

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Postcolonial Ecocriticism and American Indian Ecologies: Approaches from Anthropology and Literature

Joni Adamson. *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism: The Middle Place*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001.

Michael F. Brown. *Who Owns Native Culture?* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003.

Donelle N. Dreese. *Ecocriticism: Creating Self and Place in Environmental and American Indian Literatures*. New York: Peter Lang, 2002.

Catrin Gersdorf and Sylvia Mayer, eds. *Nature in Literary and Cultural Studies: Transatlantic Conversations on Ecocriticism*. New York: Editions Rodopi, 2006.

Michael E. Harkin and David Rich Lewis, eds. *Native Americans and the Environment: Perspectives on the Ecological Indian*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007.

Linda Hogan. *Dwellings: A Spiritual History of the Living World*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1995.

Shephard Krech, III. *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1999.

For diverse historical reasons that have, by now, become hegemonic knowledge themselves, American Indians and their relationship with the environment have been used, over the past five hundred years, as mirror imaginations of the dominant, so-called Western society's ecologies. These perceptions and illusions have provided innumerable examples used for political debates and applied policies, either as cautionary stories or as alternatives to be imitated. The debates over the perception and reinterpretations of Native ecological relationships are illuminating for postmodern discourse because they show the strengths and limits of the approach.

Two main problems exist in the relation between postcolonial theory and indigenous peoples in North America. First, as Louis Owen points out, postcolonialism has been ignoring Native American writings, and by implication the existence of colonialism in North America as such. Second, there is a concern that “postcolonial theories present significant concerns for Native scholars because they deconstruct into yet another colonialist discourse when applied unexamined to Native contexts” (Byrd 91). My intent in this review is to contribute to an examination of postcolonial theories in the context of Native environmental relations. The most important problem of postcolonial theory, I think, is uncovered by this process; what does such an examination imply, and according to what criteria should it be conducted? On one hand, the deconstruction of colonial perceptions is much needed to gain a clearer understanding of environmental relationships. On the other hand, the resulting data can be interpreted in various ways, some of which run counter to political self-representations by indigenous nations.

The postcolonial approach can be seen as

. . . an increasingly vapid and detached preoccupation with the textual analysis of ‘master narratives’ offered up as ‘cutting edge oppositional theory’ at a time when not only neocolonialism but colonialism of the direct variety continues to be a normative condition for non-whites. (Churchill 51)

I, therefore, propose to examine the theory according to its relationship to grounded practice by comparing recent discourse from anthropology and literary studies. All of these texts are important and valid in their own ways of examining and interpreting colonial and postcolonial structures; I am not so much interested in providing individual value judgments, which would deter from a critical engagement, as in opening this much needed dialogue.

Colonial relationships in North America are fundamentally expressed by relationships to the land. The anticolonial political rhetoric as a moral claim to sovereignty often revolves about historical and contemporary stewardship of the land, and it is these debates about Native ecologies that are especially sensitive and important. Perhaps no other event shows this sensitivity more than the reception of Shepard Krech’s *The Ecological Indian*. Krech’s work is dependent on, but also runs counter to postmodern discourse. He critiques the stereotypical images of ecological Indians as historical constructions, but then proceeds to deconstruct them not through textual analyses of this myth’s foundational works, but by constructing, himself, the reality of American Indian relationships with the environment, based on a stringent scientific analysis. Arguing that because the stereotype “has entered the realm of common sense and as received wisdom is perceived as a fundamental truth, it serves to deflect any desire

to fathom or confront the evidence for relationships between Indian and the environment" (Krech *The Ecological Indian* 27), he sets out to confront exactly such evidence and thereby confront the stereotype itself. His profoundly humanizing conclusion is that, "[i]n Indian Country as in the larger society, conservation is often sacrificed for economic security" (227).

Deconstructing stereotypes by critical analysis of individual authors is one thing, however; deconstructing perceived fundamental truths that are used in anti-colonial struggles is another. Although Krech is critiquing historical colonial delusions because they have become common sense and are used as political tools against contemporary colonial assumptions, many of his critics accuse him of furthering the colonial cause. This is perhaps the ultimate postmodern irony, in which the authorship of perceptions of truth and their original historical contexts has become so unimportant that a critical analysis of these same perceptions is denied legitimacy in the name of a political struggle against the ideology that in fact is responsible for their birth. The contemporary struggle for self-definition and sovereignty in the name of historical cultures is so defining for Native identities that historical approaches to these cultures are denied legitimacy. Culture becomes exclusively self-defined in each temporality.

