CHAPTER 5

Reframing American Naturism? Space, History and the Rise of Environmental Discourse

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Abstract

The rise of environmental studies is an acknowledgment that the surround plays a larger and more fundamental role in human history than previously understood. Nonetheless the meaning of “environment” and of its representations is far from settled. One point of contestation is the significance attributed to the discourses of nature, and in particular American naturism as a body of writings and conceptual frame for the environmental humanities. This chapter argues that the conceptualization of space provides a useful corrective to the predominant understandings of literary naturism in the United States. It re-contextualizes naturism in light of the geo-historical development of western societies and explores the development of American environmentalist thought through a re-reading of works by Frederick Jackson Turner and Roderick Nash.

Keywords

space – counter-culture – ecocriticism – conservation – environmentalism – preservation – naturism

1 Introduction: Nature as “Counter”

The term “counter” may serve to define an entity that counteracts, or has been designed to counteract, a hegemonic institution, idea or discourse. A counter-discourse is a “discourse of opposition,” a response to hegemonic ideas and practices seen as mistaken or destructive, but ultimately re-formable. The conception of power in a counter-discourse, then, might be likened to the concept of “countervailing power” in economic theory by which the power of capital is to be checked and opposed by that of various organized groups of civil society encouraged and supported by the State (Galbraith, 1983), but it is far closer to the idea of a counter-culture – Theodore Roszak’s sociological
operationalizing of romanticism’s celebration of values and beliefs that lie in opposition to technical reason (1969).

Arguably then the modern origin of counter-discourses lies at the point when skepticism about the Enlightenment’s conjoining of reason and value took hold; it manifested itself in new divisions between fact and valence, science and religion, mind and heart that absorbed the attention of so many writers in both popular and elite discourses of the 19th century. The discourses of ultimate value and sentimental sensibility were cast against the hegemonic values of modernization – instrumental reason, social transformation and capital accumulation. Many discourses are “counter” to dominant values in this 19th century sense: they are not transformative (or revolutionary) discourses, but discourses of contention and opposition on limited grounds, that leave aside or bracket social structures and institutions. Their weakness lies in their vulnerability to appropriation and displacement; their strength lies in a pluralistic conception of power that casts human destiny with the opportunities for creatively re-thinking the problems of fact and value.

Donald Worster traced American nature writing to the English nature essay (1994: 3–25) and Lawrence Buell has classified American nature writing as a reflection of the “environmental imagination,” merely a part of an inclusive category of literary “naturism” (1995: 11). Naturism understood as a counter-culture appeared in several national contexts: it implied and generated discourses of opposition to modernity; “environmental” in its concern with natural environments, it was also “ecological” in its opposition to an instrumentalist view of those environments and of the lifeworld. At the same time like all counter-cultures, American naturism – or “nature writing” as it was called not so long ago (Lyon 1989) – hinged on a set of binaries adapted to the American situation: practice/experience versus ideality; the imaginative versus the real; Native American versus European. Both ecological criticism (or eco-criticism) and first wave environmental history (see, for example, Worster 1979; 1990) were counter-cultural, at least in inspiration, and often in phenomenological method as well; at the core of contemporary environmental academic discourse in the humanities is an understanding that the earlier divergence from both scientific and socially constructed understandings of environment, was a profound weakness, if not perhaps an outright failure. And at the heart of the ecological perspective in both the historical and literary studies so criticized, lay American naturism with its overt concern with the preservation of natural environments. Seen at one time as holding great promise (Paul 1976), naturism was redefined as a problem. The two most persuasive responses have been premised on either (1) refining naturism by stripping away its unreliable political tendencies, flirtations with primitivism and deeply felt criticisms of