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Justyna Kostkowska, *Ecocriticism and Women Writers. Environmentalist Poetics of Virginia Woolf, Jeanette Winterson, and Ali Smith* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 189 pp.



With *Ecocriticism and Women Writers*, Justyna Kostkowska makes a significant contribution to the (ecocritical) study of Virginia Woolf, Jeanette Winterson and Ali Smith. Moreover, she extends the field itself by demonstrating the application of ecocriticism to experimental novels. Her premise is an intriguing and welcome interpretation of ecocriticism: as she states in her introduction, “nonhuman presence does not need to predominate in a text to be effective for the ecological ‘cause’: on the contrary, it is often more conspicuous when occurring briefly, sharply asserting itself within the human context” (3). In discussing the ways in which literary form may bring across ecological-political concerns, the book also adds to Environmental Humanities scholarship and its search for narratives more applicable to environmental crisis.

Kostkowska devotes three chapters to Woolf, Winterson and Smith each, in which she combines formal literary aspects and ecological dimensions. In the chapters on Woolf, she argues that Woolf’s narrative method, and especially her use of stream of consciousness, is “inherently ecological, as it deconstructs the boundary between the outside and the characters’ mind” (15). Kostkowska convincingly foregrounds the development between “Kew Gardens” and *Jacob’s Room* by showing how the decentralization of the traditionally masculine omniscient narrator leads to the “anti-anthropocentric multicentrism” (28) of *Jacob’s Room*. The discussion of Woolf’s ecological imagination continues in her reading of *Mrs. Dalloway* as “a dialogic, polyphonic, and therefore ecological text” (33). In the subsequent chapter on *The Waves*, Kostkowska again identifies Woolf’s narrative method as environmental because “it models individuals engaging in a relationship with the ‘you’ of the rest of the world, sometimes even achieving a shared ‘we’” (50). She pays particular attention to the use of similes and metaphors, which show the inseparability of the human and the nonhuman. Descriptions such as that of Percival—“flowering with green leaves”—and Susan—“I am the trees, mine are the flocks of birds”—result in, as Kostkowska notes, the unity that Woolf aimed to achieve when she planned the book: “not merely the human, but the human as one with the rest of the world” (52).

From Virginia Woolf, *Ecocriticism and Women Writers* moves on to the novels of Jeanette Winterson. Again Kostkowska’s focus is on the ways in which literary form expresses multiplicity and ecological coexistence. In her discussion of *Written on the Body*, Kostkowska pays especial attention to the potential that the novel has to affect the reader. By undermining gender roles, *Written on the Body* “teaches us to see Others as equals” (61). What’s more, the space that is opened up by the experimental nature of the

novel requires the reader to continuously re-examine how they should respond to the text, resulting in potential change in attitudes and behaviour. Kostkowska's discussion of Winterson's work continues with an exploration of *The Powerbook* in chapter 5 and *Lighthousekeeping* in chapter 6. She argues that in the highly experimental novel *The Powerbook*, form and content work together to promote the "ecological values of multiplicity and coexistence" (72). The postmodern fragmentation that characterizes the work is consequently a vital aspect of encouraging "the attitude of seeking relationships between systemic elements that seem unlike each other and existing in isolation" (90). Finally, *Lighthousekeeping*, Kostkowska argues, is characteristic of Winterson's eco-poetic project, not only because it exemplifies ecological abundance by means of formal excess, but also because it demonstrates "the idea that multiple and interlaced stories create a record of many worlds and lives interacting and evolving" (99).

The final third of *Ecocriticism and Women Writers* consists of readings of Ali Smith's writings. Set in and around a hotel, *Hotel World* according to Kostkowska displays a "communal aspect" which holds an ecological dimension. Kostkowska shows that Smith's project is similar to Woolf's, as both aim to bridge the gap between language and reality, "to reestablish connections between our isolated linguistic selves, and between ourselves and the environment around us" (115). Smith's novel *Like* invites a reading in terms of Timothy Morton's concept of the ecological thought, as Kostkowska demonstrates. The novel causes its readers to experience "the difference between easy gratification and real satisfaction, the discomfort of the process in which we are compelled to engage, and the ultimate 'bewilderment'" (142-43). Like Morton's strange strangers, the novel shows that "[i]ntimacy with the stranger is the only viable direction, its result the bewilderment and 're-skinning' into which Smith engages us" (143). A similar effect is achieved in Smith's short fiction which, Kostkowska argues, model "ecological relationships within an environmental ecosystem" consisting of a diverse world system (163).

