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Culture and the Non-Human World in Crisis

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Abstract:

In her monograph *Ecology without Culture – Aesthetics for a Toxic World*, literary scholar Christine Marran calls for a reconsideration of the role that culture can play in the current ecological crisis – both through cementing ethno-nationalist imaginations of the natural world and their subversion. Through an analysis of mostly Japanese literature and film, the author shows how certain biotopes (images and metaphors that point toward the natural world) and aestheticizing of non-human scales and perspectives can lead to a more environmentally engaged form of culture. Marran imagines literary studies that are attuned to the challenges of the more-than-human material world and throughout her book develops exemplary multi-layered analyses of primary texts.

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Marran, Christine L.: *Ecology without Culture. Aesthetics for a Toxic World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017. 160 pages, 25 USD. ISBN: 978-1-5179-0159-2.

Abstract:

In her monograph *Ecology without Culture – Aesthetics for a Toxic World*, literary scholar Christine Marran calls for a reconsideration of the role that culture can play in the current ecological crisis – both through cementing ethno-nationalist imaginations of the natural world and their subversion. Through an analysis of mostly Japanese literature and film, the author shows how certain biotopes (images and metaphors that point toward the natural world) and aestheticizing of non-human scales and perspectives can lead to a more environmentally engaged form of culture. Marran imagines literary studies that are attuned to the challenges of the more-than-human material world and throughout her book develops exemplary multi-layered analyses of primary texts.

When Timothy Morton published his seminal *Ecology Without Nature* ten years ago, he was writing against an ecocritical mainstream in many ways still concerned with a romantic notion of Nature as a pristine Other to culture. He famously stated: “Strange as it may sound, the idea of nature is getting in the way of properly ecological forms of culture, philosophy, politics, and art.” (Timothy Morton: *Ecology Without Nature – Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge, Mass. 2007, p.1). One could assume that the monograph by Christine L. Marran, *Ecology without Culture – Aesthetics for a toxic World* (2017) is a critique of Morton’s approach. Instead, Marran argues that he isn’t going far enough. Now that feminist science studies has introduced concepts such as nature-culture (Donna Haraway) to theorize how biological and ecological discourses are entangled with imperialist, racist or sexist projects, it is now time to turn towards culture. What if “culture” is as much a part of the problem as “Nature” is? Much of our cultural work, Marran argues, uses the material world as a metaphor for all kinds of identity-related, anthropocentric projects and thus itself impedes proper ecological thinking.

Marran sets out to offer an analysis of literature and film that does pay attention to the agency of

the material world. A scholar of Japanese art and culture, the author focusses mostly on Japanese work (much of it in her own translation), e.g. the literary texts of Michiko Ishimure and experimental documentary films by Noriaki Tsuchimoto. Marran makes explicit that although the primary sources are mainly Japanese, the arguments are not limited to Japanese ecocriticism – much like the dominant discourses of Anglophone ecocriticism are relevant in other parts of the world. Marran successfully develops concepts that plug into global academic debates on materiality in literature and film.

Two central concepts guide the way through a tour de force of theoretical discussions and close readings: First, Marran coins the term of the “biotrope.” In Japan, for example, the notorious image of the cherry-blossom was widely employed as a national promise of recovery after the 2011 Tsunami. How can such a trope give hope to people who lost their homes to a disastrous wave or radioactive pollution? Doesn’t it instead call upon a nostalgic dream of ecological nationhood that cannot hold true in a world where the “toxic drift of industrial modernity” defies any border, corporeal or national (p. 23)? Culture can silently perform the work of ethno-nationalism under industrial capitalism (p. 8). It is for this central role of biotropes in identity formation, the author claims, that they also carry the subversive potential to shift our gaze away from human exceptionalism. Secondly, Marran argues that scale, as theorized by Timothy Clark, is a central tool of environmentally engaged writing and film. It can allow us to see “things smaller or greater than the selective humanist ‘we’” (p. 25) – thus, for example, accounting for the agency of toxins in both human/non-human environments.

In her first chapter, Marran develops the concept of “obligate storytelling” as a way of accounting for the matter that any story needs to exist; she argues that explicitly *obligate* storytelling can foreground the material relations as vital to its narrative. The work of Japanese writer Michiko Ishimure, with its refusal of nationalist and humanist writing traditions both in form and content, is read as exemplary in its critical use of biotropes and rejection of a nature-culture divide.

Chapter two is concerned with the “cinema of slow violence” (in reference to Rob Nixon’s *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, MA 2013). Against Nixon’s claim that cinema, with its drift towards sensationalism and speed, is not suited to representing the “invisible mutagenic theatre” (p. 58) of toxic environmental violence, Marran argues that through its ability to play with both micro- and macroscopic vision, film can overcome these “representational obstacles” (p. 58). Through analyzing Noriaki Tsuchimoto’s slow-paced documentary films on the Minamata mercury poisoning, she develops a grammar of cinema that works towards representing the vibrancy of the material world.

In chapter three, Marran argues that the collapse of an urban/rural dichotomy of classic nature writing

through, for example, the building of nuclear reactors or chemical factories in rural spaces has led to a domestic turn in environmental literature. It engages the domestic space, and specifically the kitchen, in lively exchange with a toxic biotic world. Marran reads Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" and Ariyoshi Sawako's "Cumulative Pollution" as texts that use the biotope of cumulative pollution to emphasize the material agencies of industrial technologies and account for the "trans-corporeality" (Stacy Alaimo) of the (non)human body.

The concluding chapter asks what obligation the humanities, and specifically literary studies, have in an age of ecological crisis. Against both an atomizing identity politics and the totalizing gesture of the Anthropocene, Marran calls for a planetary perspective that helps us form community with the non-human world. Literary studies, the author states, must orient itself towards unfamiliar scales and elevate biotopes which "contribute to a broader view of who 'our own kind' is" (p. 126). It must critically engage with the role that culture can play in the production of cultural identity and the ecological crisis.

Marran's book switches with formidable speed between different levels of analysis. It feels at times as if each proposed concept or chapter would be worth a full monograph to reach an in-depth analysis; therefore, the three main chapters feel slightly unconnected. Nonetheless, her text is an enriching read for students and scholars of environmentally engaged literary and cultural studies and adds a playful perspective both from Japanese and material ecocriticism.

German Abstract:

Kultur und ökologische Krise

In ihrer Monographie *Ecology without Culture. Aesthetics for a Toxic World* untersucht die Literaturwissenschaftlerin Christine Marran die zweifache Rolle, die der Kultur in der gegenwärtigen ökologischen Krise zukommen kann – sowohl durch die Stärkung ethno-nationalistischer Vorstellungen von der Natur und als auch durch deren Subversion. Durch die Analyse von überwiegend japanischer Literatur und Filmen zeigt die Autorin, wie gewisse „Biotropen“ (Bilder und Metaphern, die auf die Natur hindeuten) oder der Einsatz nicht-menschlicher Blickwinkel und Maßstäbe eine „ökologische“ Form von Kultur befördern können. Marran wünscht sich Literaturwissenschaften, die sich den Herausforderungen der nicht-menschlichen Welt stellen und präsentiert in ihrem Buch exemplarische Analysen von Primärtexten.

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