

Greening across Borders – Introduction

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Early studies in ecocriticism esteemed the local as a remedy for the alienation and rootlessness of the modern subject. Especially in the United States, whose national character was ostensibly formed by the open frontier and the imperative to move west to find identity and meaning, concepts such as re-inhabitation and bioregionalism seemed to provide plausible solutions to the problem of material and spiritual homelessness from which citizens who had lost touch with their immediate environment were suffering. In the 1970s autonomous communities practising a small-scale economy – E.F. Schumacher’s 1973 monograph *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered* comes to mind – were believed to be capable of reconnecting the individual with his or her home place, and promoting autarchy, self-reliance and personal authenticity. Intimate knowledge of a local place, especially its ecology, and a deep ecological identification with place or its ecosphere were held to foster the need for its protection against exploitation and pollution. Ecocritics of the early 1990s celebrated a sense of place linked to specific landscapes (Thoreau’s Walden Pond, Edward Abbey’s Arches National Monument, Wendell Berry’s Kentucky farm or Gary Snyder’s High Sierras, to name just a few) which shaped the individual in specific ways.

In the age of globalization a focus on the local and the notion of the authenticity of a place are still seen by some as useful weapons in the struggle against hegemonic economic and cultural forces. As David fought Goliath, the local could be pitted against an imperialist power system. However, this easy dichotomy between the liberating aspects of the local and the dominating aspects of the global has become untenable, due to recent scholarship in globalization studies, and also, increasingly, in ecocriticism. Cultural geographer Doreen Massey already pointed out in 1994 that a sense of place (understood as a sense of a specific local place), instead of providing stability and a source of unproblematic identity, can also be a retreat from the dynamic and change of ‘real life,’ a romanticized escapism turning its back on the real business of the world (151). Sense of place then becomes reactionary because of the assumption that places have single, essential identities, based on some historical origin. It necessitates the creation of fixed boundaries and the distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (152). Massey calls for a progressive sense of place which is not static, has neither fixed boundaries nor single, unique ‘identities,’ and whose specificity is continually reproduced (155): “[E]ach place is the focus of a distinct *mixture* of wider and more local social relations” (156). Massey thus emphasizes the connection of place to other places and their mutual

influence in an ongoing process of development, without ignoring the power-geometry involved in this relationship. Places to her are socially constructed, not 'naturally' grown.

In the 1990s, several globalization scholars further analyzed the relationship between the local and the global, undermining the dichotomy between the two concepts. In his study on "glocalization" (1995), Roland Robertson picks up the critique of globalization as homogenization executed by a dominant power system (usually understood as the USA) which obliterates the local. He argues instead that the local and the global, or the particular and the universal, are mutually implicative (27), which is why he coined the term "glocalization." In his opinion local cultures are participating in global processes to a significant extent. They absorb messages from the USA, for example, but receive and interpret them differentially. Furthermore, major alleged producers of 'global culture' such as CNN or Hollywood "tailor their products to a differentiated global market" (38). He thus reinforces the significance of the local, but he sees it as simultaneously reflecting and shaping global forces.

David Harvey is, like Massey, more explicit about the economic consequences of globalization and the unequal distribution of power. He speaks of time-space compression, meaning the shrinkage of space and the acceleration of time in a highly technologized world, which has far-reaching consequences for the identity of a place. Places to him are social constructions, erected within the flux and flow of capital circulation (295) and subsequent power relations. As such they are not permanences but subject to time and change. Places are the locus of "imaginaries," "institutionalizations," configurations of "social relations," "material practices," forms of "power" and elements in "discourse" (Harvey 294). Harvey argues against some ecocritics' (mostly phenomenologists') notion that sense of place guarantees a more ecologically healthy relationship to the environment. He considers local knowledge as insufficient to understand broader socio-ecological processes occurring at scales that cannot be directly experienced and which are therefore outside of phenomenological reach (303). Like Massey, he also argues against a narrow sense of "community" suggesting permanence, calling instead for the realization that communities are, like places, in a constant state of flux.

