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ECOCRITICISM AND THE GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

Interview of Paul Outka by Juan Carlos Galeano

Juan Carlos Galeano was born in the Amazon región of Columbia. He's a poet, translator and has done extensive research on Amazonian folklore. He teaches Latin American poetry and cultures of the Amazon basin at Florida State University.

Paul Outka, Assistant Professor of U.S. literature at Florida State University, discusses Ecocriticism, an important and rapidly growing field of studies in North American universities. In 2009, Professor Outka's book, ***Race and Nature from Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance*** *(Palgrave Macmillan), won the 2009 Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE) biennial award for the best theoretical book written on literature and the environment published in 2007 and 2008.*

This interview took place during the summer of 2010 in Tallahassee, Florida, USA. A Spanish version of this interview was published in *Kanatari,* the main cultural journal of the Peruvian Amazon basin at Florida State University.

JCG: Let's start from the very beginning. What is 'ecocriticism' and how did it begin?

PO: Ecocriticism is the study of how nature and human/natural relations are constructed in a variety of different forms of representations such as literature, painting, music, and so forth, and the ecological, human, and political consequences of those constructions. The inquiry is structured around the fact that nature is both a real thing that exists outside our speaking and writing, outside of language and representation, and yet is always something we approach only through language, representation, and our own personal and cultural history. Analyzing the paradoxical intersection of those two realms is at the heart of what ecocriticism does.

The movement started 15 or 20 years ago, as a movement within the Western Studies Association in the US, with, at least at first, a particular focus on American nature writing and an enthusiastic celebration of wilderness experience. The field has subsequently broadened to incorporate a range of other forms of critique, including ecofeminism, critical race theory, poststructuralism, class-based analysis, globalization and postcolonial studies, science studies, and the environmental justice movement, and has turned from its fairly uncritical initial embrace of the wild to engage the pastoral and the urban more deeply. And throughout the movement's development there has been an unusual—unusual at least within the academy—openness to a variety of different expressive modes, from literary and cultural theory, to nature writing, to fiction and poetry, to music, as well

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as a particular emphasis on both the physical experience of nature and on activism, on environmentalism as a personal and political practice.

JCG: In regard to that 'paradoxical intersection' between nature as a construction and nature as a real thing, it is said that there is a wing of ecocriticism that opposes theory, particularly poststructuralism. Why is that?

PO: You put your finger on what was a huge controversy for a while, though lately I think the theoretical 'side' has been dominant, perhaps because it's embedded in the university, and perhaps because it has the better argument – I'd at least like to think the latter is true, being myself a bit of a theory head!

Despite my theoretical orientation, I really do respect and share the concern that there's a danger in reducing nature to nothing more than a language game. To view the referent of 'nature' as only textual misses the combination I noted is at the heart of ecocriticism. Why do we need nature for at all if it's *just* a construction, *nothing* more than a human creation? It is a construction, but not *only* a construction. That said, it remains critically important to the environmental preservation of that "real" nature that we pay very close analytical attention to the ways we construct it, our relations to it, our fantasies about what it is and the sort of people we become in contact with it, and so forth.

Take, for example, the historically common conflation of land and women, a representational nexus that has been fundamental to the exploitation of nature from Columbus and the Conquistadors to our own moment. In such a nexus the wilderness becomes a virgin, awaiting penetration/consummation by the male explorer, an act that results in the land becoming the explorer's property, and that brings together sexual and environmental violence. Or take the all-too-frequent combination of nationalism, imperialism and the wild, the notion that the landscape is, like the country, inexhaustible, untamable, unconquerable – a prelude to unrestrained environmental exploitation that proves the opposite. Or take the way the coal mining industry in America—and remember that coal, the dirtiest, more global warming fossil fuel, provides 50% of the electrical power generated in the U.S.—refers to strip mining and mountain-top removal mining, as 'scraping off the *overburden*'. It's just much more palatable to remove 'overburden', than to lay waste to the heartbreakingly beautiful forests and mountains of West Virginia, and all the wild creatures that live there, in the blind profit-driven pursuit of an environmentally disastrous fuel that is cooking the planet. But the latter strikes me as a much more accurate description—and ecocriticism sees environmental struggle as profoundly connected to which description we choose.

