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Ecological form: system and aesthetics in the age of empire

edited by Nathan K. Hensley and Philip Steer, New York, Fordham UP, 2019, 261 pp., \$35.00 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-8232-8211-1

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BOOK REVIEW

Ecological form: system and aesthetics in the age of empire, edited by Nathan K. Hensley and Philip Steer, New York, Fordham UP, 2019, 261 pp., \$35.00 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-8232-8211-1

Ecological Form convenes many exciting voices in a powerful demonstration of approaches now animating nineteenth-century ecocriticism. Yet this luminous collection, scrupulously edited and beautifully produced, is less invested in cordoning off another subfield than in challenging us to steep Victorian scholarship and pedagogy whole cloth with the concepts and concerns of ecological thinking understood in resolutely global terms.

Nathan K. Hensley and Philip Steer parcel their editorial contributions into a bracing introduction, “Ecological Formalism,” and a stunning essay, “Signatures of the Carboniferous.” The first thinks forward from nineteenth-century industrial capitalism, that “continent-clearing attack on nature at world scale” (1), to recast literary-cultural objects by the dim lights of our environmental crisis. The second, nothing less than a manifesto, reasons backward to trace the Anthropocene’s material substrates and imperial strata across the Victorian globe. Boldly revising cultural analysis to include energy infrastructure as an explanatory tool, Hensley and Steer detect the “literary forms of coal” from Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford* and *North and South* to Joseph Conrad’s *Nostromo*, setting the collection’s tone along with its theoretical architecture, spatiotemporal sweep, formal sensitivity, and alertness to all manner of “geophysical treasure” (74). While the editors discern the soot indirectly dusting every nineteenth-century artifact, Karen Pinkus’s sobering afterword tackles a more direct carboniferous signature – Jules Verne’s excursus on coal geology in *Les indes noires* (*The Black Indies*: coalmines) – and reflects on how we encounter the past in a present “unable to unknow” (247) the consequences of burning fossil fuels. (I write in the summer when Verne’s *patrie* set a scalding temperature record, 114.6 °F, surely not its last.)

The essays match the sophisticated aspirations of these framing materials. Centered on the British Isles, an excellent trifecta considers the putative limits of novelistic realism for ecological representation, starting with Elizabeth Carolyn Miller’s absorbing account of *The Mill on the Floss*. Miller argues that the familiar “dual temporalities” (85) of George Eliot’s novel flag the Victorian transition between energy regimes and ensuing modes of catastrophe, from water (seasonally variable, episodically disastrous) to steam (stably predictable, enduringly destructive). In a similarly bifurcated reading of *Dombey and Son*, Adam Grener posits two modes whereby Charles Dickens maps “narratively invisible regions of empire” (128) and conjures “systemic interconnection” (132). The novel brings imperial domains into (partial) visibility through wave and weather, sea and sky, metonymy and “precipitation” – Grener’s imaginative term for how the text at once materializes distance and marks representational obliquities attendant on bridging the particular and the planetary. Such vast spatiotemporal concerns are conjoined in Aaron Rosenberg’s accomplished reading of Thomas Hardy’s “scale effects.” Rosenberg demonstrates how in straining to reconcile mundane human existences with cosmic space (*Two on a Tower*) and geological time (*A Pair of Blue Eyes*), Hardy engages in narrative distortions that tilt realism towards romance and melodrama, “extend [ing] the novel’s range of sympathy to subjects far beyond the human” (184).