It is in part this question of ownership of culture and cultural knowledge that Michael Brown addresses in his *Who Owns Native Culture?* He investigates "parallels between sacred sites and intellectual property" (Brown ix), but necessarily expands the discussion to the issue of culture and cultural knowledge as exclusive property. "In public discourse," he points out, "culture and such related concepts as 'tradition' and 'heritage' have become resources that groups own and defend from competing interests" (4). In an imagined postmodern dialogue, then, Brown can be perceived as deconstructing the claims used to critique Krech's deconstruction of the ecological Indian. He does so not by setting out to find historical truth, as Krech does, but by textual analyses of conflicts over cultural resources. "One lesson taught by the twentieth century and surely applicable to the twenty-first," he writes, "is that there is reason to be wary of totalizing solutions to complex social problems" (Brown 8). He is led to a "centrist stance" and an "awkward middle ground" created by situational solutions to conflicts, "however provisional and inelegant" (9). Conflicts over cultural authority, he concludes, should not be decided on the basis of legal rights:

It is in the nature of rights to seek absolutes. Rights have a finality that silences debate and possibilities for negotiations . . . In complex, highly diverse societies, it is simply impossible to satisfy everyone's idea of what their rights are or should be, especially in the absence of an offsetting discourse focused on responsibilities. (231)

While Brown cites specific cases in which competing claims over cultural resources were settled by dialogue and situational negotiations, including applications of Traditional Ecological Knowledge, an absolutist abstract concept such as historical ecological relations used to further political rhetoric might lie outside the realm of a solution by situational discourse.

This is perhaps best shown with responses to and perspectives on Krech's text, such as in Harkin and Lewis' *Native Americans and the Environment*. The contributing authors seem to depart from one of two strategies; a specific critical analysis of applied ecological practice, whether historic or contemporary, or a textual analysis that is general, not situational.¹ The exception might be John Dorst's discussion of ecological aesthetics in museum exhibitions. He specifically focuses on "the ecological Indian's contemporary value as an ideological resource," and explicitly not on its "scientific accuracy" (190). What can be derived from a mental dialogue between these three texts, then, is that while resources and their representation can be negotiated, academic truths cannot be derived at by negotiations between proponents of extreme perceptions, whether this concerns American Indian environmental interactions or the realities of global warming. This rejection of postcolonial and postmodern approaches to truth can of course already be perceived and represented as a colonial attitude. If it is the opinions of experts that count as the last word on environmental interactions between Indians and their environments, local voices might be silenced. If cultural knowledge is seen as a resource that is owned in its totality by a community, however defined, scientific enquiry is indeed always a colonial practice. This argument, however, overlooks the current practices of social science as displayed in almost every chapter, namely that reasonable analyses depend on input from local voices and practices.

In his general textual analysis, Darren Ranco sees Krech, and by definition other scientific voices, not "as an engaged observer, but only as a casual, and distant, critic" (35). This is obvious to Ranco because Krech's analysis denies any fundamental differences between indigenous and Western ecological practices in terms of ideologies of environmental resource exploitation; "Merely making 'them' like 'us' . . . is pretense that colonization did not happen" (50). Instead, difference needs to be recognized, even if it is consciously based on the intentional usage of stereotypes such as the ecological Indian (45). Such an analysis underlines Michael Brown's point in *Who Owns Native Culture?* that "[a]n obsession with difference drifts inexorably toward the proposition that only indigenous people should be allowed to speak for and about their societies" (222). In contrast to Ranco's conclusion that the discourse over environmental interactions should be guided by the political interests of colonized communities, most authors seem to agree with Ernest Burch. He recommends "that the polarizing

debate over whether Native Americans were *either* rational conservationists or rapacious overkillers be dropped; it has become an ultimately arational debate rather than a scientific one" (147; italics in original). Most observers, perhaps exactly because they are engaged and do care, seem to argue that the very real presence of colonialism cannot and must not preclude critical analyses of ideologies and practices if the goal of social science is an understanding of cultures and a true dialogue between them.

