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Comparative Ecocriticism in the Anthropocene

1. From Ecocriticism to Environmental Humanities

Ecocriticism started out in the early 1990s in the framework of American literary studies – in the Anglo sense that equates »America« with the »United States.« In fact, the new field's first professional organization, the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment, was founded as an offshoot of academic interest focused on a particular region of the United States, in the backroom of a casino in Reno, Nevada, during the 1992 annual convention of the Western Literature Association. During its first decade, the bulk of ecocritical attention focused on American literature as shaped by Thoreau and British literature as shaped by Wordsworth – a limited but powerful concentration on nature writing in the genres of poetry, nonfiction prose, and the novel, with particular attention to Native American literature. By the turn of the millennium, in a story that has by now been told repeatedly, interest in the literature-environment nexus had grown and diversified enough that ecocriticism almost literally exploded into a much broader research area encompassing multiple historical periods (from the Middle Ages to postmodernism), genres (from poetry to the graphic novel and narrative film), and regions: the Caribbean, Latin America, East Asia, and Western Europe all emerged as new areas of ecocritical exploration. New encounters between postcolonial theory and ecocritical analysis proved particularly productive for both fields: linking historical exploration and political ecology with literary analysis, the emergent »poco-eco« matrix opened new perspectives on the connections and disjunctures between imperialism, ecological crisis, and conservation.

Over the last few years, the concept of »Environmental Humanities« has increasingly come to accompany and to superimpose itself as an umbrella term on ecocriticism and comparable research areas in neighboring disciplines: environmental history, environmental anthropology, environmental philosophy, cultural geography, and political ecology. Driven by the impulse to connect environmental research across the humanities, to justify humanistic research at institutions often prone to cut first in the humanities, and to bring the knowledge generated through humanistic research into the public sphere, environmentally oriented scholars have used the term »Environmental Humanities« as a shorthand for what they hope will be a new vision of their discipline. As of this writing, the concept remains somewhat more aspirational than real. While ecocritics and environmental philosophers have long collaborated in Australia, and environmental historians and ecocritics sometimes collaborate in the United States, the disciplines that make up the Environmental Humanities have to date largely pursued their own disciplinary trajectories. But there are signs that the tide may have begun to turn. Various universities and research organizations have started programs in the field. The Swedish environmental historian Sverker Sörlin published a brief outline of the new interdisciplinary matrix in the journal *BioScience* in 2012, and a longer manifesto followed from the editorial collective of the newly established journal *Environmental Humanities* at Macquarie University in Australia (Rose et al.

2012). Another journal focusing on the environmental humanities began publication in early 2014 from the University of Oregon under the title *Resilience.*

2. Anthropo-Scenes

The emergence of the Environmental Humanities has coincided with the rise of the »Anthropocene,« a term that has begun to circulate with ever-increasing frequency in environmental debates in both Europe and North America. In an article published in 2000, the atmospheric scientist Paul Crutzen and the ecologist Eugene Stoermer postulated that humankind no longer inhabits the Holocene, the geological era from the last Ice Age 13,000 years ago to the present day. Rather, they argued, we have entered a new epoch that they call the »Anthropocene« because humans have now transformed the Earth to such an extent that their impact will even be visible in the planet's geological stratification (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000). As Crutzen points out in a follow-up essay,

> [d]uring the past three centuries, the human population has increased tenfold to more than 6 billion and is expected to reach 10 billion in this century. The methane-producing cattle population has risen to 1.4 billion. About 30–50% of the planet's land surface is exploited by humans. Tropical rainforests disappear at a fast pace, releasing carbon dioxide and strongly increasing species extinction. Dam building and river diversion have become commonplace. More than half of all accessible fresh water is used by mankind. Fisheries remove more than 25% of the primary production in upwelling ocean regions and 35% in the temperate continental shelf. Energy use has grown 16-fold during the twentieth century, causing 160 million tonnes of atmospheric sulphur dioxide emissions per year, more than twice the sum of its natural emissions. More nitrogen fertilizer is applied in agriculture than is fixed naturally in all terrestrial ecosystems; nitric oxide production by the burning of fossil fuel and biomass also overrides natural emissions. Fossil-fuel burning and agriculture have caused substantial increases in the concentrations of ›greenhouse‹ gases – carbon dioxide by 30% and methane by more than 100% – reaching their highest levels over the past 400 millennia, with more to follow. (Crutzen 2002, 23)

