

Cordula Lemke, Jennifer Wawrzinek (Eds.)

Weeds and Viruses

Ecopolitics and the Demands of Theory

with a Foreword by Dipesh Chakrabarty

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Contents

Foreword <i>Dipesh Chakrabarty</i>	ix
Introduction. Recovering the Stage of <i>Oikos</i> : Postmodern Uncertainty and the Demands of Ecopolitics <i>Jennifer Wawrzinek & Cordula Lemke</i>	1
I. Revising Poetics	
The Poetics of Remoteness <i>Marc Botha</i>	21
Towards a Biodegradable Subjectivity: Two Women Poets from the Celtic Fringe <i>Rainer Emig</i>	49
Sean Penn, Byron, and the Eco-poetics of Hauntology <i>Jennifer Wawrzinek</i>	67
II. Contact, Context, and the Sense of Place	
The Spaces of a ‘Southern’ A-Modernity: The Non-Human World and Its Actants in Soyinka’s <i>Aké</i> and Camara’s <i>The Dark Child (L’Enfant noir)</i> <i>Russell West-Pavlov</i>	87
Aesthetic Justice? Eco-poetics in Mandy Haggith’s <i>The Last Bear</i> <i>Cordula Lemke</i>	101
“The World Has Left the Earth Behind”: The Significance of Place in John Berger’s <i>Pig Earth</i> <i>Lenka Filipová</i>	113
Blue Harmonies: Post-Apocalypse Community and Place in Sherman Alexie’s <i>Reservation Blues</i> <i>Camille Barrera</i>	131

III. Biopolitics and the Posthuman

What Can Ecocriticism Learn from Agamben and Derrida? 147
Kai Wiegandt

Tigers and Trees: Writing Nature in Decolonising India 161
Vidya Ravi

Indigenous Posthumanism: Rewriting Anthropology
in Pauline Melville's *The Ventriloquist's Tale* 175
Gigi Adair

IV. Ecopolitics and (Post)Colonial Encounter

Sea Point Contact: Preface to a Literary History of Cape Town (Never Written) 189
Hedley Twidle

What is Ecological Dance? Lin Hwai-min's *Nine Songs* as Example 201
Liu Wei-Chen

The Green Screen: Eco-Nationalism, Ecophobia and Hollywood Cinema 215
Kathy-Ann Tan

Contributors 237

Foreword

Dipesh Chakrabarty

I felt honoured when the editors of this volume approached me for a few words by way of a preface. I am not a literary critic but I could see that many of the philosophical issues at the heart of this book also show up in areas far beyond the two fields that mainly define this text: ecocriticism, and literary theory, influenced by the philosophical questions that post-structural and postmodern thinkers introduced into the humanities. Early writings on ecology, as the editors of and contributors to this volume point out, were sometimes hostile to post-structuralist thought, on the ground that while ecological concerns reflected the ‘reality’ of environmental degradation caused by humans, post-structural thinkers and those interested in them engaged mainly in the critique of representation. A reality/representation gap thus emerged between the two fields that this volume – building on the contributions of Timothy Morton, Ursula Heise, and others – does much to question, critique, and bridge.

The problematic nature of this perceived division and tension between ‘reality’ and ‘representation’ haunts the politics of what is often referred to as the gravest threat that human civilisation has ever faced: global warming or climate change. Many ‘practical’ scientists involved in human attempts to mitigate or adapt to climatic changes are increasingly realising that their purely ‘rational/scientific’ messages about what is happening to the planet as a whole often do not move people – who live in diverse circumstances – to concerted action. Local experiences and the variety of ways in which humans dwell in and make their ‘worlds’ get in the way. Scientists these days therefore emphasise the importance of working through local issues and concerns.

But what gives issues the sense of being ‘local’ if not the twin problems of human dwelling and representation? The fact that humans in different parts of the world bring to bear on their ecological practices very different kinds of imagination of – and relationship to – what constitutes ‘nature’, itself suggests that questions of ‘reality’ and ‘representation’ are inter-twined questions. Even the ‘really real’ has to be represented. Theories and critiques of representation do not lose their function simply because ecological crises have assumed severe proportions in the world. True, the scientific representation of the planetary crisis of global warming is not *merely* representation; but nor are the local, cultural representations of the environment that we find everywhere. They all stand for reality understood at different levels of abstraction and through different modes of imagination. Ultimately, in so far as thinking on these issues is concerned, one looks for a productive tension between the concepts of reality and representation. This is precisely what the essays in this book do: try and make this tension productive of new thought and analyses.

But the issues here go far beyond the local/global or the reality/representation distinctions. Literature is indeed the site where the word and the world meet; they cannot be separated without engaging in some obviously artificial – and even violent – manoeuvres. The webs of meanings that result from this meeting and are explored in this volume from a variety of perspectives, reveal in the end some perennial issues of what is perhaps best described as the human condition. The poetry of dwelling says something about how humans make their ‘worlds’ out of the earth. This fundamentally Heideggerian insight informs the discussion in this book of the inescapable problem of anthropocentrism that colours human thought. Here, again, the concerns of this volume resonate powerfully with certain dilemmas that have now assumed critical dimensions in the literature on environmental ethics. It is clear today that purely human-centric approaches to the world not only produce a crisis for non-human life-forms but in the end imperil human existence as well. That said, it may still indeed be very difficult, if not impossible, for humans to get out of their skins as it were and look at other life-forms from their – i.e. the latter’s – own ‘points of view’. The problem may seem unsolvable but clearly some kind of dialectical thinking, a continuous back and forth movement in thought, is called for. Literary analysis has something unique to offer on this score. The human predicament of anthropocentrism cannot be discussed without paying attention to the poetic function of the human imagination, something that no doubt expresses itself differently in different human contexts but that returns us once again to the very basic human activity of ‘making’, a category that brings together, into same the fold, the questions at the heart of this book: those of poetry and dwelling. I very much hope that this timely book will acquire the wide and interested readership that it so richly deserves.

Canberra
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