

Introduction

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What happens to an academic discipline as it reaches maturity? It is striking to observe just how quickly ecocriticism, or ecological literary studies, has risen from obscurity to prominence within the global community of humanities scholars during a span of the last four decades. In 2023, we can see that ecocriticism has made its way through several recognisable phases, or ‘waves’, since the field was named by William Rueckert in 1978. One feature of the most recent wave of ecocriticism, which Scott Slovic calls ‘the fifth wave’, is the tendency of scholars to ‘go public’ with their social and environmental concerns, writing not only for academic journals but also for popular media, such as blogs and mass-distribution news outlets. Another aspect of the rapidly maturing field of ecocriticism is the development of very specific sub-fields, or micro-disciplines, each of which has the potential to grow into a free-standing area of academic research and teaching.

Examples of recent micro-disciplines that have sprouted from the fertile seedbed of ecocriticism include astro-ecocriticism, cli-fi studies, empirical ecocriticism, precarity studies, and specific national or regional perspectives within ecocriticism. In proposing what he calls ‘the Astropocene’, Michael J. Gormley applies various ecocritical lenses to the study of interplanetary nature narratives in his 2021 monograph *The End of the Anthropocene: Ecocriticism, the Universal Ecosystem, and the Astropocene*. Numerous books and articles concerning climate fiction have been published in the past decade, ranging from Antonia Mehnert’s *Climate Change Fictions: Representations of Global Warming in American Literature* (2016) to Adeline Johns-Putra’s collection *Climate and Literature* (2019). Indian scholar Pramod

K. Nayar has led the way in introducing ‘precarity’ as a key concept within ecocritical studies, building on some of the decolonising paradigms advanced by environmental justice ecocriticism and postcolonial ecocriticism and offering such monographs as *Bhopal’s Ecological Gothic: Disaster, Precarity, and the Biopolitical Uncanny* (2017) and *Ecoprecarity: Vulnerable Lives in Literature and Culture* (2019). The application of empirical methodologies from the social sciences to the study of environmental texts has become known as ‘empirical ecocriticism’, and this methodological innovation is another sub-field within ecocriticism that has the potential to blossom as a bona fide humanities discipline that will contribute a uniquely quantifiable perspective on how texts inspire various thoughts and feelings among audiences – this work has been piloted in a number of individual articles and special journal issues (see *ISLE*, Spring 2020), with a foundational collection due to be published in 2023. Since 2016 or so, numerous volumes showcasing specific national, regional, and subcultural approaches to ecocriticism and the environmental humanities – such as Africa, Bangladesh, East Asia, Japan, Latinx, Southeast Asia, Taiwan, and Turkey, to name only a few examples – have proliferated. Each of these has the potential to become a free-standing branch of ecocritical and interdisciplinary, environment-oriented humanistic inquiry.

In recent years, scholars such as John C. Ryan, a contributor to the current special issue, have also pioneered another powerful sub-field within ecocriticism: the exploration of how specific species, such as plants, are represented and contemplated in human cultural texts. Ryan’s 2017 monograph *Plants in Contemporary Poetry: Ecocriticism and the Botanical Imagination* is a foundational work of botanical ecocriticism. Ryan and his colleagues have further refined this plant-centred approach to ecocriticism in such volumes as *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature* (2017), *Forest Family* (2018), *Seeing Trees: A Poetic Arboretum* (2019), and *The Mind of Plants: Narratives of Vegetal Intelligence* (2021). To further sub-divide the ecocritical interest in plants, there has emerged an even more focused movement in the field, during the past two or three years, which explores the cultural meanings and textual representations of trees. Several collections and monographs – such as Carmen Concilio and Daniela Fargione’s *Trees in Literature and the Arts: Human Arboreal Perspectives in the Anthropocene* (2021) and Anna Burton’s *Trees in Nineteenth-Century English Fiction* (2021), to name a few examples – have foregrounded the special place of trees (and the absence of trees) in the human imagination. This has been the case throughout human history, but particularly during an era of changing climate and the deforestation wrought by spreading aridity, violent new storm patterns, intensifying wildfire seasons, and ongoing tree-cutting industries, we find ourselves attuned to the meaning of trees in our lives with more acuteness and nostalgia than ever before.

The articles collected in this special issue devoted to what we are calling “arboreal ecocriticism” exhibit this tree-consciousness in a variety of cultural, linguistic, and national traditions, including Australian Aboriginal poetry, Moroccan fiction, Indian activist prose, Turkish shamanistic fiction, French literature, and Taiwanese folklore. These are surely just a few branches of the tree of arboreal fiction, which could likely be extended to include every society on Earth. Before long, given the trajectory of ecocriticism, there may be sub-sub-fields focusing on mangrove ecocriticism, cactus ecocriticism, deciduous ecocriticism, evergreen ecocriticism, etc. There could also be studies focusing on the strong activist theme within tree-related environmental literature, such as Xu Gang’s *Wake-up Woodchoppers!* (1988), Julia Butterfly Hill’s *The Legacy of Luna* (2000), and Wu Sheng’s *The Poet Who Plants Trees* (2017). We offer the seven articles that follow as a stylistically and topically diverse array of studies, hoping that this work will help to call attention to a growing interest among ecocritics in the meaning of trees in our lives.

A key voice in American environmental literature, Indiana-based writer Scott Russell Sanders, once lamented our tendency in the modern world to separate ourselves from the material world of nature and relish the “perfection of our technological boxes” (1991, 226). This was originally published in 1987, before the ubiquity of mobile devices expanded the control of technology over our lives, further mediating our conscious contact with the more-than-human world – and before the rise of material ecocriticism and such concepts as “transcorporeality”, which help us to appreciate the presence of “nature” even within our mediated, technology-dominated spaces. For Sanders, the importance of “see[ing] the world in ecological perspective”, which means appreciating our own lives in relation with fellow humans and with non-human organisms and forces, called for seeking out activities that deliberately facilitate awareness of such relationships. In his essay “Earth’s Body”, published in 1993, Sanders stretched his thinking about the need for physical contact with the natural world further by telling the story of waking up in the middle of the night and wandering into his backyard garden to commune with a tree:

I shuffle to the nearer tree and read the braille of the bark with my fingers. Roots hump beneath my feet. Overhead, leaves form a canopy of black lace. I press my cheek and chest against the sharp ridges of the bark and wrap my arms around the trunk. My hands do not meet, the maple is so stout. (45)

The writer finds this experience to be mysteriously comforting, somehow confirming his kinship with a being that outwardly appears very different than himself and confirming his sense of belonging in the

world. This special issue of *Lagoonscapes* likewise confirms what many scholars in the humanities have long suspected about ecocritics. Many of us are indeed ‘tree-huggers’, lovers of the nonhuman world (particularly trees) and humans alike. But this issue also demonstrates that we are tree-thinkers, scholars who recognise the semiosis, the cultural and psychological significance of trees – their deep importance, which includes but goes well beyond the value of their material fibre, in our lives.

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