Geologists will take until the year 2017 to determine whether the evidence indeed warrants this change of nomenclature; in the meantime, the concept of the Anthropocene has begun to circulate widely in publications, conferences, and exhibitions as a shorthand for describing a fundamental and global change in humans' relationship to the natural environment.

Biologists and ecologists had begun to address the implications of global environmental change even before the notion of the Anthropocene became common currency. Peter Kareiva, the scientific director of The Nature Conservancy, the world's largest conservationist NGO, has argued for more than half a decade that the focus of conservation needs to shift from wild to »domesticated nature«, a nature inhabited, used, and transformed by humans (Kareiva et al. 2007). The ecologist Richard Hobbs, in collaboration with other prominent ecologists such as Harold Mooney and Paul Ehrlich, has argued that the discipline of »restoration ecology« increasingly loses meaning in a global ecological context in which returns to an earlier state of nature become ever more difficult or even impossible in the face of climate change. Instead, he proposes, »intervention ecology« is a more apt term to describe ecologists' transformations of degraded ecosystems (Hobbs et al. 2011). Christian Schwägerl's *Menschenzeit:*

Zerstören oder gestalten? Die entscheidende Epoche unseres Planeten (2010) translated much of this unorthodox ecology into the public sphere by drawing an optimistic vision of the future, as did the science writer Emma Marris's much-debated book *Rambunctious Garden: Saving Nature in a Post-Wild World* (2011), which similarly encouraged its readers to embrace a stewardship of the Earth that does not look nostalgically back to the past but joyfully shapes the future of nature.

Two contradictory images of human agency underlie these scientific and popular-scientific writings. On one hand, humans are envisioned as a creative force, collectively able, at least in principle, to shape a functional and livable natural environment for the future. In some versions, this view comes quite close to the traditional Enlightenment view of humans as the beings whose cognitive and tool-making abilities set them apart from all other species and give them the right and indeed the duty to master nature. Humans have already pervasively reshaped nature, and the Anthropocene becomes the launchpad for a future that will be better than the present in many respects, in this view. On the other hand, catalogues of calamities such as Crutzen's highlight humans' destructive impact on the nonhuman world. But many of the most dire environmental crises humankind currently confronts - biodiversity loss, climate change, pollution - are not the outcomes of human intentions, but on the contrary unwanted and often unforeseen side effects of activities whose intentional goals might have been creative. From this perspective, humans' pervasively damaging impact is evidence that they in fact neither understand nor control nature enough to master complex global processes, and the Anthropocene inscribes into the planet's geology and atmosphere the failure of human intention and agency.

Whichever of these story lines the Anthropocene is perceived to imply, both of them feature humans as the protagonists of a plot that has unfolded over at least 10,000 years. Or rather, the protagonist, in the singular, since the main character here is the human species at large. This conceptual move tends to come easily to natural scientists, who often lump all humans together so as to highlight their differences from or interactions with other species and natural environments. It is a far more difficult move for social scientists and humanists, to whom far-reaching historical, social, and cultural differences between human communities tend to stand out much more sharply than they do to natural scientists. For the humanist, the primary given is a wide anthropological variety from which »the human« as a generalization can only emerge by way of slow and painstaking assembly. This is true of the humanities in general, but particularly of disciplines such as anthropology, history, or comparative literature, which have traditionally specialized in tracing differences between moments in time, communities, cultures, and aesthetic forms.

