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Gülşah Göçmen

Aksaray University, Turkey

gulshgocmen@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0003-2967-4976

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Book Review: *Blue Ecocriticism and the Oceanic Imperative*

by Gülşah Göçmen



About the Author

Gülşah Göçmen is Assistant Professor in the Department of Western Languages and Literatures, Aksaray University, Turkey. Her Ph.D. centers on the modernist sense of place in the works of E. M. Forster, D. H. Lawrence, and Virginia Woolf. Among Göçmen's recent publications are a book chapter titled "Urban Ecologies/Urbanatures of İstanbul in Contemporary Turkish Novel" in *Turkish Ecocriticism From Neolithic to Contemporary Timescapes* (Lexington, 2021), and a co-authored article titled "Nostalgic (Re)visions of Englishness in Merchant Ivory's Adaptation of Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*" (*Journal of Language, Literature and Culture*, 2021). She is an advisory board member of the Environmental Humanities Center at Cappadocia University. She is currently working on the Turkish translation of Carol Adams and Josephine Donovan's co-edited collection *Animals and Women: Feminist Theoretical Explanations* (Duke University Press, 1995).

Book Review

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Dobrin, Sidney I. 2021. *Blue Ecocriticism and the Oceanic Imperative*. New York and London: Routledge.

Shifting the helm from ecocriticism's land-based routes to aquatic and/or oceanic environments, Sidney Dobrin's *Blue Ecocriticism and The Oceanic Imperative* explores a wide range of oceanic narratives that flow against the "ocean-deficit" roots of ecocriticism (14). The book, as a navigation manual for blue ecocritical studies, initially dives into the crucial mission of "unearthing ecocriticism" and reveals how literary history is furnished with an abundance of "kinds of artifacts that now weigh upon ocean within the cultural imaginary" (32). It addresses the theoretical evolution of blue ecocriticism through "the unsettled maelstrom of an epistemological and methodological whirlpool" (35) in environmental humanities. Blue ecocriticism, as Dobrin plainly confirms, follows oceanic visions developed within such frameworks as New Thalassology (Hordern and Purcell), blue cultural studies (Mentz; Brayton), or new maritime humanities (Mentz) to uproot ecocriticism's terrestrial concerns. This spatial shift of focus finds echoes collectively and extensively in the blue humanities—though carefully noted, the issues specific to this interdisciplinary field are intentionally left out of the scope of the book as it more specifically searches into the oceanic imperative in ecocriticism and ecomposition.

In addition to the timely call to redirect ecocriticism into the exploration of oceanic environments, *Blue Ecocriticism and The Oceanic Imperative* adroitly undertakes a grave task of elucidating theoretical ways that are required to approach such a vast phenomenon as the ocean. The primary discussion is about scaling the ocean or perspectivizing it to figure out how its scaled representations engage the cultural imaginary. The scaled vision

of the Planet Earth is made explicit via certain notable examples like Albrecht Dürer and Johannes Stabuis' map of the world, the Earthrise photo ("taken on December 24, 1968, by Apollo 8 astronaut William Anders" [103]), The Blue Marble photo ("taken by either Harrison Schmitt or Ron Evans aboard the Apollo 17 mission on December 7, 1972" [105]), and the blue dot image (where the Earth is more like "the bluish-white speck almost halfway up the brown band" [107]). All point to the idea that scaling—dissimilar to land-based orientation—is of necessity to identify any cultural oceanic representation. The means of scaling, enhanced through technology, are also underlined as they are integral to the production of the scaled images that dominate visual images of the ocean. The book, thus, not only settles to frame blue ecocriticism's critical agenda through scaling interest—as I would call it in parallel to its method of scaling ocean here—but also pinpoints the processes that require closer attention in identifying "the formation of ocean in the cultural imaginary" (126).

Blue Ecocriticism endorses a new materialist approach "to navigate a fluid theoretical space not between but distributed among discursive formation in ocean representations and the materiality of ocean" (145). Theoretically and methodologically inspired by new materialisms (Haraway, Barad, Bennett) in general, and OOO (Object Oriented Ontology, Morton), ANT (Actor Network Theory, Latour), feminist new materialism (Alaimo, Jue), and material ecocriticism (Iovino and Oppermann) in particular, blue ecocriticism poses questions "simultaneously as to what the object ocean is and how is the object represented, inquiries originating in material-semiotic theory" (146). While material ecocriticism lends its "foundational tenets" to blue ecocriticism, Dobrin underlines, blue ecocriticism is by no means "material ecocriticism dressed in blue" (146). Material ecocriticism fittingly serves the purposes of blue ecocritical studies as Dobrin's analyses of oceanic representations make it clear in the book. Plus, blue ecocriticism "extends material ecocriticism's critique of subjectivity and agency into ocean" in return (152).