JCG: Your book, *Race and Nature from Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance*, is about the intersection between nature and race in North America. Could you elaborate on that intersection, and how it matters to the environment, both within and outside North America? In Amazonia, as you might imagine, the Conquistadores and then colonialism perceived the Amazonian rainforest and the people who inhabit it as some*thing* to be both exploited and "improved" upon. Are there useful parallels with the history you study?

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PO: Yes, certainly – while each area has a history as particular as its landscape and its people, the broad ways that environmental practice and the construction of race have combined to produce a particular sort of 'eco-ideology' that 'justifies' just about any sort of exploitation do have important parallels throughout the Americas.

Before turning to the details of that combination, let me clarify what I mean by "ideology," itself a term with a very wide range of meanings and usages. For me, in this context, "ideology" is *what you think when you don't want to think something through*, especially when it benefits you not to think that something through. It's a way to be dumb when it is to your advantage to be dumb, to fool yourself, a way to not take ethical responsibility for doing just what you want to do.

For me the intersection between nature and race forms an important ideological structure that helps explain a long and really vicious history of environmental and human exploitation in both the North and South. By conflating the landscape and the indigenous people who lived there, both land and people became available to the same series of commodifying practices. The savage wilderness and the savage savages were supposedly both in need of taming, improvement, civilization, noblesse oblige, the "white man's burden." The cleared pastoral landscape became a sign of the European's right to the land and that in turn reflected and signified their white identity; the supposedly unimproved wild became a sign of a "failure" to "develop" both the "natural resource" and to develop as a race and culture as well. So rather than saying "I'll use my superior weaponry to kill you and take your land for my profit," the eco-ideological intersection between race and nature I discuss in the book turned this truth into the more morally palatable "I will turn this savage wilderness back to an Edenic pastoral that reflects my superior race and civilization. You should be grateful for the exposure to such superiority."

JCG: In your book you discuss the role of slavery in unsettling this early association of whiteness and the pastoral, and the establishment of a new association between whiteness and the sublime wilderness in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America. Could you talk about the reasons for that shift in more detail? I'm wondering, specifically, if we see a similar version happening in Amazonia, where the "unenlightened" local people get associated with the destroyed forests and urbanized squalor, and Europeans with the fight to save the rainforest.

PO: Sure, that's a really important shift I think, and an intriguing connection to Amazonia as well. To summarize briefly what's a pretty complicated argument in the book, I argue that the fundamental conceit of slavery was an association of blackness and the pastoral, particularly the extraordinarily pervasive and grotesque association of black people and domesticated animals. Slaves were treated as part of agricultural capital, were auctioned, whipped, bred, housed, and fed like horses, pigs, dogs, cows, and the like. Their rights became a subset of animal rights, something not of great concern to the average nineteenth-century white farmer.

This reprehensible association between blackness and the pastoral, however, put pressure

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on the whiteness/pastoral link that had "justified" the earlier European appropriation of the land from native peoples, especially as slave narratives, and the slavery issue generally, became such a prominent part of the national discourse in the nineteenth-century. I argue that the European Romantic sublime was used by American transcendentalism to reconfigure the association of whiteness and nature in a way that "greenwashed" it, rendered it ahistorical and unmarked, the standard of "normality" rather than a visible racial identity – and did so while retaining its dominance. The ability to go to the mountaintop, or whatever, and feel outside of history, outside of time, both radically humbled and radically empowered, to associate one's individual identity with a vast and grand wilderness that supposedly has no human history, itself became a supposedly neutral test of enlightened subjecthood—one that whites just happened to pass in overwhelming numbers. "Others" whose historical relation with the land was much more intimate, more traumatic, couldn't perform this escape from history and historical responsibility quite as adroitly. So they remained on the plantation, or, if they could, fled to the city, broke the association with the land that had been so demeaning in the plantation system, in favor of an urban identification. This history is important, especially as a check on the tendency of some environmentalists to condemn poor urban people for their lack of identification with preserving the wilderness.

