

Bénédicte Meillon
University of Perpignan, France

Paul Lindholdt, *Explorations in Ecocriticism: Advocacy, Bioregionalism, and Visual Design* (London: Lexington Books, 2015), 237 pp.



In *Explorations in Ecocriticism*, Paul Lindholt opts for a cross-fertilizing approach of ecocriticism, interweaving literary and scientific studies of early to contemporary travel and nature writing, anthropology, environmental history and politics, visual arts, ecopoetry, narrative scholarship, and pedagogy. This cross-disciplinary approach benefits from looking at fine arts and technological issues through original lenses such as imperialist nostalgia, bioregionalism, and ecopornography. Lindholt's overt praise of radical activism is tempered all along by a call for reverence, for a sense of wonder at the living world, for a sense of place and the advocacy of a bioregional ethos.

Chapter 1 offers a fresh take on the literary and scientific qualities of early American natural histories prior to the nineteenth century. While early natural and travel histories oscillate between scientific fact and artistic license, they give early insight into many of the same sustainability issues which continue to preoccupy us today. Lindholt redeems histories that have been largely sidelined by academia, showing how they chronicle changes affecting the land and local ecosystems in ways that anticipate modern environmentalism. Not only do such histories provide precious encyclopedic records of the fauna and flora of colonial times, they moreover bear testimony to the evolution of humanism and utilitarianism in North American culture. Lindholt argues that these writings' rhetorical penchant for hyperbole links them to the origins of the American tall tale, which he traces back to seventeenth century writings where "the land's extravagant fables" were exploited "to lubricate colonial immigration" (13). They furthermore offer early glimpses of key concepts such as island ecology and ecological imperialism, pastoralism, postequilibrium ecology, conservation, and the observer effect, while they encourage us to "appreciate ecology as a shaping device, a determinant of forms" (25).

Chapter 2 focuses on "Literary Activism and the Bioregional Agenda." Studying "humanity's interpenetrations and interpretations of nature", bioregionalism calls attention to the myriad connections between communities and land that may sustain both ecology and human culture (28). The bioregionalist approach connects anthropology with ecology and geography, empowering more meaningful scholarship both within and outside of academia. Its transdisciplinary basis and interest in local places, fauna and flora, lore and peoples may drive literary activism beyond purely academic concerns, working toward mindful reinhabitation.

Lindholt reminds us that writing becomes political as it strives to effect change. While writing driven by praxis joins philosophy and activism in ways that can help bring about political change, literary scholars may play a key role in deconstructing and challenging the discourse produced by government officials undermining bioregional efforts. Bioregional writing and studies are thus in many ways “helping to seed new eco-cultures of peoples who know, love and care for their lands” (31).

Chapter 3 teases out ambivalent readings of Theodore Winthrop’s life and writings. If his work is stamped with the geographic beauty of North West landscapes, it nevertheless “screens off offensive sites of conquest and imperial power,” a serious shortcoming the Hudson River school of painters who inspired Winthrop are also admonished for (42). Often marred by religious bigotry, Winthrop’s splendid depictions of landscape conceal the despoiling of land, the extermination of creatures, and the violence against native peoples which Manifest Destiny ideology gave license to. Taking issue with such misrepresentations of the land and its Native dwellers, Lindholt links Winthrop’s writing to the thought-provoking concept of “ecopornography.”

Chapters 4 and 5 focus on the iconography and ideology of sabotage, tracing a line of anarchist culture from the American Revolution to Edward Abbey, Earth First!, and other movements and figures of ecotage such as Neo-Luddism – a movement whose critique of and wariness towards technocracy was much influenced by Abbey. Emphasizing the malleability and sustainability of icons, Lindholt shows how these provide powerful tools to reach often disinterested audiences. Lindholt moreover pinpoints the flaws in the now-rampant term “ecoterrorism”. He underlines the nonviolent philosophy which guides ecosabotage, with a clear line separating damage inflicted on machines from harm done to living things.

The longest in this collection of essays, Chapter 6 devotes close attention to analyzing the hidden motives behind the commissioning of artists by the Bureau of Reclamation. Looking closely at many paintings and other visual arts from the late 1960’s onward, Lindholt reveals the Bureau’s unacknowledged agenda to use aesthetic and ethical responses to sublime art in order to promote their intensive damn-building program. While ecological legislation was being passed that could bring bad press to the Reclamation Program, the imaginative work of famous artists served to shift the values associated with western dams and canals, praising the creation of recreational sites and the artistic use of innovative technologies. While kindling a sense of admiration for projects that extensively redesigned the landscape, such art simultaneously worked to erase people’s very notion of and hankering for pre-dam places. Lindholt goes back here to some of the issues broached in Chapter 3, reading many of these paintings as ecopornography, in that they “[traffick] in staged intimacies and ecstasies” (124), concealing negative impacts on the environment together with an expansionist ethos that revered human technological feats.

