

**Alfred Hornung & Zhao Baisheng, eds. *Ecology and Life Writing. American Studies – A Monograph Series, vol. 203.* Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2013. xix + 413 pp. ISBN 978-3-8253-5892-1.**

This international collection of essays emerging from the Second World Ecoculture Conference organized in Mainz, Germany in 2010 represents the ecological and ecocritical turn in the humanities and literary studies in particular. With a focus on the role of nature and non-humans in life writing, the volume seeks to provide contemporary perspectives onto issues ranging from the relationship between literature and ecology to the diverse forms of life writing, nature writing, and their hybridization. What unites the studies in the volume is an understanding of nature as shaping human and non-human lives and life narratives, and an expressed need to aim at a “planetary consciousness” with an ethical attitude needed to preserve life. As Alfred Hornung puts it in his Preface, the essays “explore the potential of the humanities to enhance ecological goals and to contribute to a transnational cooperation in the common effort to preserve a livable habitat” (xii).

The extensive volume is divided into four parts, includes a Preface and 23 critical essays, and closes with Scott Slovic’s interview with the American nature photographer Chris Jordan, known for his work on consumption and the Katrina disaster. Hornung’s Preface, in addition to introducing the essays, locates the contexts of the volume in the rise of the ecological discourse and its increasing role in literary studies since the 1960s with particular reference to the US as well as Asia. The introduction of the global perspective is what distinguishes the volume from many other collections dealing with similar themes as it makes available the emerging Asian and in particular Chinese ecocritical perspective. Similarly, the volume seeks to revise established conceptions on life writing as a primarily non-fictional form, and it provides examples of much needed new ways of understanding the links between the genres of life writing and nature writing.

The four parts of the volume address i) the relationship between ecology and literature in American and Chinese environmental and life writing; (ii) wilderness in American and Chinese literature; (iii) the role of the non-human (trees and animals) in literature; and (iv) the role of ethics and the environment in cultural texts ranging from Chinese gardens to W.G. Sebald. As the contents show, the volume – as is typical of a conference-related publication – covers diverse topics of which some remain more peripheral to the core thematics. The volume, however, has several interesting

and high-quality contributions that are worth mentioning. For instance, the first part opens with Hubert Zapf's essay "Cultural Ecology, Literature, and Life Writing" where he argues for an extended use of the notion of life writing to promote an ecological approach to literary narratives "to reconsider the anthropocentric premise of traditional life writing and open up the text and the self to a broader meaning of human life in its vital interrelatedness with nature and human life" (4). In his essay Zapf develops an idea of "literature as cultural ecology" that combines poststructuralist understandings of the role of discourse and textuality with the ecological work of Gregory Bateson and Peter Finke to suggest that literature is "a symbolic medium of a particularly powerful form of 'cultural ecology'" and that it is capable of addressing the diverse and constantly reconfiguring encounters of culture and nature (7). To illustrate this need to study life writing unrestricted by the traditional demand to focus on realist and/or autobiographical texts, Zapf analyses several texts such as Thoreau's *Walden* and Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener". In his view, when the latter is read in a context where human life, understood in a holistic way as Bartleby does, it reconnects the anthropocentric with the biocentric and generates new forms of knowledge, defined here by Zapf as *Lebenswissen* where the boundaries of knowing and not knowing are emphasized and human knowledge of nature is problematized. In other words, Zapf's cultural ecology perspective onto literature involves a reassessment of human mastery and location of the human amongst what has been formerly excluded from analyses of life writing. Zapf's work argues for a need to revise the conventional idea (and the canon) of life writing, and is supported by other essays contributing to the same aim.

These include, for example, Hornung's reading of classical Chinese gardens as autobiographical narratives by retired officials, and the two eco-critical essays interpreting Native American and Asian Canadian poetry as life writing, written by Sabine Meyer and Erik Redling respectively. Some other contributors provide fresh perspectives on auto/biography or on texts where the fiction/life writing perspective is blurred. These include, are, for instance, Catrin Gersdorf's application of Walter Benjamin's concept of *flânerie* to the work of Thoreau and a 2009 essay by Catriona Sandilands where the author is shown to walk through a bird sanctuary, which Gersdorf sees as a form of "eco-flânerie," and Deborah L. Madsen's reading of Gerald Vizenor's life writing which shows how Vizenor's texts resist western categorizations positing humans and nature as exclusionary categories. The

collection also records the significant role that non-humans play in life writing, as noticed in recent research in human–animal studies. Here, the topic is approached through Sabine Kim’s reading of birds in the work of the Canadian poet and essayist Don McKay, where the act of bird watching blurs the boundary between the observer and the observed, “nature-watcher and watched nature” to the extent that the avians are “felt” rather than “seen” (259). In a similar vein, Mark Berninger present an interesting through rather eclectic analysis of human–animal encounters in texts ranging from *Divina Commedia* to shaman manga and further to *The Whale Rider*. Also, Tim Lanzendörfer analyses the natural historical writings of E.O. Wilson, known for his acclaimed works based on scientific research, and shows how difficult it is to write from an animal’s perspective. The role of non-human animals as significant others in conventional autobiographies, however, is not addressed by the contributors to the volume.

The emphasis on the transnational and global underlined in Hornung’s Preface as shaping the writing of environment and life writing is evident in essays such as Birgit Capelle’s analysis of Asian temporalities in Thoreau’s nature writing, but more significantly in the contributions addressing the emergence of ecocriticism and environmental writing in China. Yang Jincai addresses the role of ecocriticism in contemporary literary scholarship in China, Xu Dejin analyses Qiuhu Yu’s *Lend Me a Life* (2004) as an “econarrative” where descriptions of nature function as “conveying [...] ethical and cultural message[s]” (93), and Chen Guagchen provides an ecocritical reading of the works of Shen Congwen and Gao Xingjian to show how their narratives of place, mobility, and landscape are ways of deconstructing hegemonic nationalist ideologies. These perspectives provide a corrective to standard ecocritical views that often rely on US-centred perspectives.

In sum, the wide-ranging collection is reasonably successful in achieving its aims, although it remains somewhat uneven as is typical of conference publications. Some essays would also have benefitted from a more direct involvement with nature and the environment. As the articles present fresh and well-researched perspectives, the volume can be recommended to anyone interested in the links between life writing and the environment.

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