

Review Essay: Re-mapping Ecocriticism: New Directions in Literary and Urban Ecology

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Karen E. Waldron, and Rob Friedman, eds. *Toward a Literary Ecology. Places and Spaces in American Literature* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2013), xxxix + 210 pp.

Andrea Edl, *Vom Ursprung ökokritischen Denkens zu einem kosmopolitanen Ansatz der urbanen Ökokritik. Ort und Raum von der amerikanischen Wildnis bis zur urbanen Dystopie* (Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 2013), 364 pp.



What Lawrence Buell, some twenty years ago, called an “ecocritical insurgency” (*The Environmental Imagination*) in literary and cultural studies has blossomed into a vibrant strand of critical and theoretical inquiry. And although ecocriticism and the “environmental humanities” more broadly have become increasingly institutionalized and recognized within academic and public debates, they are still mapping out the boundaries of their respective fields. What started as a reconsideration of the role of “nature” for human meaning-making processes and as a critical re-assessment of the role of literature and culture for interactions with the non-human environment has since branched out into a new discipline with various sub-strands which broach far-reaching epistemological and ontological questions within an increasingly interdisciplinary framework that includes history, science, geography, sociology, psychology, philosophy etc. In the following, I want to discuss two fairly recent trends within ecocritical debate that can both help to consolidate the field as well as signal directions for future research, namely literary ecology and urban ecocriticism.

Literary ecology and urban ecocriticism themselves are, of course, not new. Gregory Bateson, a pioneer of both fields, repeatedly hinted at the similarity between biological life processes and the poetic form of speech, which he perceived in terms of basic organizational units made up of analogies, feedback relations, and metaphors, thus opening up the exploration of the interrelationship between natural and cultural processes (Bateson). Culture, too, it followed, could be seen as “an ecosystemically organized product of overall evolutionary processes” (Finke 175) in which literature plays a vital role in articulating deficits and imagining alternative worlds (Zapf, *Literatur als kulturelle Ökologie*). Against this background, one main strand of literary ecology developed from cultural anthropology’s conception of culture as a realm in which a self-interpretation of humankind takes place (Müller) and led to theoretical frameworks that perceive literature as a specific mode of “cultural ecology” which “stage[s] [...] the

complex feedback relationship of prevailing cultural systems with the needs and manifestations of human and non-human ‘nature’ and which functions “like an ecological force” within the complex and often anthropocentric human meaning-making systems (Zapf, “Literary Ecology” 852), thus providing an imaginative space for repressed life energies to articulate themselves.

Another strand of literary ecology stems from the insight that, as Buell has put it, the “environmental crisis involves a crisis of the imagination,” and explores the ways in which nature is imagined and rendered in cultural media, aiming for, in the end, a re-articulation of “humanity’s relation to” the non-human world (Buell, *The Environmental Imagination* 2). Starting from his influential definition of what constitutes an “environmental text”, Lawrence Buell’s *The Environmental Imagination* initiated a literary ecology that sought to re-consider (canonical) texts in which nature “is present not only as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history” (7-8), thus re-claiming the “setting” of a literary text and the aesthetic mode of its presentation as well as its influence on the narrative as a focus of critical analysis. Accordingly, literary ecology has, in one form or another, always to do with the concept of space and place as the extra-diegetic and material base of the interaction between humans and their environment, studying the manifold ways in which meaning becomes ascribed to abstract space and how the experiential base of the place-world can affect environmental consciousness or behavior. This approach has been complemented by (eco-)cosmopolitan literary ecology, as expounded by, among others, Ursula Heise (2008) and Scott Slovic (2008), which underlines the need to re-align local conceptions of “place” with the “global” in order to come to terms with our current environmental crisis. Literary ecology, in sum, has so far developed along the lines of functional approaches grounded in post-structuralism and cultural anthropology as well as in the exploration of literary modes of place-making.