Still in Britain but maintaining this expansive remit, Jesse Oak Taylor reworks Alfred Tennyson’s well-known investments in geological and evolutionary tropes. Taylor’s ingenious reading declares *In Memoriam* an elegy not only for the nonhuman extirpated by humanity’s

burgeoning geophysical agency, but also for a conception of our species as “other-than-Anthropos” (57). To read Tennyson’s poem now is to reckon with the Victorians’ “ecological uncanny” (42) and to reimagine for ourselves “the work of elegy in an age of mass extinction” (45). Likewise shuttling between past and present, perhaps in a more optimistic key, Deanna K. Kreisel finds in John Ruskin’s work a prehistory of sustainability discourse (and its constitutive tensions). Her eloquent exposition focuses, unexpectedly, on *The Ethics of the Dust*, examining Ruskin’s capacious ascription of vitality to organic forms and inorganic matter, and of value to natural, economic, and aesthetic domains. In a Ruskinian key, Benjamin Morgan’s essay offers a formidable theorization of the stakes of utopia qua ecological genre, bridging metropole and margin with an analysis of William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* and Samuel Butler’s *Erewhon* – the latter also addressed in Teresa Shewry’s interesting take on satire in the literature of colonial New Zealand. Routing Morris and Butler via “discourses of settler colonialism, evolutionary theory, and transnational socialism” (141), Morgan unpacks their shared commitment to envisioning multiscalar interactions of human and non-human that make utopia “one of the only aesthetic forms capable of mediating totality” (156).

Beyond the Pacific, essays target Asia, Latin America, and the Atlantic world. (To lament the absence of a contribution on Africa, that perennial zone of neoimperial extractivism and ecological calamity, is simply to underscore the collection’s reach.) Lynn Voskuil’s elegant essay follows Joseph Hooker through India and the Himalayas in his effort to expand botany’s ambit from single specimens to distributed systems. Envisioning “botanical provinces” and “global plant communities” (167) across imperial boundaries, Hooker scaled up scientific perception and used tropes of sublimity to navigate methodological quandaries. Addressing imperial ecology less via circuits of mobility than through performance and “an idiom of ‘groundedness’” (24), Sukanya Banerjee offers a captivating account of Dinabandhu Mitra’s play about the peasant uprising against indigo planters in midcentury Bengal. *Neel Darpan* (translated as *The Indigo Planting Mirror*) rehearses the violence of colonial plantations while disclosing indigo’s own mysterious agency. Banerjee’s persuasive insistence on materiality and relationality – declining to “speak of ‘empire’ in terms of its human constituency alone” (24) – resonates with Rosenberg, Kreisel, and Taylor, and also with Monique Allewaert’s intriguing argument for ecological spiritualism. Against the background of Afro-American fetishism’s bequest to American spiritualism, Allewaert reads the work of Abolitionist writer Martin Delany, whose idiosyncratic theories of “electricity as a relational materialism” (212) crop up in *Blake*, his novel aiming to constellate a “black Atlantic countersystem” (213) to plantation capitalism.

I’ve regrouped the essays in terms of geography and genre to underscore connections occluded by their arrangement into categories (“method,” “form,” “scale,” “futures”) that sometimes cannot capture the range of essays like Miller’s (under “Form” but doubling as a methodological plea for reading dialectically in past and present) or Taylor’s (under “Method” but deeply invested in form and scale) or Morgan’s (under “Scale” but relevant in all four). What this organization *does* usefully highlight are keywords that, alongside those in the collection’s subtitle (“system,” “aesthetics,” “empire”), bespeak its high conceptual ambitions. If these abstractions seem less promising for the classroom, I should stress that they are everywhere matched by concrete, even visceral examples, all brought to attention in writing that is both arresting and artful. Virtually every essay also helpfully expounds a shared lexicon: frequent citations are to theorists fond of undercutting binaries – between natural and socioeconomic processes in global capitalism (Jason Moore), human and nonhuman agencies (Bruno Latour), animate and inanimate materialities (Jane Bennett), and natural and human histories (Dipesh Chakrabarty). I occasionally wanted a yet more searching engagement with such theoretical touchstones from the perspective of the Victorian

century, and was also surprised to find repeated assent to descriptions of the realist novel (by Amitav Ghosh and Timothy Clark) as a compromised ecocritical vehicle, when the collection's penetrating accounts showed otherwise. Overall, though, such fleeting reservations are testament to how compellingly *Ecological Form* explores the conditions for a robust and responsible ecocriticism. We can look forward to the innovative work and instruction that this energizing collection will inspire in the Victorian field and beyond.

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