While social science needs to base its analyses of American Indian environmental interactions on the variety of voices and practices and cannot select the most prominent or politically advantageous, ecocriticism, as a specific branch of literary criticism dealing with environmental writing, by its very nature analyses selected sources. Not everybody in a given society writes, and of those who do, not everybody writes about the environment. From an anthropological perspective, this simple fact imposes a general limitation on the range of cultural generalizations that can be drawn from literature theory. If Joni Adamson's goal is "to theorize a way of reading that provides us with the tools we need for building a more satisfying multicultural ecocriticism and a more inclusive, multicultural environmentalism . . . to create a more livable world" (185), the gap between analyzing literature and creating a world, or the gap between theory and practice is of great concern. Reinterpretations of re-imaginings of culture are not culture itself, and might have nothing to do with cultural reality, in which and upon which a world needs to be built. Literature, like all art, is critically and creatively reflecting society; it is not investigating or explaining society. An overarching question that arises from this problem is this: How can ecocriticism influence the real world if it is based on the study of invented characters in an invented cultural and physical geography? Joni Adamson's answer to this question is implicitly based upon a larger recognition of what she calls "multicultural" literature. The assumption that lies at the basis of this answer is that there is a difference between Western and multicultural literature. Adamson traces this difference to an imposition of language and landscape on the environment.

Western environmental literature, in her perspective, is concerned primarily with nature as wilderness; multicultural (but especially Native American) writers "bridge the gap between the human and nonhuman that looms so large in American nature writing and ecocriticism" (Adamson 88). For American Indians, environmental "features within their homelands are often alive with mythic, historic, and sacred meanings of their cultures; these places are expressive of a particular way of life, and when threatened, they become symbols of threat to distinctive cultural identities" (71). This, Adamson says, is the "vernacular landscape": "a folk landscape in which people are attuned to the contours of home and place" (90). In contrast to this stands the "official landscape," extraction-oriented and "imposed

by government and corporation on local geographies without regard for local peoples, cultures, or environments" (90). This is the Euro-American landscape, which indigenous peoples are contesting. Official landscapes are "built on the notion that progress is inevitable, that we must shut the door on the vernacular landscape and move relentlessly forward" (112). The imposition of landscape is connected to the imposition of language. "Because English is a language that has been built on the dichotomous separation of nature and culture, argues Harjo, English erases the layers of mythological and historical significance that blanket the land" (122). This stands in contrast to "the inextricable connection between myth, history, culture, moral expectations, and place in American Indian oral traditions" (121). Adamson's assertions are a stark contrast to the anthropological critique of the "ecological Indian" as an invented political argument. By relying on political generalizations, Adamson can imagine a fundamental difference. However, the anthropological perspective argues, did not American Indian societies also possess "official landscapes"? And what would English people say to Harjo's assertion that they, because of their language, cannot see any mythological or historical significance in their landscape?² Robert Kelly and Mary Prasciunas write in *Native Americans and the Environment*,

Rather than to argue about whether one human group is or is not inherently conservationist, it is better to understand the conditions under which conservation behaviors are prestigious and desirable, and when short-term needs relegate them to long-term luxuries that a society cannot afford. (115)

Adamson's efforts to address this problematic (49, 62) quickly succumb to the generalized differences; they have to, otherwise her argument could not stand.

Donelle Dreese makes this apparent when she notes

The influence of [Native American] philosophies [on ecocriticism] rests in their unparalleled ability to demonstrate conceptualizations of nature which, by their very contrast, hold a mirror to Western capitalist notions of commodification. (6)

