

A Response to Ursula Heise

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In “Ecocriticism and the Transnational Turn in American Studies,” Ursula Heise picks up where she leaves off in her 2006 *PMLA* article on the role of science in the emergence of ecocriticism. At the end of that piece, Heise writes: “Precisely because ecocritical work encompasses many literatures and cultures, it would also stand to gain from a closer engagement with theories of globalization” (“Hitchhiker’s” 513). In her contribution to *American Literary History*, Heise answers that call by attending to literature about globalization, families, and the environment, describing some of the problems that arise from equating biodiversity with cultural diversity in a transnational context.

One way to frame Heise’s main points in her *ALH* article is to think of her as concerned with various instances of alignment. Heise begins the article by characterizing the emergence of ecocriticism as resulting, in part, from an alignment between the tradition of localism in environmental literature and a growing concern for the local in 1980s and 1990s American studies. Heise then critiques recent environmental literature and criticism for aligning environmental and cultural issues. Her first example of this comes from Barbara Kingsolver’s 1990 *Animal Dreams*, a book that aligns the multicultural family with environmental systems to suggest the multicultural family as a kind of compensation for environmental problems. Heise then critiques Ruth Ozeki’s *All Over Creation* (2003) for aligning biological and cultural diversity in ways that ultimately ignore how “causally dependent [transnational cultural encounters are on] economic globalization.” Heise is arguing that environmental writing and environmentalism could benefit from a more substantive transnational turn that does more than merely romanticize transnational and multicultural subjects. Heise wants us to resist the “enduring temptation” to derive “socio-cultural ethics and political stances

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from the insights of ecological science.” In Heise’s view, the “oppositonality of the multicultural and transnational subject” has appealed to writers in ways that mask what has brought about such oppositonality in the first place: our environmentally rapacious transnational economy.

In this response, I want to focus on one part of Heise’s argument that I find particularly significant: her concern with the analogizing of biodiversity and cultural diversity. By attending primarily to this aspect of Heise’s argument, I do not mean to discount the rest of her essay. Heise’s take on the emergence of environmental criticism in relation to work in American studies, for instance, has important consequences for keeping environmental criticism from stagnating in relation to current scholarly and cultural trajectories. I want to focus on bio/cultural analogies to avoid what I fear might be a possible uptake of Heise’s piece that would see such analogies as part of a new wave of transnational environmental thought. By historicizing Heise’s examples, I mean to show that there were very similar ones in the late nineteenth century, and by offering this comparison, I want to question Heise’s suggestion that equating biological and cultural diversity is “ultimately not . . . environmentalist.” As I think my examples will show, environmentalism has long relied on such equations between what might be called nature and culture. What is at stake in seeing environmentalism as inclusive or exclusive of this kind of thinking is an accurate and responsive definition of environmentalism in our transnational context.

Analogies between species diversity and cultural difference were fundamental to the North American environmentalist rhetoric of one of the first and most successful environmentalist interventions: the effort, in the late nineteenth century, to save dozens of species of birds from impending extinction due to the industry of the plume trade.¹ In the 1880s and 1890s, environmentalists, writers, and activists responded in a number of ways to what seemed to many to be an imminent mass extinction; one of the responses was to create a new genre of the birdwatching field guide in an effort to foster new attitudes of appreciation and protectionism toward birds. As the nineteenth century came to a close, the pastime of identifying birds was promoted by field guide authors as a way to ultimately protect birds. The new field guides to North American birds were written by a number of authors, including four particularly prolific women writers: Florence Merriam, Mabel Osgood Wright, Neltje Blanchan, and Olive Thorne Miller. The logic of aligning bio- and cultural diversity (though the term *biodiversity* was not coined until much later) was one of their chief rhetorical strategies. These authors did this with

one key difference from the authors Heise discusses: instead of deriving cultural understanding from what we know about the environment, these early environmentalist field guide authors worked to teach readers about avian diversity based on what were then the predominant conceptions of cultural difference. By making species difference and cultural difference analogous, bird species were represented as identifiably different from one another, human-like, and worth protecting. The direction of the analogy was the opposite of the examples Heise refers to, as the authors Heise cites use biodiversity to understand culture, whereas the ones I have mentioned use cultural diversity to understand biodiversity. With this noted, there is remarkable similarity in that the analogies involve the same elements, equating two otherwise quite different phenomena: species and cultural difference.

