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Sarah Jaquette Ray, *The Ecological Other: Environmental Exclusion in American Culture* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013), 211 pp.



Sarah Jaquette Ray's first book alerts us to the pernicious process of "ecological othering"—which, as she argues, has been integral to American environmentalist campaigns from the Progressive Era to the present moment. Ecological othering materially and discursively abjects those human bodies considered to be polluting, disgusting, or otherwise undesirable and, in the process, covers up injustice against those bodies. For example, in the book's last chapter, Ray examines public outcry over the ecological impact of border-crossers on Arizona's Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument. As she shows, this outcry not only positions undocumented immigrants as trash, but diverts attention from the injustices that drive migration in the first place—not to mention obfuscating the comparatively greater ecological impact of U.S. border security.

*The Ecological Other* is divided into three long case studies, framed by an introduction and conclusion, which focus respectively on the ecological othering of disabled persons, Native Americans, and immigrants. While grounded in literary ecocriticism, Ray's methodology is widely interdisciplinary, incorporating historical and field research alongside close textual readings. Her archive is impressively varied as well, including everything from rock climbing magazines to ecopsychology literature to "real" landscapes like Organ Pipe.

The book's wide-ranging diversity allows it to build on several different areas of research, and it does so in innovative ways. First, while disability studies has largely focused on urban space—if it takes up "the environment" at all—Ray looks to outdoor adventure culture to help us see "how the social construction of disability and the social construction of wilderness might reinforce each other" (36). Second, in her focus on material bodies and their experiences of injustice, Ray also participates in the recent surge in "New Materialism"—though with two important twists: she critiques how much of that work idealizes the healthy, able body at the expense of the disabled (8), and she refuses to pit "the material" against "the socially constructed," as much recent materialist work tends to do. Instead, her readings consistently demonstrate that a theoretically-informed understanding of social construction can, and perhaps *must*, coexist with a focus on "real," live bodies and environments.

*The Ecological Other* also complements recent work in areas such as queer ecology. Just as queer ecology scholars have demonstrated how "the queer" has been excluded from what counts as nature, so does Ray demonstrate how "the invalid, the Indian, and the immigrant" (179) are literally and figuratively excluded from wilderness and natural environments. The book thereby undertakes what Ray refers to as "critical

environmental scholar[ship]" (2). Along with scholars such as Giovanna Di Chiro and David Mazel, Ray understands that environmental discourse does not invariably oppose oppression, but can itself function oppressively, and that U.S. environmentalism cannot always be characterized as a progressive Left movement—as it often appears in contemporary popular culture and media, and as many both inside and outside the movement tend to believe. Thus, in her conclusion, she calls on readers to recognize that “disgust activates our own environmentalism, no matter whether we are mainstream or not” (182). In this sense, I would hold *The Ecological Other* up as positive proof of the ever-increasing self-reflexivity and complexity of ecocriticism and of the environmental humanities at large.

But while the book’s critical environmental scholarship feels urgent and vital, it’s not always staged as carefully as it could be. The main issue is that two of the book’s most central terms, “environmentalism” and “environmentalist(s),” need to be defined and theorized more deeply. For example, one of Ray’s main aims is to draw a line of influence between what she variously calls “early” and “modern environmentalism” (16, 37, 132 and so forth)—largely referring to Progressive Era wildlife conservation efforts such as the development of the U.S. National Parks, which entailed the removal of Native American inhabitants—and “contemporary” or “mainstream environmentalism” (5, 39, 85 and so forth). But she does not offer any in-text discussion of the relationship, not to mention the *differences*, between “conservationism” and “environmentalism.” Such a discussion would make the lineage which Ray proposes more convincing, as would an acknowledgement of the various periodizations of environmentalism that scholars such as Ramachandra Guha and Philip Shabecoff have offered. After all, the environmental imperialisms and exclusions Ray wants to uncover might seem a lot less surprising if we consider the *conservative* roots of *conservationism*. Moreover, one might note, “environmentalism” only appeared in its present connotation in 1966, after landmarks such as Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962)—hardly an imperial or exclusionary text by most measures, and arguably a rather anti-imperial one.