The importance of American Indian environmental philosophies lies—just as it did for the enlightenment—in their functions as mirrors and alternatives for European cultures that are seen as needing to be changed. In other words, in order to be important, indigenous cultures need to be fundamentally different, and are so constructed.³ Dreese addresses one of the problems inherent in essentializing native cultures when she remarks

that “[a]fter cultural syncretism has occurred, national character is forever altered. . . . [Stuart] Hall believes that any attempt at reestablishing a historical identity is ultimately symbolic rather than true” (15). She then further agrees with Terry Eagleton that “[o]ne of the problems . . . is that metaphysical essentialism suggests that there is a true or natural national identity. Societies, therefore, run the risk of legitimating their culture over others” (16). She attributes this risk, however, to a “reflection of the Eurocentric notion.” If the notion is Eurocentric, indigenous peoples can free themselves of it; it has been forced over their original philosophies and provides a contrast to them. Thus, by using the exclusive “Eurocentric” instead of the inclusive “ethnocentric,” Dreese has found a way to reconstruct the mirror. It is, of course, true that “the retrieval of a sense of origin and place is central to constructions of identity” in “different American Indian cultures” (17). However, the same is also true for European cultures, and the very notion shows that the construction of identity is a political process, taking place in a political environment. To take the writings of a select group of authors from a particular culture or group of cultures to reflect reality on the ground, therefore, seems a dubious enterprise. Dreese sees writings as “mythic reterritorializations.” These “take place when writers salvage the stories and places from the past and rewrite them in order to claim an identity and to establish a sense of place concurrent with their present sense of self” (24). Thus, they reflect a representation (to the outside) of specific political opinions and needs in a dialogue with outside expectations about the form of representation. They certainly represent a reality; that reality, however, cannot be taken as the foundation for essentializing notions of real difference between cultures or philosophies because it owes its own existence and construction to the political need for difference.

This difference, as Linda Hogan writes, is fundamental: “two views of the world, one as seen by native people and the other as seen by those who are new and young on this continent” (11). These views ultimately cannot be reconciled because they rest on two different belief systems:

In the traditional belief systems of native people, the terrestrial call is the voice of God, or of gods, the creative power that lives on earth, inside earth, in turtle, stone, and tree. . . . The Western belief that God lives apart from earth is one that has taken us toward collective destruction. (85-86)

It seems that just like the construction of two different knowledge systems in these writings, the anthropological approach and the literature approach to Native American ecology are based on two different hermeneutics, two different projects of epistemology. The anthropological is inclusive and specific; it posits that while all cultures are specifically different, their fundamental approach to nature is generally similar. The literature approach

seems exclusive and political; it posits that native and “Western” cultures are fundamentally exclusive to each other and bases this on an essentialized notion of culture.

It should come as no surprise, then, that both Adamson and Dreese (and the writers they discuss) build an argument against scientific and anthropological knowledge to support their critique of “Western” discourses. Adamson critiques “hegemonic discourses—science law, religion, philosophy, anthropology” as systems of “social triage” (166-73), but then implicitly acknowledges that anthropological work has helped secure indigenous lands (175-76). She even seems to argue for an anthropological approach when she points out that people from different cultures, “if they want to succeed in achieving a set of agreed-upon goals, [] will need to tackle the hard work of trying to understand one another’s specific social and environmental experiences” (Adamson 176). Similarly, Linda Hogan implicitly acknowledges similarities between epistemologies when she writes that indigenous “[k]nowledge comes from, and is shaped by, observations and knowledge of the natural world and natural cycles” (85)—an empirical foundation with which Hobbes and Descartes, whom Adamson (168-73) discusses as the originators of social triage, could only have agreed. Dreese addresses the perceived

. . . need for colonized cultures to take control over the body of knowledge about their lives and histories because this information has been produced by outsiders with Eurocentric and even racist posturings who misinform and misrepresent in accordance with those biases. (98)

This is an intentional practice, born from malice, as “the misrepresentation and ideological prejudice practiced by anthropologists are often willful and fully realized” (98). Dreese, too, however, perhaps unintentionally, qualifies these attacks, as Wendy Rose, the author in whose context she makes these statements, although “the Hopi culture is matrilineal” and her mother is not Hopi, “still identifies herself as Hopi” (97). If insiders consciously cross cultural rules, can anthropologists summarily be accused of willfully misrepresenting these same rules? If all anthropology is fiction (98), Vizenor can only represent “Chippewa history without ethnological or anthropological invention” (105) if he is not reconstructing it. The difference between the Native writer and the anthropologist, then, is that the writer is representing the totality of her culture, an assumption that anthropology has long since rejected as impossible.