There are many examples of the kind of rhetoric I am describing in what was then the new genre of the field guide, but let me cite just a few instances, all from what is arguably the first field guide to North American birds, Florence Merriam's *Birds Through an Opera Glass* (1889). Merriam describes several species of birds as discernible in the ways various types of people are. She characterizes several species of woodpeckers in this way, for instance: "In the spring the yellow-bellied woodpecker is a mercurial Frenchman compared with the sober, self-contained Englishmen, his cousins, the hairy and downy" (160). Merriam analogizes biological and cultural difference for pedagogical reasons, as she is attempting to teach readers about the differences between three distinct species of woodpecker (the yellow-bellied woodpecker, the hairy woodpecker, and the downy woodpecker). To create such distinctions in the mind of the reader, Merriam draws upon a familiar system of difference (cultural) to compare the bird species to Europeans of different national origin and character. Even though all Europeans are members of the same species, *homo sapiens*, and the birds she describes are not, the analogy aligns where species and culture sit on a taxonomic hierarchy. This could be termed a kind of misalignment, since cultural difference is not of the same order as species difference, but as an analogy it does significant work to make birds seem both different from one another and human-like. Through the analogy, birds are rendered identifiable, anthropomorphic, and ultimately worth protecting. This may not be a logically or taxonomically accurate rhetoric, but it has a strategic environmentalist purpose, suggesting that readers see themselves in nature and nature in themselves. It may not go so far as to disrupt conceptions of nature and culture as separate, or nature as seconded,² but this kind of analogizing does equate humans with the natural world in ways that were

critical to fostering broad support for the environmentalist initiative of saving birds.

Now, if these analogies between animal or plant difference and cultural difference were being made between polytypic species and human culture, it might make a bit more sense. Polytypic species, of which there are many among birds, are species that commonly hybridize and are comprised of one or more subspecies or races. The level of variation among polytypic species is at least closer to that of human cultural difference. I offer this point to suggest that equating cultural diversity with biodiversity may not be inherently flawed. In fact, cultural diversity, in that it occurs among humans and humans are animals, is one aspect of difference in the natural world; the problem arises when culture is analogized in a very simple, non-polytypic way with species. When cultural difference and species difference are compared without attention to polytypic species, culture and species get constructed in relationship with one another. What results is that cultural diversity seems fixed and absolute like species difference, and species difference seems malleable and constructed like cultural difference.

While analogizing cultural and biodiversity inaccurately makes socially constructed cultural differences seem equivalent to species difference, the analogy accurately positions humans as part of the global environment.

Elsewhere in her 1889 field guide, Merriam makes comparisons between bird species and human races. Referring to the Baltimore oriole, Merriam writes:

Birds' bills are their tools,—the oriole's is long and pointed for weaving, the chickadee's short and strong to serve as a pickaxe; but when the nest does not call for a tool of its own the bill conforms to the food habits of the bird,—as the white man's needs are met by knife and fork, and the Chinaman's by chopsticks. (82)

Here, bird species in different families (there are several species of orioles, for instance) are aligned with seemingly distinct human races through a simile that equates beaks to eating utensils or "tools." By aligning the differences between birds and bird families with features of socially constructed human cultures, national origins, and races, several late nineteenth-century environmental writers implied that the cultural particularities of the species *homo sapiens* were matched up with species distinctions. This alignment of culture with species in the 1890s makes cultural

difference seem fixed while reifying race through the analogy, which is to say that it is produced by and reproductive of dominant cultural ideologies recrudescing in the era of Jim Crow laws. I would not, however, go so far as to say it is not environmentalist.

As these examples show, the kinds of analogies Heise finds problematic in 1990s fiction have at least a 100-year history in writing about the environment. Some of the earliest environmentalist arguments for species preservation in North America rely on analogizing biological and cultural diversity in what are obviously problematic ways. Importantly, the field guides I have mentioned set out to change attitudes and foster environmental preservation, and they used similar analogies to accomplish this environmentalism. In the 1880s, it was racism, xenophobia, and ethnocentrism that informed the connections made between humans and birds; in the 1990s, as Heise points out, it is transnationalism that is informing the romanticizing of the transnational family at the expense of a comprehensive understanding of biodiversity and the economics of transnationalism. I have drawn attention to the history of this kind of thinking and writing because I agree with Heise in seeing such analogies as problematic, but at the same time I want to contest her assertion that such thinking and writing is not environmentalist. Environmentalism, as I have attempted to show, has long been based on androcentric reasoning and rhetoric for the specific reason that environmentalist rhetoric is intended to appeal to readers in order to bring about substantive conservation and/or preservation. As I think the early field guides to North American birds begin to show, a sound, unproblematic rhetoric of environmental preservation has not always been as important to environmental writers as rhetoric that persuades and moves people to action.

Notes

1. See Jennifer Price, *Flight Maps: Adventures with Nature in Modern America* (1999).
2. See Sarah Franklin, Jackie Stacey, and Celia Lury, *Global Nature, Global Culture* (2000).

Works Cited

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| <p>Heise, Ursula. "The Hitchhiker's Guide to Ecocriticism." <i>PMLA</i> 121.2 (2006): 503–516.</p> | <p>Merriam, Florence. <i>Birds Through an Opera Glass</i>. New York: Chautauqua Press, 1889.</p> |
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