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INTRODUCTION



## A legacy of waste: Reflections on literature and the environment

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Instead of looking at the past by viewing the remains of ancient settlements or by inspecting inscriptions left in caves by early humans, future generations will gather information about current times by the imprint that neo-liberal capitalism is leaving on everything. Plastic bottles, chewing gum, electronic components and even medical waste will provide them with a portrait of the Anthropocene, the age shaped by the climate changes we have caused and now inhabit.

Not so long ago, Clark (2011) speculated that this global environmental issue did not generally figure in eco/environmental critical literature because of the overwhelming dimensions of the problem (10–11). Handley (2015) has since posited that the difficulty of critically tackling climate change from the standpoint of the humanities may also reside in the fact that it challenges the very core of our enlightened ideas of an autonomous self and its concomitant attributes of individual agency and accountability (333). “Climate change”, Handley elaborates, “has introduced the problem of a human agency that is so profoundly collective that accountability for the changes wrought on the climate is no easy matter to trace” (333). On the other hand, DeLoughrey (2015) has simultaneously postulated that it is precisely the awareness of the Anthropocene that has led to an increased interest in environmental humanities (352). Climate change being a global issue, the ripple effect – for studies of discourse – of this “turn to the Anthropocene” is perceived by DeLoughrey as equally global: “after decades of work that examined the historicism and difference of the human subject, particularly in post-colonial studies, we are seeing a discursive shift to figuring humanity on a planetary scale” (352).

Propelled by this ever-growing ecological consciousness that climate change and other irreversible phenomena have created in our daily lives, authors and writers are already documenting this state of emergency that society has reached. The study of these literary imaginings presents itself as more pertinent than ever, as it dwells upon fundamental questions of self, agency and accountability, as well as the interconnections between the multiple species that populate this planet. As Handley (2015) puts it, “a tale, like an ecosystem, is a human way of organizing the appearance of separation and of chaos into a workable and animated order that our imagination can use as a method for seeing and understanding our limits” (336). Literature, with its many genres and languages, continues to offer the possibility of taking small but definitive steps towards addressing this overwhelming global concern:

The unique contribution of literary language to the problem of climate change [ . . . ] is literature's capacity to expose and exploit the limited and rhetorical nature of its own metaphors and the very real differences that persist within such imagined unities. (334)

The contributors to this special focus section entitled “Eco-Fictions: Emergent Discourses on Nature and the Environment in Postcolonial Literatures” have identified a series of emergent discourses in literatures written in English that address the way in which nature has been represented in literature as well as the symbolic connection that exists between nature and humankind. The term “eco-fictions” here refers to writings about nature, the environment and ecology in general. Furthermore, the term “emergent” as a titular concept is not just used in a temporal sense, but largely in an epistemological one as these new discourses, often from previously submerged or suppressed groups, destabilize deep-rooted cultural assumptions and cause important social transformations. Thus, this section is situated at the intersection of artistic creation and political intervention, as it analyses the dialogic relationship with nature that blooms from postcolonial literatures and which is illustrative of a reflective eco-critical attitude towards the environmental consequences of human behaviour.

### Going green: The environmental turn in literary studies

At the end of the 20th century the growing discipline of study also known as “ecocriticism” opened new avenues of research within academia. Glotfelty and Fromm (1996) approached the term in their *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, as a field of enquiry that examines the relationship between what surrounds us and both literary and cultural studies. Accordingly, this academic matter for discussion denounces the anthropocentric and instrumental bias that views nature as a mere object for human exploitation. Glotfelty (1996), in the introduction to this foundational anthology, offers a provisional definition of the subject under analysis, which she describes as

the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies. (xix)

Ecocriticism is thus transdisciplinary as well as multidimensional in scope, engaging with political discourses and philosophical theories to develop a critical attitude towards environmental justice. In this vein, Kerridge and Sammells (1998) edited a collection of essays, *Writing the Environment*, which engages with the cultural fictions that emerge from this connection between humans and nature. Their anthology considers that one of the main motivations behind ecocriticism is to track environmental ideas and representations in order to evaluate texts “in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis” (5).