Chapter 7 convincingly argues that writings issued by defenders of the counter-environmental wise-use movement (WUM) deserves more attention in ecocritical studies. In spite of their pervasive use of contrarian science and their obvious upholding of ideologies promoting an endless exploitation of nature for the sole benefit of humankind, these writing may nevertheless be mind-opening in that they underscore the cultural clashes that hinder environmental politics and ecological awareness – clashes that take the form of “battles of words, of ideology, and of science” (146). These writings help understand the current tactics of “greenwashing” and “aggressive mimicry” used by various WUM groups. Moreover, if counter-environmental literature does not revel in the rhapsodic as much nature writing does, it nevertheless shares certain traits admittedly characteristic of the latter, i.e. its alleged reliance on science and cultural criticism revolving around our understanding of nature. Indeed, literature springing from the WUM should be examined and deconstructed for its counter-scientific claims that manipulate uninformed public opinion, for the ways in which it takes part in shaping socially constructed notions of nature, and because it casts a different light on the ways in which true environmental literature addresses the problems posed by such published works.

In chapter 8, Lindholt gives an insightful reading of Henrik Ibsen’s 1882 play, *Enemy of the People*, and its 1950 adaptation by Henry Miller. Identifying the timelessness of the themes, struggle, and rhetorics found in this play, Lindholt shows how avant-garde this play now appears, shedding light on its continuing relevance. *Enemy* foreshadows many of the challenges still encountered by environmental scientists, journalists, and activists. While staging the various economic and discursive forces at play in environmental combats, *Enemy* highlights the politicization of science, the slippery use of certain rhetorics, the potentially tricky role of provincial presses, the dangers linked with advocacy journalism, together with the misinformation often spread by corporations and developers influencing the judiciary through lobbying groups.

In chapter 9, Lindholt recounts some of his personal experience as a professor of English at Eastern Washington University to investigate the dilemmas, pitfalls and benefits of teaching accountability to others and to place via a bioregionalist approach of environmental humanities and English composition classes in the rural West. Combining field excursions with explorations of place-based attachments, the pedagogy he has developed strives to “enlighten and empower [...] students to shape the future” (174). Environmental studies, he argues, ought to help students develop a sense of responsibility that stems, on the one hand, from empathy derived from personal connections to place, and, on the other hand, from the understanding of the complexities involved in the social and political inner workings of a specific bioregion as much as in its topographical and biological formations.

Building from some of his earlier reflections on how to best combine, develop, and exploit skills in critical thinking and composition, the last chapter

zooms in on how English classes can effectively gain greater meaningfulness from the standpoint of environmental education. Lindholt here makes a fine case for “Restoring Bioregions Through Applied Composition.” Wary of academia’s tendency in the field of language arts to exhibit a fascination with self-reflexive theory and abstraction, Lindholt deplors the resulting detachment and estrangement of much scholarly work, too often “arrogant, specialized, void of particularities” (186). “Consequentiality,” he cogently argues, “might arise, though, from place-based or bioregional study as it couples with more personal modes of communication and the affective domain” (186). Lindholt then goes on to disentangle some of the humanist assumptions that “erect barriers between our species and nature,” and that have shaped today’s compartmentalized thinking in which our present environmental crisis is in great part rooted. Reactivating our perception and imagination of place, transdisciplinary ecopoetry and ecocriticism, Lindholt shows, can help humans fight the alienation and atomism characteristic of our times by restoring a sense of connection to place, affiliating both intellectually and affectively with place and the life it carries, thus developing one’s “ecological identity”. Teaching applied composition furthermore equips students with strong skills in deconstructing discourse through critical analysis and in using rhetoric and language in ways essential for anyone seeking to work in environmental justice and activism.

Lindholt’s fine contribution to the field of ecocriticism lies in great part in the way he stresses the need to reexamine cultural productions in the light of their environmental stakes, welding together scientific, literary, historical, semiotic, political and economic approaches. His book emphasizes the very real consequences brought about by artistic forms of discourse. Most essentially, it challenges many assumptions about academic practices and paves the way for more consequential teaching and writing in relation to environmental issues. One of the greatest qualities of this book, surely, consists in Lindholt’s personal explorations of various art forms, situated environmental conflicts, ideologies and practices. Indeed, journeying through his tightly-knit yet diverse reflections, the reader is constantly guided and grounded by Lindholt’s narrative scholarship, tying his analyses of art and theory to meaningful personal experiences. Additionally, the language is always rich, elegant and colorful. Lindholt’s idiomatic, lively and sharp style sustains the readers’ interest throughout, and convincingly illustrates the ways in which academic language can make for dynamic, thought-provoking and affective forays into studies that, one can thus never forget, indeed matter.