With its focus on human habitats and the cultural meditation of the environmental effects of urbanization processes, urban ecocriticism can be seen as being involved in these theoretical and thematic developments. Although ecocritics have long underlined the need to integrate urban systems into their research on a theoretical level, relatively few have devoted themselves to this topic, focusing on such concepts as “wilderness” or on pastoral landscapes seemingly untouched by human influence. It was only with the advent of studies like Michael Bennet’s and David W. Teague’s *In the Nature of Cities* or Lawrence Buell’s *Writing for an Endangered World* that the urban came into the field of vision of ecocritical scholars. Bennett and Teague pointed “to the self-limiting conceptualizations of nature, culture, and environment built into many ecocritical projects by their exclusion of urban spaces” and argued for the need to “remind city dwellers of our placement within ecosystems and the importance of this fact for urban life and culture” (Bennett and Teague 6). Similarly, Buell called for a shift of attention to “the interdependence between urban and outback landscape, and the traditions of imagining them” (*Writing for an Endangered World* 8). While this conceptualization of what one could call an urban literary ecology built, to a large extent,

on traditional models of urban analysis in literature and historiography—one only needs to think of Raymond Williams (1973) or William Cronon (1991)—recent studies have broadened the scope further, merging the established disciplines of urban ecology in the social and natural sciences as well as the “new materialisms” into the complex framework of a “cultural urban ecology” which seeks to trace the material fabrics of our urban worlds and their effects on the environment by analyzing their discursive renderings in contemporary culture (Schliephake, *Urban Ecologies*).

Karen E. Waldron and Rob Friedman (eds.), *Toward a Literary Ecology. Places and Spaces in American Literature*

Karen E. Waldron’s and Rob Friedman’s edited volume *Toward a Literary Ecology. Places and Spaces in American Literature* (2013) and Andrea Edl’s *Vom Ursprung ökokritischen Denkens zu einem kosmopolitanen Ansatz der urbanen Ökokritik* (2013) can be seen as situated in-between the two paradigms of literary ecology and urban ecocriticism/ecology as sketched out above, and they forge welcome links between both fields. Although I will, in the following, discuss both works individually, let me briefly discuss their shared characteristics and how these may help to enlarge the ecocritical debate. First of all, both studies lay emphasis on the theoretical notions of “space” and “place”, highlighting the importance of spatial representation in the act of imaging the environment. While this outlook is very much in line with traditional ecocriticism, their focus on human habitats and built environments is a timely addition to a debate that is still very much focused on “natural” landscapes and helps to reflect on the way in which concepts like “nature”, “country”, or “wilderness” are not only culturally mediated, but also constructed with the contrasting image of the “city” in mind. Finally, both books illustrate in a number of close readings how literary texts influence our spatial perceptions and mediate our experiences within an (urban) environment, showing how creative processes of the mind constantly interrelate with our (non-)human worlds.

Toward a Literary Ecology takes its starting point from a discussion of the relationship between literature and ecology – one of the guiding tropes of much ecocritical debate that seeks to bring literary criticism together with the science of ecology. What had once promised to be a mutual enrichment of the respective disciplines has been accompanied, as Waldron and Friedman point out, by a kind of arbitrariness with “the ‘eco’ in ‘ecocriticism’” being “a signal without a clear reference, let alone a clear articulation” (vii). That is why they opt for an approach that (a) studies “the interconnections not only between literature and the environment, but between those disciplinary perspectives that allow humans to comprehend places and environments,” underlining the connecting links with ecology by trying to reach a deeper understanding of “biotic relationships” and “the interconnections of knowledge, phenomena and representation” through the means of literary analysis; (b) takes “place, both natural and manufactured” as “integral to literary ecology,” since place as a category and as a material fact contains and combines human meaning-making

processes and non-human life forms in an intricate mix of interrelations—one that comes to the fore and can be analyzed in literary texts (viii); and (c) “delineate[s] literary ecology as a method applicable to all literature,” as opposed to earlier approaches that focused on specific genres such as nature writing, and that does so by choosing an explicitly interdisciplinary approach which integrates urban studies, cultural geography, and the social sciences in order to gain a new perspective on American literature and its interaction with spatial and imagined concepts of “place” and “nationhood” (ix).