It's a really complicated, unhappy, messy history, as I said, but working through it is critical, I think, if we are going to forge the kind of green alliance that's capable of taking on the powerful formations of capital that are so busily turning the world into a garbage-filled hothouse.

JCG: I know that you teach 19th century North American literature, and have written several essays on Walt Whitman in particular. How might an ecocritical approach to Whitman help us understand his poetry better, and, perhaps more important, how his poetry might help us better understand ourselves as citizens of an endangered world?

PO: That's a particularly important question for ecocriticism to examine at this point. Until fairly recently, Whitman's work was largely neglected by ecocriticism, especially in comparison to the attention that his transcendentalist contemporaries Thoreau and Emerson received. I think this is partly due to genre – it's harder to extract a clear political message from poetry, in general, than from prose – but also because Whitman was largely, though not exclusively, an urban poet. For too long nature was defined within the environmental movement as a place where people weren't, with all the concomitant problems of making urban places, and often urban people, less important in environmental thinking. That's really started to change now, though, and one small benefit of that change might be to open up Whitman's work to new green analyses.

In addition to the urban and social emphasis in Whitman's representations of the human and the natural, I think (and have written about) that his insistence on the fluid, material, interconnectedness of land, body, and poetry provides a model that's both useful and beautiful. So, for example, when early in *Leaves of Grass* in "Song of Myself" he has a child

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ask "what is the grass/fetching it to me with full hands," the question of the meaning of the poem and of the landscape are fundamentally conjoined. And when the answers to the child's question include a catalogue of guesses like a "flag…out of hopeful green stuff woven", or the "handkerchief of the Lord," or "a uniform hieroglyphic" that connects disparate areas and peoples, or "the beautiful uncut hair of graves," or "uttering tongues," we can see him insisting on the wholesale interpenetration of text and physicality, of poetry and embodiment, on humanity and the landscape itself. This is to me a lovely unsettling of the whole "is nature a construction or a Real?" binary question that has distracted ecocriticism for too long.

JCG: In regard to that possibility of a green environmental justice politics, you note in the book a contrast between racism and inequality on the one hand, and the fundamental truth of ecology that everything is connected to everything. That contrast seems to me to underscore the link between environmental destruction and the disconnection and fragmented ways we experience life in our contemporary world.

PO: Absolutely. One of the things that ecocriticism has been insisting on for a long time is that we have one world that we all share, that nature isn't just some special place "over there" that has status, while the rest of the planet is available for exploitation. And yet so much of what defines life in "First World" capitalist societies like the US is the invisibility of the places from which our food and other goods come and the places they go when we're done with them. Meat comes from the supermarket, not from a Brazilian clear-cut or a factory farm. Garbage goes to Planet Garbage, a different planet than Planet Earth. Oil comes from the gas station, and exhaust disappears into the air. Environmental politics is, I think, inevitably a global, as well as local, politics.

Perhaps the only good thing about the unimaginably terrible environmental and human catastrophe of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill that, as we're talking, is poisoning the Gulf of Mexico, is the way it punctures that illusory division between consumption, production, and waste. It's hard to imagine how anyone can see the image of the wellhead endlessly spewing, the dead and dying birds, dolphins, turtles, and countless other animals, the fouling of some of the planet's most beautiful shoreline, places that I and so many other people living on the Gulf Coast love with all our hearts, and not connect that devastation to our seemingly quenchless thirst for cheap petroleum and the lifestyle it permits. It turns out that gas doesn't come from the gas station but from holes a mile below the surface of the ocean, that waste doesn't go away but washes up on the beach just south of here, that there are consequences to what we drive, where we live, where our food comes from, that we can't ignore any longer. At least that's the hope – it certainly is the truth.