Of course, this focus has not always prevented scholars in these disciplines from postulating human universals of various kinds or all-embracing kinships whose hypocrisies Roland Barthes so brilliantly dissected in »La grande famille des hommes« (1957). In his footsteps, a wide range of theoretical paradigms in the humanities - from Neo-Marxism, feminism, and postcolonialism to New Historicism, Cultural Studies, critical race theory, queer theory, and some new materialisms - have exposed how claims to universality invariably rely on historically and culturally specific yardsticks of the »human«, usually to the detriment of those who are judged to fall short of such measures of humanness. The interest in difference and the resistance to universalisms also generated a wide variety of theories on how difference is undercut or overcome

in particular circumstances of transcultural encounter: key concepts such as hybridity, *mestizaje*, diaspora, nomadology, borderlands culture, multiculturalism, pluralism, and cosmopolitanism, to name a few, all sought to describe and sometimes to prescribe ways of transcending cultural difference, especially in the face of increasing economic and technological globalization.

The Anthropocene and its most salient ecological manifestation, global climate change, pose anew the task of negotiating the study of difference with the postulation of human universals. What challenge does the idea of a geological »Human Era« pose to disciplines whose foundational assumptions over the last half-century have revolved around differences of, among others, gender, sexual orientation, class, and race? Recently, the postcolonial historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, whose earlier work participated in the project of displacing Europe as the fulcrum of world history, has most forcefully proposed that the globally shared confrontation with climate change calls for a new assessment of such differences. Chakrabarty readily admits that the main culprit of climate change has been industrial civilization such as it has evolved over the last 200 years, and that the globalization of capitalism has accelerated the fast pace of climatic change. Yet critiques of capitalism, in his view, do not address the full temporal scale of climate change:

> Analytic frameworks engaging questions of freedom by way of critiques of capitalist globalization have *not*, in any way, become obsolete in the age of climate change. If anything [...] climate change may well end up accentuating all the inequities of the capitalist world order [...] Capitalist globalization exists; so should its critiques. But these critiques do not give us an adequate hold on human history once we accept that the crisis of climate change is here with us and may exist as part of this planet for much longer than capitalism or long after capitalism has undergone many more historic mutations. The problematic of globalization allows us to read climate change only as a crisis of capitalist management. While there is no denying that climate change has profoundly to do with the history of capital, a critique that is only a critique of capital is not sufficient for addressing questions relating to human history. (Chakrabarty 2009, 212)

The critique of capital is not sufficient, according to Chakrabarty, because climate change threatens *all* modes of humans' inhabitation of the planet and thereby highlights boundary conditions of humans' collective existence that are unrelated to capitalism. »The task of placing, historically, the crisis of climate change thus requires us to bring together intellectual formations that are somewhat in tension with each other: the planetary and the global; deep and recorded histories; species thinking and critiques of capital« (213). Contrary to the efforts of anthropologists, historians, and scholars of literature who have sought to detach the concept of humanity from its association with mere biological species or natural condition, Chakrabarty points out, the notion of the Anthropocene brings back precisely the idea of the human species as a collective with geological force, a natural condition for the rest of life on the planet (214).

One might object that this conception of the human species as the agent of deep history is an essentialist misconception on the part of natural scientists which obfuscates the operations of economic power. »[D]oes not the talk of species or mankind simply serve to hide the reality of capitalist production and the logic of imperial [...] domination that it fosters? Why should one include the poor of the world – whose carbon footprint is small anyway – by use of such all-inclusive terms as species or

mankind when the blame for the current crisis should be squarely laid at the door of the rich nations in the first place and of the richer classes in the poorer ones?«, Chakrabarty asks (216). But in the end, he argues, all humans are now confronted with the consequences of climate change and the threat to »conditions (such as the temperature zone in which the planet exists) that work like boundary parameters of human existence« (218). Faced with this inescapable challenge, we need a new universalism, even though it may be one that can only be articulated as a negative universalism (222) if it is to avoid simply generalizing one particular perspective, like earlier universalisms.