In the introduction to their edited volume, Catrin Gersdorf and Sylvia Mayer write for an ecocritical approach that breaks out of dichotomous perspectives between ecological Natives and unecological Westerners. They “frame the ecocritical project as one that investigates aesthetic *representations*,

discursive *performances*, and cultural *functions of nature* in historically, racially, and socially diverse communities and societies” (Gersdorf and Mayer 16; italics in original). In her individual contribution, Mayer, drawing on Val Plumwood, then points out that “postulating a special connection between [a group] and nature can run the risk of perpetuating received essentialist concepts of [that culture], concepts, for instance, that postulate the existence of one unified [cultural] perspective, role, or principle” (119). Chapters in the book focus not so much on a comparison of different cultural perspectives on the environment as presented by representative writers as on the function of specific literatures in the symbolic perception of the environment and vice versa. Thus, literature is not taken as a representation of total cultural realities but as a subject of interest that plays a part in and reflects a part of a cultural reality. It is interesting, however, that the one contribution that mentions Native Americans in its title is also the one emphasizing fundamental differences between cultural groups. Christine Gerhardt says

. . . ecocriticism has turned towards race and ethnicity as formative categories of difference in America’s environmental imagination, offering new readings of African American, Native American, and Chicano/a literatures; as part of this move, postcolonial studies are gaining attention as a possible link between green criticism and analyses of race and ethnicity. (211-12)

The fact that ecocriticism here seems to ignore non-minority literatures seems meaningful, especially since the contributions to the volume demonstrate very directly how important and diverse the representation of different environments is in European and American literatures. Caroline Delph, for example, shows how Ernst Moritz Arndt warned against deforestation and drew parallels between trees and people (343).

Gersdorf and Mayer demonstrate that literature and anthropology can engage in productive dialogues as long as their analyses are carefully grounded in specifics and not based on essentialized notions.⁴ What seems crucial for a constructive dialogue—between anthropology and literature studies, but also between cultures and academia—is also the acknowledgment that culture needs to be interpreted. On one hand, literature studies need to acknowledge that culture is interpreted by writers, whose symbolic representations are then re-interpreted by somebody else, often on the basis of another culture’s values and political and cultural needs. An example for the potential misunderstandings this can create can be found in the interpretations of Tewa interactions with the environment by Joni Adamson through Simon Ortiz’ writings as compared to Alfonso Ortiz’ analysis.⁵ On the other hand, anthropologists must not be naive enough to think that nobody will re-interpret and abuse their cultural analyses—that

they can exist in a protected academic environment.⁶

Perhaps Joni Adamson is right, and we should look for a new middle ground or "middle place".⁷ She finds this place in the concept of the garden (181), a concept she ascribes to indigenous culture and denies to mainstream society. If the garden is, however, the place "where the gardener endeavors to understand how nature's large-scale patterns work in specific places" (184), this garden reminds me of the birth of mainstream biological science. Gregor Mendel started modern biology, and, as some ecocritics might argue, modern dichotomous views of nature, in his garden. The garden also reminds me of the end of Voltaire's *Maupassant*, and such a garden cannot be a middle ground. We all have cultures of our own that we should tend to, but as Adamson herself (184) points out, "those who speak only to others like themselves are rarely heard, and their work might ultimately be washed away with the first rain." Both Adamson and Dreese define ecocriticism as activism against dualistic thinking. Somehow the middle place becomes a place "where identity is mutable and transformative," (19) as Dreese argues. While such a postcolonial deconstruction of identity might sound paradisiac to the ears of politically engaged academics speaking to themselves, it is ultimately destructive to an understanding of culture, which in its very essence relies upon dualistic structures of "us" and "them" and "culture" and "nature." Once all identity is transformable, there is no identity left, and no culture. In the end, resistance uses the same dichotomous structures of classification as oppression. To deny this might be a useful political rhetoric, but has nothing to do with the rather banal everyday reality of culture.