One of the book's major strengths is the boldness with which Kostkowska strikes out into ecocritically novel territory and explores highly experimental texts. Kostkowska's reading of Woolf's "play-poem" novel *The Waves* is an excellent example of the way in which she takes on the challenge that experimental texts pose to (ecocritical) scholars. Another example is her reading of magic realism, which, she argues, "functions as an eco-poetic device that challenges a single and hierarchically ordered worldview and encourages such attitudes as multicentrism and equal treatment of all beings" (96).

The link between literature—especially literary form—and ecological concepts is foundational to Kostkowska's argument. As she writes in her introduction, *Ecocriticism and Women Writers* focuses on "how texts as discursive environments can constitute models for a symbiotic rather than ecologically competitive coexistence, where cooperation replaces hierarchy and value dualisms" (6). While this is an established feature of ecocriticism, the direction in which she takes it is certainly new and exciting. Much of the book's potential lies in her exploration of experimental literature, so often ignored by ecocriticism, and a reading of texts as ecosystems. Following Lawrence Buell and others, Kostkowska too argues that genres and texts

function as ecosystems—both in being discursive environments as well as, to quote Buell, in reproducing “sociohistorical environments” in stylized form (qtd. on 144). Her utilization of the connection between form and physical environments places Kostkowska’s work in a tradition that goes back to ecocriticism’s roots, including Joseph Meeker’s work on genre and, more recently, Timothy Morton’s notion of “ambient poetics.”

Kostkowska’s analysis of Smith’s short stories provides a particularly good example of her method: “Smith’s short stories model ecological relationships within an environmental ecosystem. They challenge the single, anthropocentric perspective and portray a diverse world system, peopled with multiple human and nonhuman subjects defying objectification, and bound by a network of relationships within one environment” (163). However, as well as providing a particularly apt example of how literary form and physical environment can be thought together, this analysis also shows the potential limitations of Kostkowska’s approach. Indeed, the relation between experimental novels and ecology that is one of the interesting points and potential strengths of the book, may also be its weakness.

Much of Kostkowska’s analysis rests on the assumption that, as she argues, (experimental) texts are *necessarily* ecological. Although she frequently repeats this argument, the link with environmentalism Kostkowska stipulates is not convincing *per se*: “Any narrative that attempts to destabilize hegemonic patterns of thought and expression is inherently an environmentalist narrative—leading to progressive transformation of reality through the very way we talk about it” (164). The potential weakness of her approach becomes especially apparent in her discussion of metafiction. Kostkowska argues that “[a] text that calls attention to the outside context encourages an ecologically sound practice of looking outside of one’s individual reality to other beings and their worlds; it promotes an ethics of symbiotic respect and consideration” (121). Not only is metafiction traditionally not understood as pointing to the environment outside of the text—rather, it tends to emphasize the textuality of the text—how readers interpret metafiction is also highly subjective, and certainly not necessarily environmentalist.

Moreover, by drawing connections between literature and ecology, she occasionally falls prey to the risks sketched by Dana Phillips in his critique of ecocriticism. Kostkowska’s argument that *Lighthousekeeping’s* “heterogeneous form” models “the natural economy of abundance” (91) can indeed be read as a problematic reading of literature in terms of ecology. Even though she rarely uses the term, a sense of ecological holism pervades her readings. At the same time, holism has come to be seen as a highly problematic—even unfeasible—ecological concept, as for example Daniel Botkin has argued. This aspect, of course, also places *Ecocriticism and Women Writers* in an ecocritical tradition. It is this same tradition that has often, as Heather Houser has proposed, equated harmoniousness with aestheticism. In other words, we like to see literary harmony—even in experimental texts—as well as harmony in nature because it is aesthetically appealing.

However, despite these potential shortcomings, *Ecocriticism and Women Writers* presents a timely and interesting reading of three female authors whose work—with the exception of Woolf—has barely been explored ecocritically. Indeed, Kostkowska's contribution may reach beyond scholarship of Woolf, Winterson and Smith, to demonstrate the ways in which any experimental novel can also be explored ecocritically. Above all, her book continues the ecocritical trend of analyzing works that do not take nature as their obvious primary subject, and as such breaks new and productive ground.

### Works Cited

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