Other theorists, particularly Marxist ones, have disagreed with this conclusion. Most forcefully, Slavoj Žižek has challenged Chakrabarty's claim that capitalism is no longer the most decisive frame work for analyzing the climate change crisis.[1]

> Of course, the natural parameters of our environment [...] harbor a potential threat to all of us, independently of economic development, political system, etc. However, the fact that their stability has been threatened by the dynamic of global capitalism [...] has a stronger implication [...] we have to accept the paradox that, in the relation between the universal antagonism (the threatened parameters of the conditions for life) and the particular antagonism (the deadlock of capitalism), the key struggle is the particular one: one can solve the universal problem (of the survival of the human species) only by first resolving the particular deadlock of the capitalist mode of production ... the key to the ecological crisis does not reside in ecology as such. (Žižek 2011, 333–334)

One may agree with Žižek's claim that ecology as such does not hold the key to solving the problem of climate change without also accepting his argument that in order to resolve it, the capitalist mode of production has to be overcome. Climate scientists generally agree that even if emission of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases were to stop entirely tomorrow, the planet would still continue to warm up for several decades, so that the difference would become perceptible only to the current generation's grandchildren. But of course it will not stop tomorrow: even if a collective will to develop an alternative economic regime were to emerge in some of the planet's dominant nations, the transition to such a regime would almost certainly take decades (more likely, a century or more) – too late to impact the current climate crisis decisively. Žižek's assumption that the deadlock of capitalism is a prerequisite for addressing the climate crisis, in practical terms, simply denies the possibility of coming to terms with it.

In its substance, this debate is not quite as new as the emergent term »Anthropocene« might lead one to believe. The German sociologist Ulrich Beck's theory of the risk society, which he first proposed in 1986, already stipulated that the world was moving into a new kind of modernity characterized by pervasive uncertainty. Social stratification in the risk society, Beck argued, would be determined not so much by differences in wealth or control of the means of production as by differential exposure to technological and ecological risks. The old class society will soon reach its endpoint, not to give way to a classless society but to one whose classes will be defined in a fundamentally different way. Activists in the environmental and climate justice movements as well as postcolonial theorists have tended to reject this hypothesis on

1 For a detailed discussed of Chakrabarty, Žižek, and Marx's notion of »species being,« see Dibley 2012.

the grounds that currently, environmental risks usually reinforce existing class divisions rather than cut across them. In this debate also, one of the crucial points of contention has been whether a Marxist-inflected critique of capitalism (or neoliberalism, now often the preferred target of attack) adequately captures the social structure of global environmental crisis.[2]

That this discussion has re-ignited around the concept of the Anthropocene pinpoints the recurring problem of conceptualizing collective agency in the context of global ecological crisis. For theorists such as Beck and Chakrabarty, class as the collective agent is no longer adequate, while newer entities such as the »multitude« proposed by Hardt and Negri have yet to prove their political relevance. The difficulty in envisioning »species« as an agent in the realm of the humanities and social sciences, as Chakrabarty argues, is that »[w]e humans never experience ourselves as a species. We can only intellectually comprehend or infer the existence of the human species but never experience it as such. There could be no phenomenology of us as a species. Even if we were to emotionally identify with a word like *mankind*, we would not know what being a species is, for, in species history, humans are only an instance of the concept species as indeed would be any other life form« (220). This is, according to Chakrabarty, the crisis in historical understanding that the Anthropocene and the postulation of species agency generates.