Building on these three premises, the collected essays follow a decidedly “ecological” approach by situating the analyzed texts within their respective place-worlds. By showing how their examples come to undermine culturally constructed dichotomies like “city” and “country,” the authors not only question the anthropocentric outlook on the non-human world, but also sketch out the methodology for a literary ecology which recognizes literature not only as a medium that reflects on human-nature relationships, but that is implicit in social processes of “change and commentary” (ix). Both strands of “literary ecology” summed up in my introduction above are thus brought together in *Toward a Literary Ecology* and pave the way for a literary ecology that is concerned both with the concrete realities symbolized and reflected on in imaginative texts and with offering a functional approach to literary studies. This can already be seen in Waldron’s introduction to the volume which focuses on American literary realism and naturalism and shows how literary texts always already express a form of ecological thinking. Drawing on authors such as Sarah Orne Jewett, Stephen Crane, William Dean Howells, and Willa Cather, Waldron convincingly demonstrates that these writers recognized the complexity and diversity of their surroundings and considered “the natural or biotic and the social or cultural structures as interdependent” (xxii). As she further makes clear, literature was involved in the project of American nation building early on; yet, it would be wrong to misconstrue the relationship to its places merely as a portrayal of setting or a reflection of the human transformation of “nature.” Rather, “the nation’s nature and the nature of its places and spaces must be considered through multiple dimensions that weave its physical and social ecologies together” (xvii).

In focusing on the concept of “nation,” the essays take “America” as a focal point that illuminates how “place” and “environment” are always made up of processes that are both natural and social and that link imaginative and material worlds together in a complex symbolic universe that is expressed in literary texts. Rather than working with a narrow definition of “place,” the authors thus strive for “an *ecology* of place” (xix, emphasis in the original), i.e. an awareness of “the fact that no place or environment exists in isolation” (xxii). The place-based thinking that has been a characteristic of many approaches to literary ecology is thus brought together with a conception of interconnectivity that speaks of “place” not in the singular, but in the plural, and that brings literary form and aesthetics, social processes, nature, and science together in a way that “expose[s] the underlying affinities of scientific thinking and literary expression.” Against this background, all essays argue, in one way or another, “that all

modern American literature is illuminated by tensions between Enlightenment positivism and Romantic transcendentalism, between realism and romanticism, where the dialectics of the natural and human dwelling in places plays out in aesthetic terms” (xx). Literature, while it reflects on social developments and cultural discourses, can therefore, at the same time, transcend and undermine the frameworks posed by any scientific or cultural theory, expressing and testing inherent tensions and contradictions within a de-pragmatized discourse. Literary ecology is thus not so much concerned with exclusionary concepts or ideologies, but rather highlights openness and interrelations. It can be defined as “the illumination that reveals complex material, social, and biotic ecological interconnections” (xxii).

The different essays in *Toward a Literary Ecology* all follow this framework, while laying emphasis on various examples of place-based living and writing and different theoretical approaches – from bioregionalism to urban ecology and social systems theory – that help to underline the interconnected ecological praxis of imaginative texts and literary study. The three essays in the first section, “Ecological Identities,” start from an exploration of the specific sense of place of different authors, of how they ascribe meanings to the respective environments in which they live and of how, in turn, literature can influence our own spatial perception and our outlook on the non-human world. Taking the culturally mediated concept of “identity” helps to underline how place-based stories can generate a feeling of belonging to a specific environment, and how cultural and social processes of identity construction are bound up with spatial metaphors and a feeling that our respective environments have been shaped by a history of the interaction of anthropogenic and non-human agents (Schliephake, “Memory, Place, and Ecology”). This is true for Jill Gatlin’s take on “The Potential and Limitations of Interactivity in Gary Snyder’s Urban Literary Ecology,” which employs a bioregional framework in illustrating how Snyder’s city-poems reflect on the interactions between built and manufactured environments and the non-human world. Gatlin shows that the urban is a zone in which social institutions and non-human agents are enmeshed. In the same vein, but with a different set of examples, Susan Berry Brill de Ramírez’s essay “Geographies of Belonging in the Work of Native American Poets: Simon J. Ortiz, Sherman Alexie, and Kimberly Blaaser” investigates what the author calls “geographies of belonging” that tie communities to their respective habitats. She thereby explores how poetic language and world making can complement scientific endeavors to effect a change in environmental consciousness and how Native American poetry can elicit a sense of belonging to the land even for non-native readers. Josh A. Weinstein’s essay “Urban Ecology and Gary Snyder’s ‘Three Worlds, Three Realms, Six Roads’ and ‘Night Song of the Los Angeles Basin’” offers a close reading and a literary analysis of Snyder’s urban literary ecology which unearths the semantic and poetic structures that make up his concept of “deep inhabitation”—a concept that conceives of urban spaces “not as islands of human domination that stand apart from their surrounding ecosystems, but rather as constituent parts of the larger ecosystems in which they exist—interwoven and interconnected” (57).

