

Hans Bak and Walter W. Hölbling, eds., *Nature's Nation Revisited: American Concepts of Nature from Wonder to Ecological Crisis*. Amsterdam: Vu University Press: 2003; *European contributions to American Studies* no. 49. 480 pages; ISBN 90 5383 897 x paper; € 42.90.

Like most conference anthologies *Nature's Nation Revisited* is a collection of fairly diverse papers, in this case delivered at EAAS's 2000 meeting in Graz, Austria; in fact, there are thirty five entries arranged within eight thematic categories. Usually this makes for interesting reading but difficult reviewing, but in this case, the papers read surprisingly well together. Taken collectively they comprise a nicely edited and unusually coherent collection which spoke directly to the underlying question of the conference – what do we make now of the Emersonian idea that America is “nature’s nation”? Leo Marx has called it a “dominant theme” of American culture and it certainly has been an important hinge on which American Studies has swung; the essays collected here indicate a continued sharp interest in the subject.

Apparently the “debate” between two prominent American scholars – Leo Marx whose study, *The Machine in the Garden* (1964) is one of American Studies’ “classic” texts, and Lawrence Buell, author of *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) and a prominent scholar in the relatively new field of ecocriticism – sparked great interest and many discussions during the conference itself. Although there were many essays of high quality, I will take the essays written by Buell and Marx as the central documents in the anthology because they address important theoretical issues about how to study questions of nature and culture. The issues underlying this debate are difficult, but I can briefly summarize the necessary background: the prevailing conception of nature in the western world since Descartes as a realm apart has been subject to a withering critique by various critical Marxisms and poststructuralism. The older generation of Americanists – as represented in works by scholars such as Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds* (1942), F.O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance* (1949), Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land* (1950), Sherman Paul, *The Shores of America: Thoreau's Inward Exploration* (1958), and Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology & the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964) – found much value in treating nature as foil to American culture – a source of American uniqueness, yes, but alternately the font of artistic resistance to dull American materialism and willful innocence. These works often elicited a mythic sensibility and invoked a universal understanding of nature standing outside of culture. An example of this approach is the work of Arno Heller (Karl-Franz, Austria) which was included in this anthology. He interprets the interest of writers in the great American southwest as a quest for a “confrontation with the primeval” – in which the construction of nature as a wilderness “uncontaminated by human intrusion,” has its chief virtue in its separateness from culture, a separation which paradoxically becomes the source of an alternative culture.⁷ This formulation clearly shows the influence of structuralism – seeing thought in terms of a nature-culture polarity – but there are also pragmatic and phenomenological elements

7. Heller, “The Desert Mystique,” 184–197, esp. 192, 195.

as well – seeing and evaluating culture as a response to nature, a response that often calls for social dynamism, cultural creativity and enhanced powers of subjectivity. Thematically the concern is with the power of myth, the search for authenticity, and the quest for an alternative American culture – often expressed in terms of nature and through nature writing.⁸

The major complaint of the critics is and has been politically-inspired: the charge is that the old school emphasized national identity for the purpose of class collaboration, a position which at the same time reflected gender and race biases – effectively a so-called “consensus” view of American culture. The attack on “nature’s nation” was spearheaded by the British scholar Raymond Williams in his work *The Country and the City* (1973). Williams insisted that the roots of pastoralism and other formulations of concern with and interest in “nature” in Britain were largely motivated by class concerns – that “nature” (as opposed to the real existing pre-modern countryside) was inherently a construction of a privileged social class. Later on, the arrival of various postmodernisms in the American academy brought on even stronger critiques often tied to issues of gender and race. Poststructuralism exploded the foundations on which the myth and symbol approach to American culture – and to the theme of nature and culture – had been based. In declaring nature dead, postmodernists broke with established literary and cultural criticism – particularly important to American Studies as a field of study.⁹ The “death of nature” is a melodramatic but effective expression of the postmodern idea that nothing stands outside of cultural representation – and therefore the effort to identify nature as something separate, authentic and powerful must be understood as having collapsed.

Leo Marx and Lawrence Buell provide two different responses to these critiques. Marx agrees with the critics that the convention of separating human beings from nature should be re-thought. But he roots his epistemological reappraisal in evolutionary theory: it was Darwin that “made the idea of nature’s separateness untenable” (37). Yet the historian of culture must give cultural motifs their due: in 19th century America, nature is seen in opposition to culture, though the terms in which this oppositional force is understood vary. In Emerson, America is seen as “nature’s nation” in process, while for Melville nature’s very existence as a force outside of human control and understanding drives men (Americans) to madness. These are descriptive statements for Marx; underlying them is a condition of American society in its relation to the natural world. That relation begins with “biophysical nature” itself, specifically with North American geography and the geographical experience of North Americans. It is not surprising that Americans coming from Europe to what was an under-developed continent would see nature as wilderness standing outside of cul-

8. See also Sherman Paul, *Repossessing and Renewing: Essays in the Green American Tradition* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1976).

9. A key text is Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 1989). On American Studies, see Luccarelli, “Rethinking American Studies for the 21st Century,” *American Studies in Scandinavia*, 36:2 (2004): 17-30.

ture, hence the cultural themes explored in Marx's earlier work. But the real significance of Marx's turn to geography is to direct the contemporary student of American culture to geo-economic and technological factors which mediate the relation of human society to the biophysical world. It's an approach which has the advantage of seeing culture in relation to natural (especially geographic and environmental) and social processes.