Yet this argument is a curious one. Granted, humans may not normally be able to experience themselves as a species - anymore than they are able to experience themselves as a social class or a nation: unless, that is, communities produce institutions, symbols, and forms of rhetoric that establish such abstract categories as perceptible and livable frameworks of experience. A great deal of historical and cultural analysis over the last four decades has shown such political and cultural processes at work in the emergence of modern European nation states in the 18th and 19th centuries. As theorists of cosmopolitanism have long argued, different institutions, laws, symbolic markers and rhetorical forms might make the framework of »humankind« experienceable in a similar way. And even the »species« framework might not forever remain as phenomenologically ungraspable as Chakrabarty makes it out to be. Surely what being a »species« means, from a biological and ecological as well as a social perspective, is to be situated in a network of lived, existential relations with other species and with the inanimate environment (soil, water, atmosphere, weather patterns). This ecological embeddedness, especially for twenty-first-century citizens shaped by material and socio-cultural structures that tend to make their own dependence on ecological networks invisible, may not be immediately perceptible or experienceable any more than the social embeddedness into class or nation, and indeed probably less so because there are fewer historical precedents for conceiving of »species« as a relevant social category. But there is no principled reason why it cannot be translated into the realm of perception, experience, and collective self-identification by means of its own set of rhetorical, symbolic, legal, and institutional structures. Crafting these structures is the task that the global environmental movement has set for itself, and comparative ecocriticism might usefully be conceived of as a small part of this larger venture.

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2 I have discussed Beck's approach in confrontation with the environmental justice movement in Chapter 4 of *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (Heise 2008).

3. Comparison and the Assembly of the Human

Ecocritics have only begun to engage explicitly with the notion of the Anthropocene.[3] But recent publications in the field demonstrate that the expansion of ecocriticism into a full-fledged comparatist research area has been underwritten by two divergent theoretical impulses that parallel the debates about the Anthropocene. The first of these impulses arose out of critiques of North American environmentalism and emphasizes views of nature, of crisis, and of conservation that emerge from economic conditions and cultural contexts substantially different from the US-American one. The Indian sociologist Ramachandra Guha articulated such a critique in a 1989 essay that highlighted how American environmentalists' investment in wilderness as the yardstick by which to measure what nature should be falls short as a way of understanding the struggles of indigenous and local communities in the developing world. In their fights against, for example, deforestation, dams, and the imposition of first-world farming methods, Guha argued, what is at stake is not a pristine nature to be enjoyed aesthetically as a part of one's leisure, but nature worked on and sustainably used by communities who have experiences with local ecosystems that reach back centuries or even millennia. Together with the economist Joan Martínez Alier, Guha elaborated this critique into a theory of different »varieties of environmentalism« that prevail in different regions and cultures. A good deal of postcolonial ecocriticism has followed in Guha and Martínez Alier's tracks, often in combination with the body of thought produced since the 1980s by the environmental justice and climate justice movements, to highlight how environmental crises and possible solutions play themselves out in the global South. Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, one of the most prominent recent examples, focuses on the writings, non-fictional for the most part, of writer-activists in the developing world such as Ken Saro-Wiwa, Maathari Wangai, and Indra Sinha, whose social vision and political commitments often differ quite significantly from those of environmentalists in the global North.

The increasingly global nature of environmental crises such as pervasive toxification, ocean acidification, soil erosion, biodiversity loss, and climate change, however, has also given rise to a different theoretical orientation in comparative ecocriticism. This second strand, ranging as widely across regions, cultures, and languages as postcolonial ecocriticism, has tended to emphasize not so much the divergent environmentalisms that arise out of communities' different positions in an increasingly globalized economy and their varying exposures to risk, but similarities that the confrontation with shared crisis scenarios generates. Karen Thornber, for example, whose wide-ranging work *Ecoambiguity: Environmental Crises and East Asian Literatures* (2012) engages with Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Taiwanese environmental texts, argues »for a deeper planetary consciousness enhanced by comparative ecocritical scholarship. The ubiquity of environmental problems and the interdependence of all life make it especially vital that creative articulations of environmental degradation be read not only as part of national literatures but also in terms of intercultural thematic and conceptual networks« (30). She elaborates that

3 The beginnings of this engagement are visible in Rose et al.'s »Environmental Humanities« and Rob Nixon's »This Brief Multitude: The Anthropocene and Our Age of Disparity,« a keynote delivered at the 2013 ASLE Convention.

