Zapf, Hubert. "Ecocriticism in the Twenty-First Century: The Return of Culture to Writing about Nature." *Literature as Cultural Ecology: Sustainable Texts*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. 45–50. Environmental Cultures. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474274685.ch-006>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 02:25 UTC.

Copyright © Hubert Zapf 2016. Released under a CC BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>). You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

Ecocriticism in the Twenty-First Century: The Return of Culture to Writing about Nature

While these environmental writings of the twentieth century do occasionally reflect on the mediating role of language and the text, and while they are aware of the importance of rhetoric, narrative, and metaphor in the transmission of environmental issues, their common denominator is the attempt to convey an *unmediated* perception of reality and nature beyond linguistic and cultural categories rather than an awareness of the inevitable textual and cultural “framing” of all human knowledge and depiction of the nonhuman environment.¹ This awareness has become one of the hallmarks of developments in the early twenty-first century, in which the ecodidactic orientation and polemical opposition to theory has been superseded by an opening of ecocriticism to various branches of cultural studies and, consequently, by a rapidly increasing theoretical and methodological diversification of the field.

Ecocriticism in this wider sense is no longer a coherent, monosystemic approach but a “transformative discourse” related to “wider social context” (Garrard 7). From a linguistic-epistemological aspect, this links up with Gregory Bateson’s observation that ecological thinking is closer to metaphoric than to logocentric speech (Bateson 1991). Garrard distinguishes some of the characteristic metaphorical concepts or “tropes” which govern “the production, reproduction and transformation of large-scale metaphors” within the discourse of ecocriticism: Pollution, Wilderness, Apocalypse, Dwelling, Animals, Earth, Health (Garrard 2004, 2013). In various ways, these

¹ The idea of the “cultural framing” of environmental discourse has been the topic of an Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded research network at the University of Bath and at Bath Spa University from 2010 to 2011.

conceptual tropes form characteristic focal points of attention that pervade both the thematic concerns of ecocriticism and the fictional scenarios of ecoliterature.

While some ecocritics continue to focus on the local, personal, and experiential dimensions of environmental writing, fusing autobiography and scientific observation into what Scott Slovic calls “narrative scholarship” (Slovic 2012), others explore the global and systemic aspects of ecocriticism, emphasizing the need to link local and personal ecologies with transpersonal and cross-cultural aspects of ecological thought in a globalized world. The latter critics examine the ways in which contemporary life is changed by increasingly complex worldwide economic connections and information technologies in an “environmental imagination of the global” (Heise 2008). Furthermore, within the broad range of contemporary ecocriticism, “environmentalism” as a political-pragmatic position can be distinguished from “deep ecology” as a philosophical-spiritual position, from “social ecology” and “eco-Marxism” respectively as community- and class-oriented positions (Newman) and from “ecofeminism” and “queer ecology” as gender- and sexuality-oriented positions (Garrard 2004: 16–32; Mortimer-Sandilands and Erikson; Westling 2014). In the course of this diversification of the field of ecocriticism, attention has been expanded toward new branches of ecology such as “urban ecology,” in which the binary opposition between city and country is destabilized; positive values such as “sociability, walkability, cosmopolitanism, spontaneity, and diversity” are associated with cities (Goodbody 2007: 211); and new forms of culture-nature symbiosis in urban life are envisioned, which are often connoted as “transcultural spaces” (Brandt et al.). Complementary developments are “ecopsychology,” in which the deep-rooted dependence of the human psyche on experiences of nature is explored in terms of sickness and health, trauma and therapy (Nemeth et al.; West; *Ecopsychology*), and “affective ecology,” which looks at the important role that psycho-emotional effects play in the production and reception of environmental discourses (Weik von Mossner). Other forms of recent ecocriticism involve an interdisciplinary dialogue with such diverse fields as science studies (Alaimo), evolutionary biology (Wilson, Easterlin), systems theory (Bergthaller), chaos theory (Berressem), complexity research (Gras), quantum physics (Barad), and the material sciences on the one hand (Iovino,

Oppermann) but also with philosophy, ethics, religion, history, and different versions of critical theory on the other. This interdisciplinary opening has led to significant extensions of the ecocritical field toward what has come to be called and is increasingly being institutionalized worldwide under the umbrella term of the environmental humanities.

There have been attempts to describe these developments of ecocritical thought in a teleological way as successive “waves,” which followed upon each other as if in clearly distinguishable phases from naïve beginnings to ever more sophisticated phases, leading at last to the establishment of a coherent, fully authorized scholarly field. Rather than positing distinct stages or waves of ecocriticism, however, it seems preferable to speak of “palimpsest”-like, overlapping layers (Buell) and multiple coexisting and interacting ecocritical approaches and orientations, which not only point forward in time to a not yet achieved “ecology to come” (Morton) but also backwards to the multifaceted and multilayered historical archives of ecological thought that had long been buried in cultural history (Böhme 1989). The various directions of ecocriticism, which have evolved from this dialogue between theory and practice, past and future, scientific and cultural forms of ecological thought, have crystallized around a number of key critical issues but have not always produced easy answers. They have rather revealed specific paradoxes or “quandaries” (Clark), which seem to be inevitably tied up with such a concrete and yet also universal episteme as ecology. Nevertheless, the identification of these quandaries or paradoxes may itself be one important way of describing not only the limitations but the enormous potential of ecocritical theory and practice, because it indicates the coexistence of the seemingly incompatible as a fundamental condition of ecological thought.