The idea that places are no longer the "clear supports of our identity" (Morley and Robins in Tomlinson, 106) is further explored by John Tomlinson, who shares the concept of 'deterritorialization' with other globalization critics. Tomlinson agrees with Canclini's definition of the term, namely "the loss of the 'natural' relation of culture to geographical and social territories." It implies that the stretching of local relations across time and space – to Tomlinson the core of globalization – affects the character of the localities that we inhabit (107). Deterritorialization calls for reterritorialization, i.e. a new concept of place-belonging which he sees realized in the process of hybridization. One pertinent example is Anzaldúa's theory of a borderland experience, which recognizes the

necessity to struggle with ambiguities and to re-establish a cultural home which acknowledges the dynamics of a complex space, and which rejects essentialized notions of a geographically and culturally fixed place.

The significance of the imagination as a social practice in the creation of a new, globalized sense of place is pointed out by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai in *Modernity at Large* (1996), to name but one further scholar of place studies. Appadurai, too, argues against globalization as cultural homogenization, because such arguments fail to see how elements of the metropolis become indigenized, for example (32). In order to highlight the complex relationship between the local and the global, he identifies five dimensions of global cultural flows (ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes and ideoscapes) which are constituted by historically situated imaginations of different persons or groups around the globe. These create different localities, which are never static, but “always emergent from the practices of local subjects in specific neighborhoods” (198). Again, a sense of place is not ‘natural,’ it is a slippery concept including various historical, cultural, political, social and other elements across time and space.

It comes as no surprise that ecocritics have joined the debate about an expanded sense of place beyond territorial or national boundaries. Catastrophes such as the nuclear meltdown in Chernobyl in 1986, the South Asian tsunami in 2004, global warming, and the spreading of genetically altered food or epidemics all over the world are examples of events which have powerfully demonstrated the artificiality of man-made borders and the impossibility of hermetically sealing off a local community and of ignoring the formative influence of exterior forces. But because of ecocriticism’s long history of interest in “regional allegiances” (Buell *Future*, 82) and exploring bioregions, it has only recently begun to refocus the critical lens to include the study of global aspects of place. It was only in 2005 that Lawrence Buell called for “experiments in imaginary planetary belonging” (77). Taking Richard Powers’ 1998 novel *Gain* as one literary example, he argued that “the factors that define a bioregion are transnational and even global” (89) and that, more generally, “in literature if not also in literary studies, something like a global sense of place is coming into existence” (92). Two years later he wrote about “environmental imagination on a planetary scale” as “an emergent critical project” (2007, 227-228), the beginnings of which he detected in early American anticipations of an ideal future landscape of world-historical import (235), but especially in writers such as Thoreau, Melville and George Perkins Marsh as “harbingers of contemporary ecoglobalist imagination” (242). Buell sees in place-specific contemporary literary works by Berry, Silko and Yamashita an “ecoglobalist affect”, in that they are preoccupied emotionally “with a finite, near-at-hand physical environment” which is linked imaginatively to “a context of planetary reach” (232). He argues with Massey for a global sense of place: “the vision of a particular site understood as a nodal point of interconnected force fields of planetary scope” (233).