Randy Lundy points out that his

. . . own writing tends to begin and end with the landscape and all of its creatures, human and otherwise. If people read this writing and see in it something that might be termed *aboriginality*, then so be it. . . . Whether we are Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, this place, this landscape is the only place we have to call our home; it is home to each of us as individuals and it is home to all of our diverse cultures Although Aboriginal cultures have a prior historical and cultural claim to this landscape, the passionate attachment or ecstatic attention that can and must make this place home is open to all who are willing to look and listen. (81-83)

Rather than seeing in this argument evidence for the non-importance of cultural boundaries, I take it as a riposte against the construction of cultural dichotomies and definitions that would limit the necessary flexibility of cultures to adapt to new circumstances in various ways. Cultural identity is not anchored in obvious but superficial political rhetoric, but in everyday

practices that escape the eye of the casual academic and non-academic tourist.

In relating postcolonial discourse to realities in communities, we must discover that cultural realities do not follow political constructions. Native peoples live in complex situations which cannot be reduced to essentialized political standpoints without creating “yet another colonialist discourse.” This new colonialist discourse expresses itself by creating “authentic” Natives and Native literature, a process to which the academic imagination of dichotomous Western-Indigenous paradigms contributes much because it helps select the criteria of authenticity. In this discourse, writings that are too much associated with so-called Western culture become suspicious. Louis Owens warns that “we need to examine carefully those Native American texts that do make it somehow from the margin to, if not the center, at least an orbital relationship with the homogenizing gravity of that center,” (14) because the center is selectively using tokens to better exclude the authentic voices. This suspicion can easily lead to the classification of authentic Native literature as marginal and as focusing on certain themes—political resistance or ecological sustainability, for example—a practice that in effect silences other Native voices. Using postcolonial theory to reify dichotomous distinctions of resistance, authenticity, ecological practice and indigeneity versus collaboration, ecological destruction and Western societies does not lead to a better understanding of complex cultural interactions. Instead, as bell hooks says, true liberation from colonial paradigms must be found by using “theory as a liberatory practice,” to see in critical and self-critical theoretical analysis a “location for healing” (59). Such a practice needs to take as its basis the complex and complicated realities of communities, where indigenous and non-indigenous communities engage in practices that do not always follow our cultural, political, social, or economic expectations. If it is true that “what is at issue in perceptions of the image of the Other is power,” (Ruoff 199) then the *deconstruction* of colonial theory truly needs to focus on a critical discussion of cultural perception of others. In order to transcend the colonial discourse focusing on power relations, however, we have to take as the departing ground for a *constructive* critical theory the cultural reality of others and ourselves. Critical literature studies and anthropology both have their place in this enterprise, but they need to engage in a dialogue, not assume that they can or should undertake the same task.

Notes

1. In the interests of full disclosure, the fact that I have contributed a chapter to this book needs to be mentioned. That specific chapter is not discussed in this review, and does not matter for it, as this essay

- focuses on a general, theoretical discussion.
2. American authors—whether native or not—often seem to not realize the difference between European and Euro-American relations to the environment. For a succinct explanation of differences and an argument linking ecological interactions to historical time spent on the land, see Claude Lévi-Strauss' *Tristes Tropiques*, pages 93-94.
 3. All those who think that indigenous communities do not react to expectations of representation should take notice that “historically marginalized communities have begun to recognize the political potency of strategically deployed essentialisms” (Brosius 281).
 4. For an older example of such a constructive dialogue showing how American Indian literatures are examples of the cultural distinction between nature and culture, see Jerome Rothenberg's “Indians & Wilderness.”
 5. See Alfonso Ortiz's *The Tewa World*.
 6. “[I]t is not I but others who link *The Ecological Indian* to education reform, property rights, and sovereignty. These links are neither necessary nor logical” (Krech, “Beyond the Ecological Indian” 9). Such an insistence that pure academic truth should be accepted as such does not take into account larger cultural factors. While Krech is right, he should not be surprised that his analysis is re-interpreted in a political, not an academic sense, because academia itself has become a political much more than an academic playground; it has itself been “caught up in a process of domination and resistance” (Eagleton 123).
 7. Adamson obviously takes the concept of a “middle place” from Richard White's *The Middle Ground. Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*, although she never acknowledges this. Nor does she provide a critical discussion of the concept as applicable to her notion of it.

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