Buell takes another tact altogether. Indeed his article entitled "Green Disputes" is directly critical of Leo Marx. Marx, he tells us, has overreacted to the critique of nature discourse; he's engaged in a "materialist approach" and is too concerned with the theme of modernization in culture. Furthermore, Marx has over-reached in his generalizations (in *The Machine in the Garden*) about the concern of North Americans with nature: in fact "there may be a tendency," Buell claims, "for all national cultures to define the culture essence in terms of countryside, exurbia."¹⁰ Buell proposes maintaining the view of nature as distinct from culture, but to strip nature of its mythical significance: nature becomes a nonhuman "other" that is defined culturally and approachable through a "postfoundational ethical model." In the end for Buell nature is not dead but it is to be seen inside a socially constructed system of meanings – one among several "discourses of alterity."¹¹

The larger effect of Buell's advocacy of ecocriticism is to place the study of responses to nature firmly within the framework of postmodern cultural studies – though it is important to point out that he resists postmodern assertions that "nature" – or rather various cultural landscapes – must be subordinated to the alterities of subject groups. Such work is represented in this volume by Rocio Davis (Navarre, Spain) writing on the use of the Hawaiian landscape as a source of ethnic identity in the writings of the Asian American, Garrett Hondo; and by Begona Simal Gonzales (Coruna, Spain) on Amy Tan's re-vision of subjectivity in relation to the humanizing – and humanized – mountain landscapes of provincial China in her book, *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995).

Buell is as concerned with the expression of multiple subjectivities and constructions of alterity as these approaches, but he has not lost nature as an object of study – or as I'm sure he would prefer to speak of it – as a subjectivity of its own. The distinction is important because Buell has spoken strongly in favor of retaining the canon of

10. Buell, "Green Disputes," 50. I think it's a highly exaggerated claim. There are important differences between the European south and north on just this issue. Furthermore, though it's no longer defensible to see the American cultural pattern in isolation as *sui generis*, we should not make the mistake of simply assuming that it follows a pattern identical with other western or industrialized societies. For example, David Nye argues in his book, *Consuming Power* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998), that the pattern of American technological development is virtually singular; therefore we might well assume that there are distinct characteristics in the manner such a technological civilization sees and understands landscape and nature. There are also international and regional factors which greatly complicate understanding the character of a national landscape. For an excellent reading that is both international (i.e. Anglo-American) and regional, see Peter Coates, "Garden and Mine, Paradise and Purgatory," 147-167.

11. Alterity – systematized construction of different classes of people.

nature writing – and his most important work has been his Thoreau scholarship. The best reading in the present volume of this approach was provided by Fredrik Brøgger's study of the American renaissance writers which explores the question of anthropomorphism as a tendency to project human feelings and ideas onto nature. Brøgger (Tromsø) rejects anthropomorphism as a prime example of reading over nature, but he also appreciates how both *Walden* and *Moby Dick* play with anthropomorphisms, greatly complicating what he presents as Emerson's simplification of nature. In Brøgger's reading, Thoreau was open to nature as a set of relations outside of the anthropocentric universe, raising the hope that human arrogance could be overcome in a culture where "meaning may flow *from nature to man*."¹²

In the final analysis, the position of Buell and his allies rests on an assertion of the priority of ethics, and specifically an ethics based on recognizing difference as the key to understanding and revisiting the relation to nature. The notion that the problems of environment comes down to human arrogance, strikes me as a bit simplistic and formulaic. It expresses itself as an attack on humanism which is understood as a form of philosophical foundationalism: Thomas Claviez (Berlin) tells us, "any attempt to reduce the other to the economy of my standards, knowledge, even my ontological being" is inherently "dangerous."¹³ From Claviez's perspective, conceiving human social life in relation to geography and environment (as Marx has done) invites seeing nature as an object – an "other" – opening "it" to further control and exploitation. The only possible remedy from this point of view is to re-conceive nature as a subjectivity among others; to base the treatment of nature – or really of specific beings in the natural world such as animals, plants – on a politics based on respect for difference; and to resist the idea that collective human life should be understood as part of nature.

The alternative approach – Leo Marx's – is nicely expressed by Richard Martin (Aachen, Germany), who puts it thus: "it is not a question of man being essentially identical with Nature, but of man being as much a *part of Nature*, as ... trees, rocks, birds, animals ..." It requires pragmatically understanding the human condition as being a part of nature but also capable of responding to nature through "continually shifting points of view" and "changing paradigms" – that is to say understanding that the human condition as that of both a natural and cultural being. This condition defines the possibilities and limits of human freedom, including the capacity to make conservation and preservation of nature a goal necessary to and worthy of human beings.¹⁴ Such an approach by definition must study environmental and related conditions which shape human society, as well as the attempts of human beings to interpret and respond to these forces.

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12. Fredrik Chr. Brøgger, "The Conception of Nature in the American Romantic Age," 94-113, esp. 99.

13. Thomas Claviez, "Second Nature's Nation," 51-59, esp. 57.

14. Martin's comment, in "Nature's Nature/Nature's Art: Responses to the Natural World," was in response to the position taken by Deleuze and Guattari, 71, 77.