Just a few years earlier, in 2002, Australian ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood approached the issue of the autonomy and self-sufficiency of small-scale communities desired by early bioregionalists and their local sense of place from a different angle. She identified the remoteness of decision-making as one of the main reasons for ecological damage, because a privileged elite usually does not have to bear the consequences of their decisions (71). This argument seems to support the idea that place-based autonomous communities are ideal sites for good ecological decision-making, as their members directly experience the results of their actions (75). Nevertheless Plumwood sees problematic aspects to autarchic forms of bioregionalism (76), because they “privilege [...] ecological relationships automatically over other kinds of relationships” (29, 249) and thus again create borders between ‘us’ and ‘them.’ They are also problematical because many ecological impacts cannot be contained at the level of the local community. Autarchy and self-sufficiency can even hinder adequate ecological behavior, which must take larger regions into consideration to be effective. Closeness to the land and local ecological literacy are often not enough to understand ecological dynamics in the larger global world. Plumwood supports John Dryzek, who called for coordination across boundaries, flexibility, and matching scale for a positive ecological impact (77). Thus she, too, is an advocate of the local as intricately linked to global processes, of place being created by social, cultural, political and environmental aspects, of the political necessity to be aware of these linkages, and of acting according to them.

The most profound study of the need for a global sense of place in ecocriticism comes from Ursula K. Heise. In her landmark book *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (2008) Heise convincingly argues for an ‘eco-cosmopolitan’ approach to literary and cultural studies as “an attempt to envision individuals and groups as part of planetary ‘imagined communities’ of both human and nonhuman kinds” (61). I cannot do justice here to her detailed and highly informative account of the development of an understanding of place from environmentalism to ecocriticism to the imagination of the global, to her knowledgeable assessment of globalization studies and especially of Ulrich Beck’s risk theory, or to her productive reading of novels, poetry and art works which demonstrate the intricate and various ways in which the local is part of the global. What seems important to me is the argument that an eco-cosmopolitan literary criticism acknowledges and explores not only how geographical or regional places are a part of larger forces which expose the arbitrariness of national borders, but also how other borders, between species for example, are becoming permeable. This recognition of the connectedness and reciprocity of the particular and the universal, of the local and the global, of various forms of being in the world, invites new conceptions of identity beyond essentialism and beyond any form of reductionist thinking, conceptions which accept ambiguities, differences, conflicts, and the often messy dynamics of development. According to Heise (and Harvey,

Tomlinson, Robinson, Massey and others), these do not emerge ‘naturally.’ They are produced and perpetuated culturally, and they “foster” or “impede” “regional, national, and transnational forms of identification”, the analysis of which sometimes requires the achievement of an abstract knowledge (61, 62) and, to quote Plumwood again, the use of “a larger network” of information (77).

The following essays join the recent debate about a sense of place in a globalized world from an ecocritical perspective. The authors are all conscious of the need to transgress narrow definitions of the local and become aware of its intricate connections to larger external forces. They question the existence and perpetuation of strictly demarcated borders and essentialist notions of a specific place as home. Nevertheless all the essays argue – with different results – for the necessity to explore the ways in which local identities are still significant, especially in the age of globalization.

Christopher Oscarson analyzes Swedish writer Kerstin Ekman’s 1993 novel *Händelser vid vatten* [*Blackwater*], in which a contemporary sense of place is understood as dependent both on familiarity with and experience of the physical environment and on recognition of the complexities of human consciousness and modern society that transcend locality. A particular place (Ytan/Stärnberg) is produced by intertwining human participation (memory, direct experience) and material environment (a dynamic, evolving topography and ecosystem), and by a complex interplay of the local and the global. Oscarson provides a useful overview of some theorization of place and how it relates to the ecological debate. He focuses on the devaluation of place and the proliferation of non-places in a globalized world which has liberated the subject from parochialism and narrow-mindedness, but he also points out the disadvantage of this devaluation which can lead to estrangement and to a lack of sensitivity to natural processes and rhythms. Unlike the nostalgic, place-based texts of the Swedish National Romantics, Kerstin Ekman’s writing approaches the issue of place from a much more critical perspective. In her novel, writes Oscarson, she illustrates the dangers of essentialist thinking and the myth of pure origins, but she is also against an understanding of place as an exclusively socio-cultural or linguistic construct. To her, the materiality of space combines with human discourse to create a sense of place situated between the subject and the object, the system and the individual, and finally the local and the global.