> emphasis on cultural uniqueness tends to minimize important variations within individual societies. Just as significant, focus on cultural specificity, much less cultural essentialism, also can obscure the even more important resemblances among disparate societies, resemblances that allow us to understand more deeply our common humanity, and in particular the fundamental similarities of contacts between people and environments, throughout time and space, in life as well as in literature. (Thornber 2012, 95)

It is not entirely clear where Thornber would ultimately locate the source of this similarity. She sometimes seems to invoke cultural universals, as in the reference to similarities in literature just quoted, whereas at other times the universalism seems to derive from material uses of nature: »Beliefs concerning ideal relationships between people and environments can differ widely across and within cultures, but behaviors toward these environments - given similar populations and capability to manipulate landscapes - have been strikingly similar« (442 n.20).

Leaving aside, for the time being, the challenges one might raise to this extremely broad claim, it is clear that where Guha and Nixon see primarily economic and cultural differences between environmentally oriented thought in the global North and the global South, Thornber perceives resemblances that foreground different communities' shared humanity. Put somewhat simplistically, the outlines of a comparative ecocriticism with a focus on differences here diverge from a comparative ecocriticism that foregrounds global similarities. Nixon emphasizes a world divided by class differences, while Thornber sees a world crisis shared by all of humanity.

To point out this parallel between debates about the Anthropocene and recent work in comparative ecocriticism is not to argue that the two discourses are exactly homologous in their concerns. For Žižek and Chakrabarty, the fundamental question is whether the advent of the Anthropocene forces us to revise current theories of history and of the collective human subjects that drive it. Žižek, in this context, holds on to *class* as the central subject, whereas Chakrabarty sees in the notion of the *species* the outlines of a new collective subject. For Thornber and Nixon, the central question is what work writing - especially but not only literary writing - performs in current struggles to deal with present and impending ecological crises, and what critical scholarship adds to this kind of writing. Thornber claims that a comparatist approach that takes shared ecological crises as points of departure and that stresses commonalities rather than differences will in the end produce enhanced intercultural understanding:

> [B]eyond focusing on what is written in particular languages or cultural spheres, we also should analyze how literatures from multiple sites treat shared phenomena found in one form or another across the world. The shift is in many cases subtle: for example, from studying how Japanese and Chinese literatures discuss pollution to examining literary engagement with pollution by incorporating examples from several cultures, including Chinese and Japanese. [...] Moving the spotlight away from looking solely at what narratives tell us about specific peoples and cultures to what they also reveal about widespread human and nonhuman phenomena - in this case abuse to people and the natural world writ large - helps us break down barriers of isolation, insularity, and exceptionalism. Such an approach allows for new understandings, insights, and interpretations of cultural processes across time and space. Creative negotiations with ecological destruction [...] can increase planetary consciousness. (Thornber 2012, 434-35)

This outlook clearly resonates with a tradition of comparatists who have seen their work as a tool for pluralism. But methodologically, the procedure Thornber suggests

remains problematic. It assumes that comparatist work can take its point of departure from »phenomena« whose definition is somehow independent of cultural context, which then allows similarities and differences across different languages and cultures to emerge. But the definition of ecological phenomena, often even in the scientific language itself, is culturally anchored, context-dependent, and subject to change: »pollution,« Thornber's own example, has come to be applied to CO2 emissions in the context of global warming, even though CO2 is one of the most naturally produced gases in the global biosphere, a by-product of plant photosynthesis. The term »climate change« itself has by now largely replaced »global warming« and the »greenhouse effect« for political and cultural reasons; »biodiversity,« coined as recently as the 1980s, has come to dominate conservation efforts. And that is just sticking to the English language – never mind the linguistic and cultural translation issues that come into play when we seek to investigate »forests,« »soils,« or »landscapes« across languages. By assuming that such ecological crises and phenomena can be defined ahead of their particular representations and rhetorical uses in national and international contexts, Thornber veers dangerously close to a circular argument: Once ecological processes are defined as globally shared realities that affect a multitude of cultures and languages, the comparatist proceeds to analyze their representation in particular cultures and finds that they are – well, shared across cultures. To point out this circularity is not to deny that it is sometimes necessary to posit certain terms as points of departure, or that Thornber's suggested procedure may yield valuable results. But there is no comparatist freeway from global ecology to planetary consciousness that does not have to detour through the byways of cultural and social difference, even if it were only to determine what we actually mean by global ecology, environmental crisis, place, local community, degradation, pollution, endangered species, and so on.

