

## The Rhizomatic Trajectory of Ecocriticism<sup>1</sup>

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With a wide range of authors, and academic voices from around the world, ecocriticism today has taken a multicultural-transnational stance.<sup>2</sup> This is a signpost for the third wave of its disciplinary development, in the wake of which we are witnessing a significant expansion of its scope in terms of subject matter, approach and epistemological position, ranging across diverse topics and disciplinary fields. The entry of new transnational perspectives and interpretive methods into the ecocritical field has initiated a multi-directional trajectory and initiated a debate about where ecocriticism is heading. The present ecocritical activity is either acknowledged as a healthy development, or criticized as the field's weakness, pointing to what I have previously called an 'ambivalent openness' (Oppermann 2006), and thus to the need to redraw its boundaries.<sup>3</sup> Ecocritics' engagement with the major issues of Cultural Studies (alterity, race, gender, ethnicity, class, and identity), and of Postcolonial Studies (the global systems of hegemonic power, the operations of imperialist systems of political, economic and cultural domination, and the globalization of social injustice), and also their deepening engagement with the Environmental Justice movement point to a willingness to proceed on several fronts. Many of these issues are studied in relation to the growing impact of climate change, the disruption of local ecosystems, and other environmental insecurities. Involvement with cultural processes has produced various different ecocriticisms, including postcolonial ecocriticism, environmental justice ecocriticism, and urban ecocriticism.

These new entryways into ecocriticism suggest that our story is tangled up with the story of the planet and its non-human life, perhaps more so today than it has ever been before. Ecocriticism's biggest achievement has arguably been its global cognitive mapping of the

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<sup>1</sup> Some ideas in this paper were used in my keynote speech ('Ecocritical Encounters with Postmodernism: New Directions') at the International Conference on "Ecological Literature and Environmental Education: Asian Forum for Cross-Cultural Dialogues." August 14-21, 2009, Peking University, China.

<sup>2</sup> See Joni Adamson and Scott Slovic's "Introduction" to the 2009 special issue of MELUS; the essays in *Coming into Contact: Explorations in Ecocritical Theory and Practice* (Ingram), and in *Nature in Literary and Cultural Studies* (Gersdorf and Mayer)

<sup>3</sup> See Hayashi; Gifford; Phillips, and Estok.

environmental space for more responsible engagement, which today includes, in Adamson and Slovic's words, "a diversity of voices' contributing to the understanding of the human relationship to the planet, both within the United States and throughout the world" (6). While arguing that scholars associated with ecocriticism's second wave of development made this happen (7), Adamson and Slovic bring to notice a third wave of ecocriticism, which "explores all facets of human experience from an environmental viewpoint" (7) Since the ecocritical move to the new areas providing environmental conceptualizations of socio-cultural processes demands the adoption of new methods, ecocriticism inevitably incorporates diverse theoretical approaches drawn from cultural, literary, as well as science studies. Its trajectory of multiple directions presents a major challenge, namely methodological and theoretical uncertainty. Ecocritics such as Terry Gifford have interpreted ecocriticism's pluralistic framework as a fundamental weakness, because it implies the lack of a distinct ecocritical methodology.

In his "Recent Critiques of Ecocriticism" Gifford states that "the absence of methodology provides the reason for a lack of radical internal debate" (15). He sees the problem ecocriticism faces today in its lack of "fundamental theoretical tenets" (15), and argues for the necessity of developing a clear methodology. Likewise, Dana Phillips writes accusingly that ecocritics' reluctance to engage with theory puts them "in the philosophical and theoretical minority [...] and can make their arguments seem less than persuasive if not altogether passé" (38). These contentions are valid enough. The problem, however, lies not in any lack of methodology, as Gifford sees it, or in any lack of theoretical engagement, as Phillips complains, but in ecocriticism's methodological and theoretical plurality. The difficulty of theorizing the multiple directions and categorizations of ecocriticism is inseparable from the question of how to read ecocriticism's trajectory.

In answering this question, I can suggest that if the various developments in ecocriticism are unified neither by a common object nor by a single theoretical language, they can, however, still be viewed as participating in a shared intellectual attitude, albeit to different degrees. This attitude is characteristic of postmodern discourses, and finds its best expression in the concept of the rhizome which Deleuze and Guattari formulated in their *A Thousand Plateaus*. To challenge the arborescent model of thought that privileges hierarchical principles and excludes difference and plurality, they proposed a rhizomatic model which breaks down dichotomies by "pluralizing and disseminating, producing differences and multiplicities, making new connections" (Best and Kellner 99). This model provides the best explanation for the current multiple trajectory of ecocriticism.