Part Two of the edited volume, "Ecological Cityscapes," takes these ideas one step further by bringing literary ecology together with urban semiotics and postmodern conceptions of space. Eoin Cannon's essay "Semiotic Mapping in Urban Fiction as a Model of Literary Ecology: Walter Mosley's *Always Outnumbered, Always Outgunned*" takes its starting point from a historical analysis of anti-urban rhetoric and of the implication of "urban ecology" in the urban renewal policies of the mid-twentieth century. Misguided notions and assumptions about cities and urban communities have continued, Cannon argues, to negatively affect large, predominantly poor parts of cities that are seen as harbingers of pollution and disease. Accordingly, socio-spatial and semiotic approaches can be seen as a reaction to anti-urban discourse. By showing how the "urban" is itself a system made up of signs which follow an ecological principle in so far as they interconnect material, non-human and built environments and reflect on how they can be strategically re-aligned to produce more sustainable cityscapes, they challenge culturally mediated images and dichotomies between "country" and "city." The desire to think issues of urban politics and planning together with issues of environmental justice also informs Jessica Maucione's essay "Literary Ecology and the City: Re-Placing Los Angeles in Karen Tei Yamashita's *The Tropic of Orange*." Maucione takes literature as a central cultural text which can incite a change of perspective on both social and ecological problems and shows how both interrelate. Drawing on Frederic Jameson and cultural studies, Maucione diagnoses an increasing "alienation" and un-rootedness of urban dwellers which coincides with an ecologically instable urban landscape based on globalized sameness and conformity. Maucione thus re-claims literature as a force of resistance that articulates ways of place-based living, of creativity, and of heterogeneity in order to revise a city and its communities.

The chapters of the third section, "Ecological Rhetoric," take the broadest perspective, since they do not put emphasis on a specific place or spatial concept, but rather re-visit the notion of "ecology" with the help of a different set of examples that help to illustrate the all-encompassing agenda of a "literary ecology." Laura Sayre's "Apocalyptic? No, Georgic!: Literary Agroecology from Virgil to *Silent Spring*" uses a comparative approach by tracing the connecting narrative patterns and symbols between Virgil's description of a plague and Rachel Carson's apocalyptic vision of technological disaster that opens her seminal work, showing how catastrophes have been rendered and made sense of over the centuries. Ella Soper's essay "Toxic Testimony in Terry Tempest Williams's *Refuge* and Chip Ward's *Canaries on the Rim*" proposes the concept of the "feminist ecobiographical testimony" so as to trace how it combines autobiography and feminist activism in its conceptualization of the place-body relationship and the personal call to action within a meaningful environment. Debarati Bandyopadhyay's "Exploring Literary Ecology of Place in 'New' Nature Writing" uses the concept of the "new" nature writing to investigate how ecological notions and awareness continue to alter a literary tradition and its rhetoric and how, in turn, literature constantly articulates renewed connections with and images of the non-human place-world. While these three essays trace the inter-dependency of personal activism and

ethics, literary meaning-making and ecological knowledge, the last essay of the volume, Rob Friedman's "Metaphors of Measurement: Indirection and the Sublime" once more bridges the dividing gap between literary and scientific ecology, taking the concept of "measurement" as a metaphor and as a practice that illustrates how scientific knowledge and literary aesthetics can complement each other in their respective project of studying the non-human world. "Metaphor" thereby functions as a mode of articulation that both gives shape to things that cannot be articulated within any specific disciplinary framework and allows for an experience of the "sublime." Emotion is thus attributed its own epistemological dimension, one that transcends common measures of the subjective and the objective and that highlights the heuristic value of openness and interconnectivity.

In sum, *Toward a Literary Ecology* is a major step into a new direction of ecocritical literary studies that both draws on established theoretical notions and frameworks and tests the disciplinary boundaries of the field. In conceptualizing the dearly-held notions of "space" and "place" not as isolated terms, attached to a specific locale, the emphasis on the interconnected nature of the place-world not only offers new ways of thinking about how places are connected to each other, but also how natural, cultural, social and scientific processes constantly interact to make and re-make the landscapes in which we live. Rather than opting for a crude naturalization of cultural processes, the focus on the human places in "nature" like, for instance, on urban environments, allows for an interdisciplinary outlook that merges natural and social ecology into a complex framework. The literary ecology proposed in the edited volume is a stark reminder of a fact easily forgotten when talking about the non-human world, namely that the interrelationship between humankind and "nature" necessarily has to be culturally mediated—and that literature is a vital force within our cultural frameworks that can both reflect on humanity's situatedness within a meaningful environment and that can test alternative worlds.

