another version of the same, never entirely reducible to the self. Nature is, and is not, a cultural construct. It is the necessary human construct of that which is not a human construct.

On the other hand, the processes and activities of culture cannot simply be identified with processes of material nature. They do not obey the same causal-empirical laws as natural processes but are characterized by their own internal dynamics and evolutionary developments, which can be productively described

² Joni Adamson has highlighted this in her concept of "multinaturalism," referring especially to the diverse nature concepts of indigenous cultures, which however also lend themselves to a transcultural "ecocosmopolitics" (Adamson 2012).

in their manifold analogies to evolutionary developments in the nonhuman world, yet are distinguished from them to the degree that they are shaped by human agency, intentionality, and “semiotic freedom” (Wheeler 2011). Within the new ecocritical approach of a material ecocriticism, it has been rightly pointed out that the nonhuman world of material nature is not inert but “vibrant,” continually in motion, changing, and, “in a sense, alive” (Bennet 117). Assimilating knowledge from the postclassical material sciences into ecocritical thought, material ecocriticism ascribes independent agency to matter and to nonhuman life as well as to human culture.

Material ecocriticism represents an important and innovative step beyond former exclusionary binaries, which opens up entirely new research agendas and promises to be highly relevant for future ecological literary and cultural studies. This potential has been impressively demonstrated by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann in their various contributions, which highlight the many ways in which material processes condition, shape, interact, transform, and co-evolve with discursive processes in politics, society, culture, media, and texts (Iovino and Oppermann 2014). Adapting insights into the co-agency of mind and matter, humans and nonhumans, social and material forces as theorized in science studies (Bennet, Latour), material ecocriticism shows how diverse modes of ecological communication from film to landscape art, from political speech to toxic discourse, from illness narratives to civic resistance, from popular culture to literary art are transfused by material signifiers and energies which are an intrinsic part of their discursive processes. This approach casts new light on various forms of ecological thought, laying bare its inextricable interdependence with the material processes that it is aiming to conceptualize. It also helps to illuminate more explicitly a dimension of literary texts that has all too often been neglected, even though it has been a shaping force of aesthetic processes in literary history long before the emergence of modern ecocritical thought, by focusing on the elemental realities, things, and objects with which the lives of literary characters are enmeshed. It draws attention to the role of time and space as conditioning and limiting factors of human intentionality and to the importance of more-than-human agencies appearing as fate, chance, or monstrous concatenations in the conception of literary plots. The uncanny entanglements between humans and things, organic and inorganic

forces in gothic novels; the determining role of genetic, historical, and social factors in naturalistic writings; the overpowering influence of urban milieus as major agencies in modern city narratives; the hypertrophic wasteland scenarios pervading the landscapes of postmodern fiction; not to speak of the manifold agentic manifestations of nuclear, chemical, biotechnological, toxic, plastic, computer, media, cyborg, AI, and other material products and processes in a contemporary Anthropocene depicted in dystopias, ecothrillers, and environmental disaster narratives—all of these supply multiple evidence of that entanglement of material and discursive agencies in texts and other artifacts, which material ecocriticism productively and systematically points out as one pervading topic of ecocritical theory and textual analysis.

While cultural ecology likewise highlights the indissoluble interconnectedness and dynamic feedback relations between culture and nature, mind and matter, text and life, it remains aware of the fluid and ever-shifting but nevertheless real differences and boundaries that have emerged within and between them in the long and ever-accelerating history of cultural evolution. This double relation of connectivity *and* difference can be found in the various phases of evolution: the emergence of life from matter, of animal life from plants, of human from nonhuman life, of the cultural from the natural evolution. In all these cases, the former stage of evolution remains present in the later stage, which, however, develops its own new and irreversibly distinct forms of self-organization. Human culture and consciousness have evolved from but cannot be reduced to matter and bodily natures: they are matter or nature becoming self-aware. In this sense, cultural ecology is not simply a deterministic application of biological ecology to human culture and society but takes into account the semi-autonomous dynamics and increasing internal differentiation of culture, consciousness, and the human mind. The ecological principle of diversity entails awareness and recognition, both in an epistemological and an ethical sense, of the uniqueness and singularity of natural and cultural beings and phenomena as they have evolved in specific space-time-contexts, while the inextricable interconnectedness of these beings and phenomena within complex networks of material and mental-cultural relations is equally acknowledged. Indeed, in this view, the uniqueness, individuality, and singularity of life forms emerges from and consists in

precisely the ways in which they are interconnected with the natural and cultural forces that make up the process of being-as-continuous-becoming in which all life participates.

At the same time, if the argument of an inseparable co-agency of matter and mind is pushed too far, a radicalized material ecocriticism risks to disempower human culture and creativity to a point where anonymous material processes of nature/culture entanglements are replacing personally and socially responsible forms of human agency as shaping forces of political, economic, social, scientific, or artistic developments. The legitimate critique of a deep-rooted tradition of anthropocentric humanism has, in some radicalized forms of posthuman ecocentrism, led to a projection of values, meaning, and agency onto the nonhuman world, which in effect is being assigned the place of the discredited world of human civilization as ethical-epistemological authority of the ecocritical discourse.

This basic premise of a vital interrelatedness yet evolutionary difference between culture and nature has significant consequences for ecocriticism. While it helps to overcome the deeply entrenched culture-nature dualism and its anthropocentric ideology of supremacy and exploitative dominance over nonhuman nature, it also resists opposite attempts to simply dissolve culture into nature and to replace an anthropocentric ideology by a physiocentric or ecocentric naturalism. Axel Goodbody argues along these lines when he describes nature, following the German eco-philosopher Hartmut Böhme, as a “cultural project,” in which “the dualism of humanity and the non-human cannot simply be collapsed into a formless unity... The way forward lies in positions located between a physiocentrism which recognizes the primacy of our interest in the survival and well-being of humanity as a species and an anthropocentrism which recognises our intuitive feelings that nature is more than just a resource” (Goodbody 277). What is needed is neither a naturalist reduction of culture nor a culturalist reduction of nature. The paradoxical, double perspective that cultural ecology adopts in this contested discursive field between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism has perhaps best been summed up in the Italian ecocritic Serenella Iovino’s notion of a “non-anthropocentric humanism” (Iovino 2010).