Assuredly presenting its methodology, the book also presents a meticulous approach towards its "object ocean" (137)—simultaneously a *hyperobject* and *not-hyperobject* (95)—and reveals its entanglement with other agencies at work like light or sound in addition to plastic. It thoroughly searches into "the ubiquity of plastics—particularly microplastics—in ocean water" (159) within a new materialist framework, and it starkly discloses "the representations of plastic materiality" (159), which is usually dismissed from narratives as they fail to be traceable as a form of micro-particle reality. Blue ecocriticism deals with plastic ocean, presenting a demand for further inquiry into "the economics, politics, and ethics from the moment of extraction of the petroleum needed to produce plastics, the manufacture of the plastics, the distribution of the plastics, the

disposal of the plastics, and the degradation of the plastics” (160) as all of them shape “the cultural imaginary that perpetuates representations of ocean and the materials inculcated in those representations” (160). It is similarly captivating to observe material-discursivity of ocean body, centering on the processes in which we need to “question about the very materiality of music production and distribution, particularly in terms of plastic use and e-waste associated with digital music circulation” (164) rather than solely attending to the ocean-inspired sound productions. Or, light, in this respect, functions actively as another agency at the material-semiotic level of oceanic bodies as it mainly makes visual representation possible through mediation of light, its physical reflection in the ocean, its reception by human eye, and of course technological devices that operate in the process. Through a quick history of light, Dobrin displays how blue ecocritical studies is “inseparable from the ways in which ocean is and can be represented or experienced visually” (184).

Though placed towards the end, I believe, “Protein Economies” is one of the most notable parts of the book, essential to figure out “the technologies, politics, economics, and ethics of global protein economies bound to ocean” (202) and “to consider the reciprocal interplay between ocean representation and global ocean harvest in terms of the rhetorical positioning of human protein needs and nonhuman animal lives” (202). Dobrin turns to “animal studies and environmental rhetorics” (202) for this chapter, which might be considered promising and fruitful especially for a specific direction in animal studies, that is, vegan studies. I consider this chapter’s potential valuable to bloom out a new conversation in vegan studies with its sound observations about industrial harvest of aquacultured protein and with its fitting criticism about protein politics. Moreover, the chapter explores how protein driven industries end up destroying ocean animals or their natural habitat together with limiting their representation to that of the status of food or protein. Dobrin’s argument here encourages the reader to question “the larger role of representation that provides access to understanding the interactions between the placement of industrial harvest in cultural imaginaries and the effect such representations might have, then, on the human-ocean interaction” (214). Through protein economies, ocean animals seem to lose their subjectivity and become mere seafood—“not-animal or wildlife” (216). This reflects one of the basic principles of veganism that denies the use/abuse of nonhuman animals by human animals and that “seeks to eschew all animal products . . . in defence of animals” (Griffin 6). Blue ecocriticism’s call to examine existing representations of oceanic animals through various media or historical recollections opens a conducive gateway for vegan studies and critical animal studies. It is interesting to note that the chapter appropriately takes plant-based protein into account in its discussion; however, it still misses any reference

to the role of veganism or vegan studies that might at least deserve an endnote explanation—though the author already points to his scope-bound restraints. With this minor omission in mind, the chapter substantially contributes to the development of a critical frame that intersects both blue ecocriticism and vegan studies, which, I believe, will be soon picked up by those who are in need of a theoretical lens to fight against ocean-deficit of vegan studies. Vegan studies anthologies, as yet emerging in number, unfortunately lack any serious orientation towards the ocean or ocean animals, and blue ecocriticism might lead the way to focus more on the representations of these animals set in the cultural imaginary of both vegan and nonvegan human narratives.

As a final remark—once more indulging in aquatic metaphors—, I note that *Blue Ecocriticism and The Oceanic Imperative* achieves more than it sets out to do in the first place, not only hitting blue ecocritical waves to the shores of earth-based ecoliteracies but also redirecting vegan studies' and animal studies' rivers into the deep waters of blue humanities. The imperative of rerouting critical interest is urgent for ecocriticism that seems to lack so far both a theoretical framework for and an unscaled interest towards the ocean, as the book aptly explains throughout its chapters. It is, I believe, urgent for vegan studies to join the blue frontier together with land-based ecocriticism and to set sail for blue-oriented representations of nonhuman world.

References

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