One can quite distinctly see this problem emerge even in writings whose pretensions are not particularly literary – nonfiction prose accounts of global ecological crisis that often adopt a loose framework of travel narrative to portray the author's encounters with the manifestations of crisis around the world. In these texts, which have become increasingly popular since the 1990s, the author – usually a scientist, journalist, or environmental activist – travels the globe to document the consequences of, for example, global warming, disappearing species, or demographic shift. But if such journeys start with the assumption of shared global eco-predicaments, they often end on a note of unease, with the author unsure whether what he or she has witnessed actually does add up to a unified picture. Seeking to portray climate change in his book *High Tide*, for example, British activist Mark Lynas reports on unusual flooding in Britain and Wales, melting ice in Alaska and unusual drought in Inner Mongolia, but wonders at the end to what extent these phenomena are really comparable given their divergent economic, social, and cultural contexts. Similarly, the journalist Terry Glavin, in his volume *The Sixth Extinction*, travels to the Russian Far East and encounters local residents who kill highly endangered fish to eke out a living in a post-Soviet socio-economic landscape that has left them no other resources. Later, he journeys to Norway to speak to whalers who wish to hold on to their hunting customs in the face of animal rights advocates' resistance and the International Whaling Commission's moratorium on whale hunting. How to compare these two radically different scenarios, both of which involve highly endangered marine species? Glavin hesitates:

»a single narrative is not so easily imposed on the land« (2006, 5).[4] In accounts such as these, the writers start with the assumption of shared crisis only to end up somewhat doubtful as to what »shared« really means in this context – a demonstration of the difficulties that Thornber's procedure runs into even in ostensibly realist, science-oriented texts.

Nixon's analyses might at first sight seem to follow some of the analytical procedures Thornber suggests. In a chapter on the rhetoric surrounding the construction of megadams, for example, Nixon takes as his point of departure similar large-size hydrological projects that were undertaken in many countries over the course of the 20th century. He points to the important role megadam construction has played in bolstering the national self-image of nations embroiled in Cold War rivalries and those emerging from colonial rule, and the resistance such projects have encountered on the part of local activists. Yet it would be impossible to mistake this analysis for a search for human universals in the way Thornber envisions them. As Nixon analyzes Arundhati Roy's strategies in her polemic against the Sardar Sarovar Dam, he contrasts them with environmentalist campaigns against dam-building in the American West, especially David Brower's and Edward Abbey's protests against the Glen Canyon Dam in the 1950s. While Brower and Abbey condemn dam-building as a defacement of sublime monuments of the American wilderness, Roy foregrounds the cultural monuments built by communities whose places of residence will be put under water: »At stake in the Narmada were literal temples not metaphoric ones, temples to be drowned, alongside the villages they had served for centuries, by the monsoon waters that rose higher each year with the ever-rising dam walls« (Nixon 2011, 156). What interests Nixon is ultimately the different power dynamics that Abbey's and Roy's writings emerge from, and the way in which these writings engage – or fail to engage – with »modernity's surplus people, its developmental refugees, and its virtual uninhabitants« (160), that is, those who are disenfranchised, made invisible, inaudible, and uncountable in contemporary environmental struggles.[5]

Nixon sees the world of »neoliberal globalization« (a phrase that recurs frequently in his book) as sharply divided by those who are made invisible and those who have the power to make places and populations disappear from the public imagination – national governments, transnational corporations, international institutions. In this context, his primary interest lies in nonfiction prose and in the figure of the »writer-activist« who combines political engagement with writing. »[E]mbattled communities, beset by officially unacknowledged hazards, must find ways to broadcast their inhabited fears, their lived sense of a corroded environment, within the broader global struggles over apprehension. It is here that writers, filmmakers, and digital activists may play a mediating role in helping counter the layered invisibility that results from insidious threats, from temporal protractedness, and from the fact that the afflicted are people whose quality of life – and often whose very existence – is of indifferent interest to the corporate media« (16). If Thornber sees environmental literature and ecocritical scholarship as a means of building intercultural bridges and communities,