In his reading of Nicaraguan author Gioconda Belli’s science fiction novel *Waslala* (1996), Scott DeVries enters the debate about the complications of the globalization of place. He shows how Belli is concerned about the dangers of an enforced program of anti-development and nature conservation which ignores the local communities of the Third World and thus becomes a form of neo-imperial exploitation and environmental injustice. In the novel a future fictional Central American city called Faguas is forcibly turned into an oxygen-producing country and a repository of trash for the First World in exchange for electricity and

consumer goods. All development is cancelled in favor of the conservation of the forest and clean water. The Third World communities are disempowered, their local identities sacrificed, and nature has been reduced to a mere green mass by multinational corporations. Belli imagines a utopian alternative of a spiritually-based sense of place founded upon ecological ideas, a place called Waslala, which serves as a reference point for the world at large. DeVries concludes that although the novel is a defense of place in the face of ruthless economic globalization, it nevertheless affirms the connectedness of life and provides ideals for a more just political economy, especially in the age of globalization.

Alexander Starre is concerned with the problem of borders which individuals have to face once they are forced to move to unknown territory. Turning to the genre of captivity narratives which revolve around confrontation with the environment and the unsettling forces of wilderness and animality, he argues that these confrontations spur the narrating subjects into painful reconsiderations of borders, both geographically and physically. In his analysis of the function of rivers in two Puritan captivity narratives, Starre points out that they serve as a structural element, as a physical and a spiritual borderline (in the case of Mary Rowlandson), and as a means of heightening awareness of the natural environment (in the case of John Gyles). Away from civilization, captives become very conscious of the precarious interrelationship between humans and animals. Faced with the hardships of their travels, they are forced to acknowledge the essential naturalness of their own existence. Two recent memoirs of American captives in the desert of Iraq and the jungle of Columbia reflect American involvement in global conflicts. They point toward the globalization of the genre by continuing the discussion of place-loss and animality specific to the captivity narrative. Both captives are situated in a natural setting without the orientation of maps and recognizable national borders, both become conscious of their animal existence through their own bodies. Starre argues that in these narratives differences between nations vanish in favor of a concrete material environment, and that boundaries between the human and the animal world are blurred, which forces the narrators and readers to reconsider their own embeddedness in the non-human world.

Finally, Micha Edlich turns to the “greening” of art history and criticism in the context of ecocritical debates about the global. He is especially concerned with the dilemma of artists who produce environmental work critical of political, socioeconomic, cultural, and especially ecological implications of globalization, yet who are, at the same time, dependent on what Arjun Appadurai has termed “global cultural flows” or “landscapes” (ethno-, media-, techno-, finance- and ideoscapes) to produce and distribute their art. To illustrate the complications of a globally and ecologically conscious art, he reads two recent works: Portuguese artist and Bay Area resident Rigo 23’s contributions to *Human/Nature: Artists Respond to a Changing Planet* (2008), and North American artist Philip Krohn’s *EARTHSticker*

(2005). Rigo 23 cooperated with local artisans in Brazil to rebuild a ballistic missile submarine and a cluster bomb with earth materials. The two sculptures not only exemplify a collaborative artistic enterprise and transnational solidarity between Western artist and indigenous population, they also expose the global risk both cultures on two subcontinents are subject to. Philip Krohn's minimalistically designed *EARTHSticker*, a bumper sticker, points towards art's relationship to the physical world, to culture's embedment in nature. It is, at the same time, plastic, made for cars, and distributed and sold via the internet, thus leaving its own environmental footprint. Edlich sees Krohn's *EARTHSticker* as tapping into Appadurai's numerous landscapes and demonstrating art's involvement in these global flows. He interprets it as consciously revealing its reliance on the frequently detrimental global processes that the works dissect.

This collection of essays thus seeks to contribute to the ongoing debate about the significance of borders, of place and of self by highlighting the dynamic interplay between the materiality of place and its different cultural manifestations.

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