Relatedly, *The Ecological Other* vacillates in its conception of “environmentalism,” even as the book tries to pin it down for critique. Most often, it’s something fundamentally bad; at other times, it’s something potentially good; at still others, it’s a blank canvas. Early on in the text, for example, Ray “agree[s] with Laura Pulido’s assessment that *environmentalism is ‘a form of racism that both underlies and is distinct from institutional and overt racism’*” (17; my emphasis). But, later, she declares that “environmentalism can be redefined by a different sensibility, one that values an array of bodies and a wider spectrum of positive ways to interact with nature” (40). If environmentalism is a form of racism, we might ask, how can it ever value a diverse array of bodies? In such cases, more nuanced language and explanatory discussion would obviously be useful, as would an early, in-depth grounding of Ray’s critical position—vis-à-vis, for instance, the deep ecology vs. social ecology debates, or the debates around environmental justice as an alternative to the environmentalism of the privileged. Such foundational work would be particularly helpful for readers new to the

environmental humanities, who might otherwise find an ecocritical book that critiques environmentalism so pointedly to be rather odd.

Finally, *The Ecological Other's* important case would have also been strengthened if it presented more evidence. Chapter 2, for example, discusses indigenous writers' responses to the "ecological Indian" stereotype without offering a single primary example of the stereotype, much less of environmentalists perpetuating it. The most famous example that springs to this reviewer's mind is the so-called "Crying Indian" TV commercials from the 1970s produced by the Keep America Beautiful (KAB) organization; the commercials featured a Native American (played, of course, by a non-Native American) sorrowfully navigating a trash-filled landscape. But as scholars such as Heather Rogers and Elizabeth Royte have shown, KAB's efforts, while seemingly "environmentalist," can also be seen as an instance of corporate greenwashing that shifts responsibility for waste onto individual consumers. In such a case, it would be difficult to say that "environmentalists" are the ones perpetuating the stereotype. But since such perpetuation surely does exist, *The Ecological Other* would be all the more incisive for pointing directly to it.

To be fair, Ray admits the slippery nature of designations like "environmentalism" and "environmentalist(s)" near the end of the book, when she observes that "much environmental discourse has become not *environmentalism* at all, but a green veneer on conservative social politics" (183, my emphasis). One might then ask why "environmentalism" *tout court* is specifically singled out throughout the book (10, 16, 27, 34, 89, 129, 179, *passim*). Arguably, Ray thereby contributes to this very confusion between "environmentalism" and "conservative social politics." Readers might then wonder if there is something more to be learned from the instances of ecological othering described here than that "environmentalism" can be exclusive or oppressive—something, for example, about how conservative, imperial, or colonial projects co-opt environmental and/or progressive tropes and terms, or about how corporate and conservative greenwashing succeeds, and what that tells us about the current status of "green."

If nothing else, though, these aspects of *The Ecological Other* point to the deeply complicated nature of environmental politics. After all, if corporations and conservative groups have been so successful at greenwashing that it's hard even for an ecocritic to define "environmentalism" anymore, and if supposedly progressive environmental discourse and activism can further marginalize underrepresented or vulnerable populations, then there are some serious conversations to be had across both environmental activism and environmental scholarship. *The Ecological Other* can function as a spark for these conversations—and, thankfully, Ray has offered many of the tools needed for them, such as the concepts of "green alarmism" (178) and the "poetics of trash" (33).

And it's clear that Ray has already launched some such conversations. In fall 2014, for example, the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society in Munich, Germany will host a workshop inspired by Ray's book, titled "Ecological Othering and Biopolitics in the Environmental Humanities." Meanwhile, along with disabilities studies

scholar J.C. Sibara, Ray is editing a collection on disability and environment that will be the first but surely not the last of its kind. The ideas broached in *The Ecological Other*, I expect and hope, will continue to inform debate and inquiry in the environmental humanities for some time to come.