Andrea Edl, *Vom Ursprung ökokritischen Denkens zu einem kosmopolitanen Ansatz der urbanen Ökokritik*

Andrea Edl's monograph study *Vom Ursprung ökokritischen Denkens zu einem kosmopolitanen Ansatz der urbanen Ökokritik—Ort und Raum von der amerikanischen Wildnis bis zur urbanen Dystopie* (*From the Origins of Ecocritical Thinking to a Cosmopolitan Approach of Urban Ecocriticism—Space and Place from the American Wilderness to the Urban Dystopia*) is also an example of a recent approach to literary ecology that, like Waldron's and Friedman's edited volume, makes use of a broad theoretical perspective and puts its focus on allegedly human-dominated landscapes like the urban environment in order to show how natural and cultural processes constantly interact and determine our living conditions on a global scale. Edl presents a broad overview of the development of ecocriticism in America and traces manifold culture-historical approaches to and reflections on the traditions of imagining the American

landscape—from the wilderness of the great West to the urban jungles of the postmodern era. She opts for an approach to literary texts that reads them against their respective cultural contexts and that draws on the notions of “space” and “place” in order to examine how authors at different times have thought about the human relation to the non-human world. By focusing on anthropogenic environments like the city, Edl incorporates a decidedly interdisciplinary framework into her study that brings urban ecocriticism together with cosmopolitan approaches, as well as with ecocentric philosophers like Albert Schweitzer who call for a change of our outlook on our habitats. From such a perspective, the dystopian or apocalyptic bent of many environmentalist projects appears as the cultural diagnosis of an imbalance with the natural world which leads to an awareness of ecological crisis. Only by changing our anthropocentric outlook on the Earth, Edl argues, can we reverse this trend and become truly ecocentric beings, in harmony with our surroundings. Although Edl manages, for the most part, to show what part literature can play in this ecological project, her overly emphatic reception of spiritualist and metaphysical philosophy sometimes puts her in danger of losing sight of her initial project, as well as of neglecting the material processes which shape and re-shape our (urban) environments.

The first chapter of her study, which is a revised version of her dissertation, provides a short introduction to the field of ecocriticism which she tries to open up for German literary scholars (Edl translates ecocriticism as “Ökokritik”—a term that has indeed been used in different contexts, but which harbors connotations that are not found in the English term. One wishes she had stuck to the original form.) Although ecocriticism has long taken roots amongst German literary critics with a focus on Anglophone literatures and amongst European scholars more broadly (important German contributions to literary ecology, like the “cultural ecology” of Hubert Zapf, are surprisingly left out of the study), Edl’s remarks offer a good overview over the development of the field—from William Rueckert’s early formulization of the term to recent trends like ecofeminism and bioregionalism. Edl focuses on the interconnected approach that she sees as a defining characteristic of ecological thinking and as a connecting link between the different strands of ecocriticism. This is not problematic in so far as the heterogeneous character of the field as such is underlined, yet Edl’s study has the tendency to over-generalize (e.g., by speaking of ecocriticism and ecocritics in a monolithic singular: “die Ökokritik” or “ÖkokritikerInnen”, 328) and to formulate grandiose, somewhat simplistic assertions (e.g., “die All-Verbundenheit des Seins [stellt] das zentrale ökokritische Theorem dar [...]” [“the all-connectedness of being is the central ecocritical theorem”]; 11, my translation) with which many ecocritics might beg to differ.

