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Title:

Book Review: *Ecologia letteraria. Una strategia di sopravvivenza* by Serenella Iovino

Journal Issue:

[gender/sexuality/italy, 2 \(2015\)](#)

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Publication date:

July 2015

Publication info:

gender/sexuality/italy, "Reviews"

Permalink:

<http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/book-review-ecologia-letteraria/>

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Iovino, Serenella. *Ecologia letteraria. Una strategia di sopravvivenza*. Milano: Edizioni ambiente, 2014 (2006). Pp. 160. ISBN 9788866271307 (ePub). € 9,99.

In the age of the global ecological crisis, literary critics have joined forces with scholars in other fields to raise awareness about the tenability of our current lifestyle and help us develop alternative modes of perceiving our relationship with the environment that can become “strategies of survival.” Already in its second edition, Serenella Iovino’s *Ecologia letteraria* introduces Italian readers to ecocriticism, while contributing significantly, as Cheryll Glotfelty and Scott Slovic explain in the book’s preface and afterword respectively, to the international debate on literary ecology that arose in the US in the 80s and 90s. Drawing on a wide array of sources, *Ecologia letteraria* provides an in-depth overview of the theoretical framework of ecocriticism. In addition, it provides practical examples of how this interdisciplinary approach, which is intertwined with other discourses of difference, can enhance the readers’ understanding of texts in a way that will develop their ecological consciousness—that is to say, the awareness of the interdependence between all forms of life—and turn them into responsible global citizens.

Focused on theory, the first section (“Un’etica della cultura ambientale”) delves into the conceptual premises of ecocriticism. Iovino contends that ecocritical thought is an expression of the second, “reconstructive” phase of postmodernism; it aims at challenging master narratives while developing alternative discourses that will give voice to marginalized perspectives and create a culture of inclusivity. Because of its emphasis on difference, and its goal of dismantling dichotomies to create a horizontal society, Iovino sees ecological thought as having strong ties with gender and postcolonial studies, as witnessed also by the emergence of ecofeminism. In the critic’s view, the type of non-anthropocentric humanism supported by ecological thought can help develop new attitudes towards the Other which can enhance alternative theories of difference while helping to broaden their scope. Chapter one (“L’orizzonte dell’etica ambientale”) reconstructs the cultural milieu that gave rise to ecocriticism by examining some of the key theories, from deep ecology to social ecology, ecofeminism, and ecosocialism, which seek to develop a new discourse on society based on the symbiotic relationship between human and non-human. Chapter two (“La sfera d’azione globale e l’immaginazione ecologica”) focuses on bioregionalism and ecological cosmopolitanism as two of the movements that have aimed at preserving biodiversity against the effects of globalization and sought to translate ecological thought into a political praxis. In Iovino’s view, ecological cosmopolitanism is more likely to have a lasting impact because, by establishing a dialogue between local and global, it can transform the preservation of regional difference into a politics of international collaboration, leading also to the development of a transnational model of citizenship based on ecological responsibility. Chapter three (“La cultura ambientale come strategia di sopravvivenza”) examines the relationship between environmental ethics and ecocriticism while exploring the “strategies of survival” that are specific to the latter and its “ecology of culture.” Ecocriticism seeks to develop an ecological awareness by looking to literature and other cultural products, without distinction of genre, as applied ethics. Its goal is to investigate how, by working on the imagination, texts orient readers towards a new paradigm of living based on the interdependent evolution between all forms of life, and can transform them into agents of a horizontal dialectic between human and non-human.

The second part of Iovino’s *Ecologia* (“Quattro letture ecocritiche”) provides four practical applications of ecocriticism. The first chapter in this section (“La differenza e l’ammonimento. Il femminile trasversale nell’*Iguana*’ di Anna Maria Ortese) is an ecofeminist reading of Anna Maria Ortese’s *The Iguana* (1965). Ecofeminism, Iovino argues, develops a broader and more inclusive discourse about gender by establishing a parallel between women and the environment as victims of an oppressive system that justifies marginalization through the construction of conceptual binaries and hierarchical dichotomies. Ortese’s work, in the critic’s view, is particularly suitable for an ecofeminist

reading because of the author's attempt to create a discourse about femininity based on the solidarity between different forms of life. Daddo, the Milanese aristocrat who is visiting Estrellita's imaginary land in *The Iguana*, initially sees the child servant as a reptile because of the degraded state to which she is reduced. Only when Daddo starts to empathize with the iguana is his vision finally corrected, leading to his awareness that animality is a cultural construct created by humans to oppress their own kind. As Iovino contends, in *The Iguana* Ortese subverts our ontological categories to build a non-essentializing portrayal of femininity, or *femminile trasversale*, that can become a catalyst for both social and ecological change.

Iovino's second ecocritical reading ("La trascendeza sovversiva. 'La passione secondo G.H.' di Clarice Lispector e la mistica del non umano") argues that Clarice Lispector's *The Passion According to G.H.* (1964) attempts to reshape the readers' imaginary by redefining accepted notions of both the human and the divine. After killing a cockroach, the novel's protagonist undergoes an experience of reverse mysticism that leads her to convert to a form of pantheism. She establishes a communion with a non-human form of life that helps her transcend the limitations of the human and reconnect with "matter." In *The Passion*, Iovino argues, animality exposes anthropocentrism as a social construct that limits the possibilities of being and acts as a subversive force that helps humanity redeem itself. In her third ecocritical analysis ("Un'ecologia della differenza. Cultura e paesaggio in Pier Paolo Pasolini"), Iovino argues that Pier Paolo Pasolini is a central figure to the development of an "ecology of difference." Pasolini's work is informed by an "ethics of place" that seeks to preserve biodiversity against the homologating effects of the consumer society through the recovery of the vernacular cultures that *speak* and thus are inextricably connected to landscape. Pasolini's theory of landscape, Iovino argues, is based on a horizontal relation between human and non-human, which reaffirms their interdependence. Dialects and "fireflies" are the voices of a past that returns to foster redemption through the development of an ecological, future-oriented notion of the present.

The final chapter and last ecocritical reading of *Ecologia letteraria* ("La vita plurale degli alberi. Jean Giono, la *land ethic* e un'ecologia della speranza") examines the parallels that exist between Jean Giono's story, "The Man Who Planted Trees" (1953), and Aldo Leopold's project of a "land ethic" as theorized in *A Sand County Almanac* (1949). Leopold views humans and the land as part of an interrelated "biotic community," which must follow an evolutionary model based on shared survival. The protagonist of "The Man Who Planted Trees," Elzéard Bouffier, applies this theory of harmonic co-evolution when he metaphorically resists the destruction of the World Wars via the reforestation of a desolate valley by the Alps in Provence. Iovino interprets Bouffier's effort to make his land habitable as the work of a model ecological citizen, a citizen who understands that the life of all species is interconnected and, instead of acting as mere consumer, takes responsibility for the survival of her/his own biocommunity.

In conclusion, *Ecologia letteraria* makes a compelling case for how the ecological crisis is a product of our own faulty ethical systems, and the ecocritical reading of cultural texts can help us revise our conceptual frameworks in a way that may foster change. In addition, it provides important insights on how, by overcoming the dichotomy between human and non-human, ecocriticism also brings a new and positive dimension to the discourse and the mission of gender studies. As Iovino convincingly argues, with its broader definition of difference and inclusion, literary ecology supports the development of a society where no form of life is subordinated to, or can be exploited by, any another, and diversity in all of its facets is seen as a fundamental condition and an essential *agent* of survival.

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