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REVIEWS

The Nature of Cities: Ecocriticism and Urban Environments


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Ecocriticism – the study of literature as a medium for society in its relationship to nature and the environment – is a branch of literary studies that is a scant fifteen years old (Marshall 2002). To date, most of its attention has been focused on writing that addresses wilderness or pastoral environments. The Nature of Cities was published as a corrective to that trend. As an edited collection, its focus is specifically on urban nature and urban environments, defined in a variety of ways.

Despite the diversity in this collection, the authors are united in focusing on a couple of themes. The first is the tendency on the part of environmentalists and earlier ecocritics to conceive of humans and nature as radically separate, which accounts for their neglect of cities. The second is their observation that the theoretical and practical priorities of environmentalists, and their ecocritical colleagues, are often shaped by their privileged class and racial backgrounds.

However, in making these points, the authors are in danger of going too far in the opposite direction. For instance, in emphasizing the “social construction” of nature, biophysical ecosystems virtually disappear. There is a danger, in my view, of conflating all manner of ecological and social realities into the bland porridge of “environment.”

The first section in the book – the section on urban nature writing – suffers from the aforementioned conflation of natural and physical environments. The first essay traces the emergence of urban poetry in England and tries to compare it to nature poetry. The second essay discusses Audre Lorde as, amongst other things, a “nature writer” of the urban environment, but this is not primarily what Lorde’s writing focuses on. By contrast, the third essay by Terrell Dixon provides a useful discussion, drawn from practical experience, of how to make environmental literature more relevant to urbanites from a variety of cultural backgrounds.

The second section, on parks, features an essay on Frederick Law Olmsted and the creation of Central Park. The author does a good job of analyzing the social injustices that accompanied the expropriation of the land, and the middle and upper class discourse that provided momentum for the park’s creation. But one gets the sense that, on balance, he has a positive
opinion of Olmsted and the park, and feels that something worthwhile was contributed.

Not so with Richard Heyman's deconstruction of Gas Works Park in Seattle. Despite its being innovative for its time (in the early 1970s society was only too happy to demolish all artifacts of the industrial era), Heyman can only see the park as a valorization of the triumph of post-industrialism and globalization.

In the ecofeminism section, the essays are particularly critical of white ecofeminists' essentialism (identification of some or all women with nature), and their tendency to either ignore or romanticize indigenous women and women of colour. But so minute does the hair-splitting become that one can foresee activists succumbing to "paralysis of analysis," for fear that their projects might have unconscious class or racial biases, and not be sufficiently "inclusive."

The last section of the book makes one think that some people perhaps have too much time on their hands. The first paper is about how literature and other media have dealt with society's anxiety about the relationship between people and nature by imagining atrocities lurking in urban sewers, such as the half man/half fluke featured in an episode of the X-Files. The second deals with people's relationships with their pets and how that colours or reflects our attitudes towards nature – a worthy topic but not one that feels much illuminated after reading this essay. The final paper focuses on the simulacra of nature presented in a Reno casino, and how this and other developments are making nature culturally redundant. Again, a useful observation, but one that could have been usefully exhausted in a couple of paragraphs.

In their self-described "main objective... to remind city dwellers of our placement within ecosystems and the importance of this fact for understanding urban life and culture," the editors have failed. Too much attention has been focused by the authors on social construction and class and racial privilege. Our ethics and ontology will always be socially constructed, and we will always be affected by our life experience and social privilege (or lack thereof).

But, despite these handicaps, we must still wrestle with the "facts" and "realities" of a global ecological crisis and the implications of this for human society, and we must critically analyze activities with the potential to make a difference. Rather than tying ourselves in self-winding theoretical knots, we must occasionally remind ourselves of E.F. Schumacher's well-expressed aphorism: "an ounce of practice is worth a ton of theory."

References