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Huggan, Graham and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism. Literature, Animals, Environment* (New York/London: Routledge, 2010), vi+245 pp.

It was only a matter of time before an extensive and fundamental book-length publication would be devoted to the burgeoning area of postcolonial ecocriticism. What would one expect from such a publication? Certainly, it would have to integrate the theoretical and interpretive movements of the two theoretical impulses in order to lay the foundations for a combined field of study, as well as to generalise its notions and thus map out future territory. With *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, such a text has now arrived, and to those who have followed developments in the field, it will not come as a surprise that its authors are Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin: Huggan is well-known for his work in postcolonial studies and criticism, as well as for his important contributions to postcolonial ecocriticism, while Tiffin is noted not only for her contribution to the still seminal *The Empire Writes Back*, but also for her work in animal studies. Whereas Ashcroft et al. maintained the “continuing importance of post-colonial analysis of global [environmental] crises” (213) as early as 1989, the present *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* can be regarded as the intellectual harvest of the last several years. The two authors’ fields of expertise are reflected in the structure of the book: its first half addresses the theoretical issues that bring together postcolonial studies and ecocritical analysis, while the focus in the second half shifts to animal studies or zoocriticism. Thus, the chapter division itself already provides a provisional map of this conceptual terrain.

It is in the first section titled “Postcolonialism and the Environment” that Huggan and Tiffin take pains to explain postcolonial ecocriticism not so much as yet another branch of ecological studies (or, conversely, postcolonial studies) but as a logical consequence of the two academic branches. They quote Pablo Mukherjee, who in 2006 maintained:

Any field purporting to theorise the global conditions of colonialism and imperialism (let us call it postcolonial studies) cannot but consider the complex interplay of environmental categories [...] with political or cultural categories [...]. Equally, any field purporting to attach interpretive importance to environment (let us call it eco/environmental studies) must be able to trace the social, historical and material co-ordinates [of its categories]. (qtd. in Huggan and Tiffin 2)

After providing numerous examples from and references to work by authors who have remarked on the parallels between racism and speciecism, and who

have identified the Eurocentric, neo-imperialist “hegemonic centrism” (Val Plumwood qtd. in Huggan and Tiffin 4) as the underlying principle of the “colonial/imperial underpinnings of environmental practices” (3), Huggan and Tiffin go on to explore this common ground. So, in the book’s first half, issues of ‘development’ and ‘entitlement’ are discussed, and Huggan and Tiffin minutely describe both the rhetoric and the practices which cluster around these issues, examining them as legal, political, and material phenomena as well as from the more individual perspectives of emotion and personal connection. In so doing, Huggan and Tiffin engage in a form of scholarly critique they see as a central yet currently neglected intellectual task: to scrutinise the ways in which the notion of “development” works as an enabling myth of neo-colonialist ideology and catalyst of commodification whose logic increasingly threatens to dominate the various and complex forms of entitlement. Unfortunately, they argue, this kind of critique is often rather unbalanced and polemical. A postcolonial ecocriticism that deserves the name will have to overcome such simplifications and take great care to properly contextualise its objects of study with regard to their social and political situation. Starting from the “writer-activist” perspectives of Ken Saro-Wiwa and Arundhati Roy, they soon expand their range to fictional works from Australia, South Africa and other countries – always aware of the fact that these novels in one way or another successfully stage and emphasise that “ecological disruption is co-extensive with damage to the social fabric, and that environmental issues cannot be separated from questions of social justice and human rights” (52).

In the second half of the book, animals are discussed as the “cultural other” (135); and since “[t]hrough western history, civilisation has consistently been constructed by or against the wild, savage and animalistic,” (134) this concentration poses a dual challenge: Animality must be studied as a cultural trope that has engendered the notion of both animal and human bestiality and thus has allowed economic exploitation (e.g. the trade in ivory) and degradation in the name of enlightenment philosophy to go hand in hand. Animality can and must, however, also be discussed from another angle, namely how the animal *as such* occurs in cultural texts; and the difficult task of reading the animal as what it is, rather than as a symbol or an allegory, is convincingly identified as one of the principal tasks of ecocriticism. Although many readers may have grown up with fables and animal characters in children’s fiction, literature is also capable of demonstrating ways of how to take animals seriously, and the book’s section on “Agency, sex and emotion” – provocatively dealing with interspecies sexual intercourse – identifies the species boundary as the crucial conceptual challenge in this regard.