The second chapter begins with a self-reflexive reminder that ecocritics should be aware of their own worldview, since their outlook on the world is necessarily grounded in a specific cultural context and comes from a specific point in time. Since this outlook has to be mediated through language, it, too, is a limited interpretation of reality. Ecocriticism itself must be viewed as a historical phenomenon. Drawing on the

ecocentric philosophy of Albert Schweitzer, she separates this “Weltanschauung” (“worldview”) from a “Lebensanschauung” (“view of life”) in which “reason” replaces mere cognition and life itself becomes the guiding principle of action (52). Although integrating Schweitzer’s philosophy into ecocriticism is a new approach, Edl’s claim that it is only through a mystical understanding of the self and the world that the boundaries of language and knowledge can be transcended and an “all-connectedness of being” (55-56) can be attained seems an all too simple solution to these epistemological, ontological, and, in the end, ethical problems—after all, mysticism, too, is a cultural construct. The remainder of the chapter offers a comprehensive overview over culture-historical developments and movements that have become involved in the project of nation-building and the theoretical formulation of ecocriticism alike. Edl traces the concepts of “anthropocentrism” (which she sees as a heritage of Christian-Puritan thinking), “ecocentrism” (which she attributes to American-Indian concepts of the world), and “transcendentalism” (which she perceives as the pivotal American philosophical framework that influenced ecocriticism and gave shape to an elemental variant of ecocentrism) and illustrates how they continue to influence our contemporary outlook on the environment. Drawing on American transcendentalist thinkers like Emerson and Thoreau, she investigates early proponents of literary ecology and makes clear that it is only through non-anthropocentric thinking and a conceptualization of the world as an interconnected space that the recent ecological crisis can be challenged. Her remarks help illustrate that literary ecology is not only a way of reading and textual analysis, but also a highly subjective and personal undertaking, where cultural contexts and ethical standpoints play an important role.

Building on these theoretical reflections and historical analysis, Edl then turns towards the urban as a realm where “nature” and culture meet, and as a space that has so far been underrepresented in ecocritical analysis. In order to grasp the heterogeneous and multi-dimensional character of the urban, she conceptualizes the city metaphorically as a “complex organism” (146) which calls for a more encompassing understanding of “environment” that has to take account of both human-made and natural aspects. Drawing on urban studies, Edl shows how an urban ecocriticism can extend its own perspective—an argument that she pursues in her call for a cosmopolitan take on contemporary urbanity. Rather than pursuing a local/global dichotomy, both aspects have to be thought together in order to grasp the urban situatedness in place and the global networks that connect urban localities to global economic developments. Edl illustrates her claim with an analysis of Gary Snyder’s “bioregional cosmopolitanism” (148) which weaves both aspects together in the imaginative space of his literary ecology. This is a welcome addition to the analysis of Snyder’s urban ecology put forth in *Toward a Literary Ecology*, as discussed above, and can indeed complement approaches that focus on the local aspects of cities. It is the best but, alas, also the shortest part of Edl’s monograph could have benefitted from more examples. And although her argument is not entirely new—both Heise (2008) and Harvey (2009) have combined bioregionalism and cosmopolitanism in the analysis of the global interconnections of the

place-world—it points in new directions for ecocritical studies. Recently, I have also drawn on Heise, as well as on Harvey’s work on “world cities” and the linkage between local slum ecologies and global urban politics to illustrate how local environmental injustices are rooted in global economic networks—an argument that is explored with the analysis of contemporary non-fictional urban writings in my own monograph (Schliephake, *Urban Ecologies*).

Chapter four offers a theoretical discussion of the terms “space” and “place” which Edl sees as integral tools for an urban ecocritical analysis, since individual literary works are perceived as place-bound in so far as they take their ethical viewpoint and their outlook on the world from the socio-cultural and environmental contexts from which they originate. Edl discusses the concept of the “map” in order to show how subjective knowledge and perception of a place can complement or contradict seemingly objective and factual “maps” drawn by scientists or urban planners. Her remarks echo the classic view of scholars like de Certeau (1988) or Edward Soja (1989) (who is not named in her study) and prepare for her comparative analysis of the urban writing of Swiss author Hugo Loetscher and Gary Snyder. In the latter, Edl shows the extent to which the authors’ respective “sense of place” is also rooted in urban environments and in how far urban writings, too, can be seen as “environmental literature.” Both writers perceive natural or non-human forms of life and presence as integral to postmodern urbanity. Their writings bridge cognitive knowledge and sensual perception (again, the concept of “mysticism” looms large in Edl’s analysis) and use literary representation so as to make room for a new outlook on the world.