4 For a more detailed analysis of global ecological travel narratives, see Heise 2012.

5 The striking contrast Nixon draws between white male activist-writers in the American West and Roy as the writer-representative of local communities in India would be complicated, however, by the portrayal of indigenous struggles against dam construction in Canada in Linda Hogan's novel *Solar Storms* (1996).

Nixon emphasizes how creative and critical environmental writing can work to highlight the conflicts that divide the global haves from the have-nots. He openly admits his skepticism vis-à-vis the subsumption of postcolonial literary studies under the newer paradigm of world literature that Thornber's analysis builds on, on the grounds that »world literature often ends up deflecting attention away from the anti-imperialist concerns that a materialist postcolonial studies foregrounded« (38).

Ironically, for all their differences of theoretical perspective, Thornber and Nixon converge in downplaying the relevance of cultural specificity, which played a central role in older variants of Comparative Literature. Thornber subordinates cultural specificity to tracking transcultural networks of topics, concepts and literary forms that engage with environmental crisis. Nixon is careful to outline differences of historical context, geopolitical situation, political perspective, and rhetorical strategy on the part of the writers he examines, but cultural difference plays no decisive role in his approach. Indeed, his framework of analysis - the global spread of capitalism, particularly under the aegis of Thatcher's and Reagan's neoliberalism - stipulates the emergence of a new class of disenfranchised people who are partly but not entirely identical with the working class exploited in earlier forms of capitalism. His reference to the »environmentalism of the poor« conceived as a globally distributed group points to a social class defined more by its position in the global market than by particular local or regional cultural frameworks.

My own attempt to think through the challenges of difference and those of globally shared ecological crises have in the past led me to envision an »eco-cosmopolitanism« that would be informed by deep knowledge of at least one culture other than one's own, including a knowledge of the ecology in which this culture is situated and of which it forms part (2008, Ch. 1). While this goal may seem to resonate with Thornber's invocation of shared humanity, eco-cosmopolitanism is not in fact based on the assumption that forming part of the biological species *Homo sapiens* guarantees any far-reaching commonality or shared legacy that could serve as the foundation for structuring a global political community. On the contrary, eco-cosmopolitanism as I conceive it is shaped by an awareness that very little commonality can be taken for granted, and that speaking about humans, humanity, humanness, or the Anthropocene requires a patient and meticulous process of *assembly* - in its most craftsmanlike and technological connotations. For this reason, Nixon's mode of analysis strikes me as persuasive up to a point: its attention to historical and political detail is primarily intended to reveal rifts, conflicts, and power differentials rather than to evoke any prospect of quick collaboration or reconciliation. But it seems to me this analytical procedure could be pushed further, beyond somewhat formulaic invocations of »neoliberal globalization«, »turbo-capitalism«, or the nefarious impact of multinational corporations. Not because the institutions and power structures that Nixon refers to by means of this standardized language are less important than he claims - quite the contrary. It is because they are so central that in comparative studies of language and literature, their planet-wide impact merits close analysis in terms of how it is articulated with specific historical, cultural and rhetorical legacies that are shaped by but not reducible to imperial conflict and economic domination. Nor to natural-scientific generalization: the crucial contribution of comparative ecocriticism to the study of the Anthropocene is not just the analysis of how humans' ecological impact has sedimented in language and literature, but also to point out the conceptual mechanisms

that underlie any assembly of global humanness and of species agency. No toll-free highway leads from global ecological crisis to the constitution of a collective human subject in the way the concept of the Anthropocene is often understood to outline. The task of comparative ecocriticism is to map the byways and detours by which such a subject might come to inform our political imaginations.

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