The explicit focus on imaginative potentials of fiction certainly works to the book’s advantage, for Huggan and Tiffin constantly keep in mind that if texts can be understood as “catalyst[s] for social action” (12), ecocritics are well advised to theorise the tensions between aesthetics, advocacy, and activism.

Huggan and Tiffin dedicate a whole subchapter to these tensions and the role of fictional texts in negotiating the aporias of ecological and ethical discourses. While they steadily keep “an eye on [...] literature’s specific aesthetic properties” by means of which “writing [...] is always likely to transcend its categorisation as ‘protest literature’” (14), the authors do not shy away from the difficult question whether literature really can deal with environmental issues: “literature, with its traditional emphasis on plot, character and psychological states has been seen perforce as being focused on individuals or groups of humans, or at least anthropomorphised animals” (16). Rather than ignoring the possible impasse of literary functions and novelistic form, Huggan and Tiffin meet the challenge head-on. It is with regard to the potential of fictional literature, then, that they demonstrate the task of postcolonial ecocriticism – “to contest [...] western ideologies of development” (27) and to solve “the blatant and unresolved contradiction” (138) that underlies our representation and our dealings with the non-human other.

In dealing with both our imaginative and our instrumentalising attitude towards nature, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* inevitably has to reassess humanism. After an extensive discussion that focuses on the intersections of “zoocriticism and the postcolonial” (133), Huggan and Tiffin therefore conclude by dealing with the idea of an ecocriticism “after nature.” The crisis of humanism and concepts of posthumanism are scrutinised with regard to their potential for dealing with the dialectics of modernity and our estrangement from a natural world which we find increasingly difficult to grasp. By reading Haraway, McKibben, Merchant, Soper and others against the foil of a humanism in crisis, Huggan and Tiffin point to the “imaginative possibilities opened up by the implosion of nature and culture” (205); literature, they claim, can successfully negotiate both the possibilities and the dangers of what Donna Haraway has described as the breaking down of the “artificial boundaries between the subject and the object, the technical and the political” (qtd. in Huggan and Tiffin 205) and the “selective universalism” (206) of humanist thinking. Ultimately, postcolonial ecocriticism, as well as the fiction it is concerned with, are essential means in this process of “think[ing] beyond the human” (215).

And yet, do they succeed in this task? Rather than probing a single solution, Huggan and Tiffin offer a plethora of approaches which all have in one way or another been brought to bear on the issues they have established as central to postcolonial ecocriticism. Since this book seems to have been intended as a benchmark for the field and therefore discusses most of the relevant approaches and comments on nearly all recent work done in the context of postcolonial environmental studies, it would not have been suitable to privilege a single methodology. Instead, the book provides the reader with an overview that already illuminates the fault-lines and conflicts between these approaches on a theoretical level. So rather than one particular approach or literary theory, the authors provide a fairly exhaustive overview of the existent

spectrum of approaches and demonstrate their interpretive range (and conceptual blind spots) in a number of selected readings of individual texts.

It is not least the eloquent and engaging style that renders this book a fruitful challenge that will prompt reader to rethink their own scholarly position as well as the position of human beings in general, who are constantly trying to make sense of (or, as it were, subjugate) the world around them. This thorough and well-written introduction to the field of postcolonial ecocriticism is a challenging read not only by virtue of the great number of starting points it presents but by repeatedly coming back to the question of the place of literature in a debate about environment and animals. To theorise this will be the task for the next years, and *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* offers a useful foundation by meticulously mapping the territory.

Works Cited

Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, eds. *The Empire Writes Back. Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. 1989. London: Routledge, 2002 Print.