Ecocriticism's development is neither arbitrary nor ambivalently open, but rhizomatic in nature, in the way it disseminates across diverse intellectual trends. The metaphor of the rhizome opens up a new cultural and literary space for theorizing the developments in ecocriticism as a multi-faceted discursive formation, allowing its polyphonic nature to be seen not as a manifestation of a disciplinary crisis, but as a cultivated kind of rhizomatic activity.

Deleuze and Guattari state that “[a] rhizome as a subterranean stem is absolutely different from roots and radicals. Bulbs and tubers are rhizomes” (*Plateaus* 16). In botany, a rhizome is the main, fleshy stem of a plant that grows underground horizontally, and sends out roots from the bottom of its nodes and shoots from the top of its nodes. As a network of multiple threads, the rhizome has interconnected living fibres without any central unit. Plants with underground rhizomes are defined as multiplicities. Deleuze and Guattari note that the rhizome “assumes diverse forms, from ramified surface extension in all directions to concretion into bulbs and tubers” (*Plateaus* 7). More importantly, the rhizome “is composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion” (*Plateaus* 21). As such the rhizomic process challenges any centralizations and hierarchical orientations, because “the rhizome is an acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without a General and without an organizing memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states”. It “operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots” (*Plateaus* 21). Moreover, “the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance.” (*Plateaus* 25).

If we view ecocriticism as a rhizomic discursive formation, we can understand that its move in multiple directions as an engagement in the manifold complexity of interdisciplinary relationships. As Deleuze and Guattari observe, “one of the most important characteristics of the rhizome is that it always has multiple entryways” (*Plateaus* 12). What other metaphor could better explain the many pathways we witness in ecocriticism in its third wave of development? What is most compelling about this image is the fact that the rhizome is also an exemplary metaphor for the non-hierarchical mode of postmodern thought that privileges difference and multiplicity and thus defies totalizations in any form. It constitutes a perfect model for postmodernism’s divergent semiotic systems and conceptual schemes. Similarly, the rhizomatic paradigm defines the multifaceted nature of ecocriticism, making it a manifestly postmodern field. Deleuze and Guattari’s listing of the rhizome’s characteristics, which include principles of connection, heterogeneity, multiplicity, and asignifying rupture (*Plateaus* 7-9) can easily be applied to ecocritical activity today. Ecocriticism draws its strength from diversity, multiplicity, and heterogeneity, and to continue the list of

postmodern traits, also from plurality, situatedness, contextuality, and subversion of unitary categorizations and master narratives. Behind each of these strategies is an attempt to show that there is no monolithic representation of the world. Hence the third wave points to the postmodern turn in ecocriticism. With its contextually and relationally established meanings, ecocriticism's pluralistic framework and rhizomatic trajectory draw attention to the postmodernization of the field. Therefore I will call the third wave postmodern ecocriticism,<sup>4</sup> as the field consistently interacts with many disciplinary domains and collapses boundaries between areas of academic study.

Postmodern ecocriticism is, one can say, to quote Deleuze and Guattari, “a collective assemblage” (*Plateaus* 85). Gilles Deleuze has stated in an interview that “[w]herever we leave the domain of multiplicities, we once again fall into dualisms” (“Dualisms” 95). Postmodern ecocriticism in this sense is perhaps the only literary/cultural/critical movement that has adopted this perspective with the aim of ecologizing the diverse discourses it operates in. By being polycentric it stands out as an exemplary rhizomic discourse that can create symmetries in spite of differences. In taking this stance ecocriticism also shares one of the key insights of postmodernism: thinking through both/and approach, rather than in binary terms. This is a necessity if the challenges of ecological crisis are to be met. Postmodern ecocriticism is capable of remodeling and modifying the multipolar horizons of contemporary thought to constitute a new cognitive paradigm. It encourages a praxis that embraces diversity and holism without subsuming either term to the other. This is the direction ecocriticism is taking, an engagement in what Guattari calls “processes of *heterogenesis*,” a term he uses to signify “a becoming that is always in the process of adapting, transforming and modifying itself in relation to its environment” (95).

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<sup>4</sup> The term 'postmodern ecocriticism' was first used by Paul Wapner, professor of international relations and environmental politics, “as a shorthand reference to postmodern orientations toward nature” (169).

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