

Beyond the West, Beyond the Canon – Feminist Ecocriticism Today

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Abstract:

Current controversies around the Anthropocene concept and global climate justice underline what many ecofeminist scholars, and specifically postcolonial ecofeminists, have been stressing for decades: The ongoing suppression of female and queer voices and bodies is not only deeply intertwined with racism and colonial violence, but also with the destruction of nature through those same forces and histories. There is a need for intersectional approaches and voices which take the multiple dimensions of human and non-human experience seriously; a gap which this present edited volume, *Literature and Ecofeminism, Intersectional and International Voices* by Douglas A. Vakoch and Sam Mickey sets out to fill. It offers a number of insightful and careful analyses of literature and covers a lot of ground, both historically and geographically.

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Current controversies around the Anthropocene concept and global climate justice underline what many ecofeminist scholars, and specifically postcolonial ecofeminists, have been stressing for decades: The ongoing suppression of female and queer voices and bodies is not only deeply intertwined with racism and colonial violence, but also with the destruction of nature through those same forces and histories. There is a need for intersectional approaches and voices which take the multiple dimensions of human and non-human experience seriously; a gap which this present edited volume, *Literature and Ecofeminism, Intersectional and International Voices* by Douglas A. Vakoch and Sam Mickey sets out to fill. It offers a number of insightful and careful analyses of literature and covers a lot of ground, both historically and geographically.

After the popularization of the Anthropocene concept in the early 2000s, debates soon turned towards the question: If we do accept the Anthropocene as a new geological epoch, what exactly is its starting point? The late 18th century with the Industrial Revolution, colonialism and the export of plantation ecologies throughout the world, or the first nuclear explosion in New Mexico in 1945 have been proposed as potential dates. At the same time, voices emerged criticizing how the Anthropocene concept directs responsibilities to a monolithic 'we' of humanity, while actually Western industrialized nations have disproportionately contributed to the emission of CO₂ and nuclear particles, or the spread of non-biodegradable waste – which all have been discussed as potential geologic markers for the Anthropocene in the stratosphere. Such a 'we', then, omits that marginalized groups suffer from environmental destruction without being, in large part, responsible for it. Even today, being poor and female is linked to comparatively low CO₂ emissions, while poor women are the first to suffer the consequences of global climate change.

The urgency of this recent debate underlines what many ecofeminist scholars, and specifically postcolonial ecofeminists, have been stressing for decades: The ongoing suppression of female and queer voices and bodies through normative societal forces is not only deeply intertwined with colonial histories and racism, but also with the destruction of nature through those same forces. There is a need for intersectional approaches and voices which take the multiple dimensions of human and non-human experience seriously; a gap which this present volume, *Literature and Ecofeminism, Intersectional and International Voices* (edited by Douglas A. Vakoch and Sam Mickey) sets out to fill.

The volume's focus on literature also takes on a second gap in the Environmental Humanities: Since its emergence in Anglophone academia, the field of ecocriticism has been dominated by Western voices and themes. As editor Sam Mickey stresses in his preface, the edited volume neither intends to present a comprehensive introduction into the many branches of ecofeminist theory, nor does it claim a representative depiction of all contemporary feminist ecocritical scholarship in terms of geography, themes, or theories. Instead, *Literature and Ecofeminism* presents thirteen case studies that can give students and scholars interested in ecofeminism inspiration for their own analyses and insight into a variety of literary works, biographies, and histories and the entanglement of gender, race, colonialism, and ecology.

The contributions cover a lot of ground, both historically and geographically. Lesley Kordecki (DePaul University, US), for example, turns toward Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to discuss the affiliation of Ophelia with nature, while Emine Geçgil (Bilkent University School, Turkey) positions US-American author Mary Austin as a "proto-ecofeminist" through a reading of her 1917 novel *The Ford*. Etienne Terblanche (North-West University, South Africa) undertakes an eco-feminist reading of T.S. Elliot's poetry and arguably brings forward the least convincing line of argument in the volume when he reads Elliot's early 20th-century social analysis, his apocalypticism and natural imagery as an ecofeminist inclination. Julia Tofantšuk (Tallinn University, Estonia) engages with Elliot's contemporary, Silvia Townsend Warner, and examines her relational view of society and nature, while Nicole Anae (Central Queensland University, Australia) positions writer-anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston in an ecofeminist tradition and underlines the allegiance of her black folklore with anti-speciesism.

Karl Zuelke (Mount St. Joseph University, OH, US) takes on a line of criticism that ecofeminism in its early forms was often confronted with; he exemplifies the pitfalls of thinking of women and indigenous people as essentially close to nature through a reading of Peter Matthiessen's novel *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* from 1965. Peter I-min Huang (National Taiwan University, Taiwan), Carmen Flys Junquera (University of Alcalà, Spain) and Gopinath et al. (University of Kerala, India) examine contemporary Taiwanese, Spanish, and Indian literature, respectively. Finally, Deirde Byrne

(University of South Africa) and Izabel F.O. Brandão (University of Alagoas, Brasil) highlight the voices of contemporary authors by examining the work of South African poet Malika Ndlovu and the figure of the Black Venus in Guyanese writer Grace Nichol's and Scottish Jackie Kay's poems.

Ecofeminism first emerged from activism. It therefore only makes sense, as Anna Bedford remarks in the afterword to the volume, that the contributions at hand subscribe to an ethics of relationality and care and embody a political-activist approach in literary studies. Some papers could have profited from drawing upon, in addition to the continuously cited canonical ecofeminists Greta Gaard, Val Plumwood, and Karen J. Warren, other contemporary ecocritical approaches, such as material ecocriticism to further complicate the issue of essentialism, or the above mentioned Anthropocene discourse and its questions of global ecological justice. Furthermore, the question of literary form and narration, the specificity of fiction and poetry in an ecofeminist endeavor, remains out of focus. Yet, even if the volume doesn't always bring forward the most innovative analyses or approaches, its merit lies in assembling a variety of voices across history and geography and in bringing a large number of international voices and intersectional analyses to the fore.

German Abstract:

Nicht nur der Westen, nicht nur der Kanon – Feministische Ökokritik der Gegenwart

Aktuelle Kontroversen um das Anthropozän-Konzept und Klimagerechtigkeit unterstreichen ein Argument, das ökofeministische und insbesondere postkoloniale ökofeministische Kritik bereits seit Jahrzehnten immer wieder vorbringt: Die Unterdrückung weiblicher und queerer Stimmen und Körper hängt nicht nur mit Rassismus und kolonialer Gewalt, sondern auch mit der Zerstörung der Natur durch ebenjene Kräfte zusammen. Es sind intersektionale Stimmen und Analysen nötig, um diese vielschichtigen Zusammenhänge zu hinterfragen – eine Lücke, die der vorliegende Band *Literature and Ecofeminism, Intersectional and International Voices* von Douglas A. Vakoch und Sam Mickey durch eine Reihe bemerkenswerter Literatur-Analysen füllen möchte.

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