In the case of ecofeminism, for example, the tension that is generally observable in ecocriticism between celebratory, “nature-endorsing” and culturalist, “nature-skeptical” views is especially virulent (Soper, Merchant, Grewe-Volpp 2016). Ecofeminists of the former group have proclaimed a special closeness of women to natural life cycles in relation to motherhood, nurture, and the female body, celebrating various matriarchal incarnations of nature in different cultures in what is commonly subsumed under the Gaia myth of the earth as the Great Mother. This body-oriented mytho-ecological view has been translated into a scientific framework in concepts like James

Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis, which conceives of the whole planet Earth as a living ecosystem that regulates climate and chemistry in such a way that it remains "always close to an optimum for whatever life inhabits it" (Lovelock). Endorsed by evolutionary scientists such as Lynn Margulis, the Gaia hypothesis has become part of biocultural theories of the interrelatedness between mind and life both on individual and on collective, global levels (Thompson 119–122). Poststructuralist versions of ecofeminism, on the other hand, tend to highlight the discursive constructedness of such views and their inevitable entanglement in the negotiations of language, power, agency, and subjectivity in modern society (Sandilands). They point out the different meanings which have been ascribed to nature in history (Evernden, Soper) and which often went along with hierarchical binaries that assigned women, along with nature, the body, or the cultural other, an inferior status in society in an essentializing ideology of a "natural order," from whose repressive regime ecofeminism aims to liberate thought and discourse. However, the ecocentric, nature-endorsing and the poststructuralist, discourse-analytical versions of ecofeminism are facing opposite problems. In the former view, the analogy between women and nature posits an ontological affinity which may involve an inadvertent return to traditional gender clichés, while in the latter view, the notion of nature as an exclusively cultural construct threatens to eliminate the nonhuman world, once more, from the anthropocentric categories of humanist studies. Various attempts to think together these different positions are, however, characteristic of recent ecofeminist theory and scholarship, which, in a material ecofeminist framework, aims "to decalcify fossilized significations of nature that render it distant, empty, and mute" (Alaimo 1997) and "to reconcile what has hitherto been torn asunder, to show the actual integration of what historically has been polarized and hierarchically valued" (Sandilands 1999: 195).

In postcolonial versions of ecocriticism, which have gained increasing visibility in recent years, the issue of environmental justice has become especially relevant, and the unequal distribution of environmental risk and disaster caused by the industrialized world in different cultures and social classes is critically examined on both a regional and global scale (Huggan and Tiffin, Nixon, Banerjee). Nature has always been an irreducible part of the postcolonial imagination in a double sense. On the one hand, postcolonial ecology looks at the ways in which the traumatic memory of colonialism has

shaped and deformed the relationship to the natural world. As DeLoughrey and Handley point out in *Postcolonial Ecologies*: "... since the environment stands as a nonhuman witness to the violent process of colonialism, an engagement with alterity is a constitutive aspect of postcoloniality" (8). Because of this suppressed history of violence, "the land and even the ocean become all the more crucial as recuperative sites of postcolonial historiography" (8). On the other hand, postcolonial ecocriticism recovers forms of indigenous knowledge of nature and brings together modern concepts of ecology with non-western modes of protoecological thought—as, for example, in indigenous Native American, Caribbean, Latin American, African, or Asian traditions. Local knowledge and global interconnectedness go together in these versions of ecocriticism in forms of creative hybridity. In this sense, postcolonial literature has always included an awareness of environmental issues, and a merely US-centered genealogy of ecocriticism needs to be extended toward a transnational genealogy and rhizomic trajectory of environmental literature and philosophy (Oppermann 2010, 2012; DeLoughrey 2011).

As Heise points out, however, there are not only convergences but notable differences between the epistemological and political agendas of ecocriticism and postcolonialism—in their respective emphasis on purity vs. hybridity, place vs. displacement, dwelling vs. border crossing, wild vs. urban settings, national vs. transnational orientations, harmonious vs. conflictual worldviews, interspecies vs. intercultural conceptions of "otherness" (Heise 2010 "Afterword": 253). Such differences are not to be downplayed but must be taken into account and discursively negotiated in up-to-date versions of postcolonial ecology. Moreover, what will be of specific importance in such fusions of ecocriticism and postcolonialism in the fields of literary and cultural studies, according to Heise, is the role of the aesthetic, of literary genre, form, and language in the exploration and representation of ecological and postcolonial issues. The question is what the contribution of literature to cultural knowledge can be in these fields beyond merely illustrating the factual knowledge and public agenda of straightforward political and environmental analysis. "In the convergence of ecocriticism and postcolonialism, therefore, this question of the aesthetic arises with double force. If we believe—as I assume most ecocritical and postcolonial critics do—that the aesthetic transformation of the real has a particular potential for reshaping the individual and ecosocial

imaginary, then the way in which aesthetic forms relate to cultural as well as biological structures deserves our particular attention” (258). This attention to the transformative role of the aesthetic in reshaping the ecocultural imaginary, I believe, is one of the crucial tasks of future ecocriticism—not only in its postcolonial versions but as a perspective which is relevant across the different directions of current ecocriticism and which represents the main explorative focus of the present study.

With such recent developments as sketched in this chapter, ecocriticism is becoming a globally relevant agenda of research and teaching in the disciplines of literary and cultural studies as an integral part of the environmental humanities, which in my view has the potential for providing new answers to the much-debated question of why the humanities matter today. Ecocriticism in this sense is not a single unified theory or methodology but the platform for a lively, polycentric, and dynamically developing transcultural and transnational dialogue, which can only gain from the multi-vectoral directions that it produces, acknowledging that these directions represent no all-explanatory truth-claims but exploratory perspectives within a constantly shifting discursive field.