The final part of the book deals with the urban dystopia as found in Paul Auster’s novel *In the Country of Last Things* (1987). After an overview of the author’s biography and a prolonged discussion of the concept of “dystopia,” Edl offers a persuasive analysis of Auster’s novel and illustrates how its dystopian vision can inspire reflection on socio-environmental changes and alternatives on the part of the reader. Rather than perceiving dystopian narratives as a somber outlook on humanity’s future, Edl thus sees the genre as a mode of literary ecology that harbors critical potential with regard to our present environmental crisis. Auster’s novel depicts a post-apocalyptic urban world in which dysfunctional human systems find their expression in an imbalanced material environment. That the protagonist is able to retain her own humanity within a repressive environment is proof that the “inner” landscapes of the mind are every bit as important as the outside world, and that a change in outlook on the world and on life can have positive effects on the interaction with the surrounding environment. Literature, Edl makes clear, is a medium which explicitly addresses the interrelation of personal thinking, ethics and environmental conditions, and which therefore can bring about such a change.

Coda and Outlook

That the two books discussed in this essay have been published roughly contemporaneously is notable in itself, as it would seem to indicate that the fields of literary and urban ecology are finally attaining critical mass. While they elaborate on classical ecocritical notions of “space” and “place,” they also signal new directions for future work. There are complex reasons for the expansion of both literary and urban ecology at the present time. For one, the humanities increasingly have to face the challenge of positioning themselves in a competitive academic environment in which issues of relevance, access, applicability and economic benefit loom large. In this context, the advent of climate change and of the ecological crisis has become a subject of inquiry that promises new interdisciplinary connections between the humanities and the sciences and that demands, as both studies show, a thinking based on interdisciplinarity and synergy. While the solution to environmental issues is tied to scientific knowledge, economic frameworks and pragmatic technological developments, creativity, symbolic world-making and poetological forms of inquiry are likewise involved. Rather than merely being based on material processes of the world, the environmental crisis is also a cultural narrative in which not only cognitive, but also emotional and intuitive modes of knowledge production play a vital role. *Toward a Literary Ecology* and *Vom Ursprung ökokritischen Denkens zu einem kosmopolitanen Ansatz der urbanen Ökokritik* both attest to the ways in which literature can itself be seen as a mode of ecological thinking, where disciplinary gaps are transcended and alternative visions of living with and in an environment that encompasses both the human and the non-human can be explored. In bringing narrative and imaginative world-making together with the concrete realities of the social and natural world, literary ecology illustrates how the material processes of the world and of the mind are interrelated and how literature and literary studies can become involved in changing and challenging our contemporary relationship to the environment.

Secondly, urbanization has to be seen as one of the central arenas in which environmental issues of the 21st century—the first truly urban century in the history of humankind—will be played out. For although cities make up only 2% of the Earth’s surface, they now account for more than 50% of the world’s population. By 2050, the urban population will have doubled with more than 6 billion living in cities (cf. the UN’s 2014 revision of the World Urbanization Prospects <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/>). This growing urbanization has significant environmental implications, from the production of waste, sewage, and greenhouse gases to the logistic challenge of providing city dwellers with food and water. Both studies identify the urban as a sphere where environmental questions loom large and show that it is time for ecocritics to shift their focus to the places where natural and human-built environments are interrelated. The urban, they make clear, must be thought of as a spatial and social arena in which environmental problems are both produced and intricately felt. Rather than being a solely human-dominated realm, however, it is a hybrid and highly heterogeneous space, in which

human social systems and non-human life forms meet and merge. This helps to challenge and to problematize an anthropocentric outlook on the world, as well as to show that “sense of place” is a highly complex phenomenon in which social, scientific, natural, and cultural processes interact. This approach has recently been complemented by an urban ecology that links urban culture with non-human material processes and investigates both within the framework of environmental justice (Schliephake, *Urban Ecologies*). What unites these studies is a move away from “pristine nature” to the places in which the great percentage of humankind actually lives. They are part of a larger, common project to re-map the boundaries of ecocriticism. Along with other recent trends in the field, like Morton’s “ecology without nature” (2007) or Iovino’s and Oppermann’s “Material Ecocriticism” (2014), this is not only a move away from “nature writing” or “nature,” but also a move towards the liminal spaces where “culture” and “environment,” “mind” and “matter,” “representation” and “meaning” converge and where they remake our storied worlds.

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