The 1990s marked a turning point for the analysis of ecology as a critical concept. From this point onwards, postcolonial, posthuman and feminist theories started to question the simple representation of concepts such as “nature” or “environment” under the umbrella term of ecocriticism. With this, new approaches opened further avenues of research inviting scholars to deal with the nature–culture dichotomy beyond

its symbolic level, as well as to overcome it. The “first wave” of ecocriticism – after Naess’s (1995) articulation during the 1970s that political or economic changes may not be accomplished without first changing the individual’s ideology (cited in Clark 2011, 23–24) – was strongly anthropocentric and rooted in deep ecology (Buell 2005, 21). However, since the late 1990s, a new understanding prompted ecocritics to no longer perceive human beings and the environment as opposed to one another, but instead to underscore the ways in which they were interdependent. They began to address both human concerns and non-human nature in urban, suburban and wilderness settings; they encompass now all types of literary text; and they have widened their scope beyond their former focus on European and Northern American texts.

Indeed, world literatures have become paramount in this emerging discipline. Coupe (2000), in the introduction to *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism* (3–7), points to the close connection between ecocriticism and political commitment. According to Coupe, the existing relationship with our surroundings, our sense of place, also conditions our identity. This special focus section bears witness to this idea. Environmental sustainability lies at the core of the problematic that certain texts, including the ones contained in this corpus of analysis, wish to target. Love (2003), in *Practical Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology and the Environment*, goes beyond the straightforward representation of physical and psychical relationships in aiming for a scientific understanding of human nature by drawing, for his literary study of pastoral texts, from biological sciences such as evolutionary psychology. Love also advocates the analysis of literary texts from a global perspective, so as to examine divergences and points in common between different literary traditions.

A rhetorical analysis of tropes around nature and the environment is the point of departure for Garrard (2004) in *Ecocriticism*. He sees the production, reproduction and transformation of culture as creating political effects or to serving particular social interests:

The challenge for ecocritics is to keep one eye on the ways in which ‘nature’ is always in some ways culturally constructed, and the other on the fact that nature really exists, both the object and, albeit distantly, the origin of our discourse [ ... ]. Ecocritics remain suspicious of the idea of science as wholly objective and value-free, but they are in the unusual position as cultural critics of having to defer, in the last analysis, to a scientific understanding of the world. (10)

Despite these different scholarly approaches to ecocriticism, Buell (2005) highlights in *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* the way in which ecocritics agree on keeping environmental matters at the centre of their concerns. Differing points of view in world literatures, as well as in theoretical practices, enrich the debate on the complex existing interplay between culture and the environment. Buell focuses on the themes and topics found in literary texts, where nature and the environment acquire a paradigmatic dimension, rather than on providing an ultimate definition or method of analysis. This cosmivision of literature around ecological matters has favoured dichotomies regarding issues related to gender and class, which have become more important in recent years.

Scholars have continued to question anthropocentric considerations of nature and to advocate the dislocating of humankind from the centre of the universe. For instance, Morton in *Ecology Without Nature* (Morton 2007) and *The Ecological Thought* (Morton

2010) follows this view and postulates a discursive conception of nature – that is, a rhetorical construction that goes beyond the simple representation of it in literature. Accordingly, the representation of nature in fiction needs to be carefully considered in order to avoid any kind of misinterpretation. Nature is not an object of adoration; it is rather the element that conditions the existence between humans and non-humans. One of the main challenges faced by contemporary ecocriticism is the need to move away from formulations that deify nature in the same way anthropocentrism glorifies humankind.

In order to facilitate such a move, LeMenager, Shewry, and Hiltner (2011), in the introduction to *Environmental Criticism for the Twenty-First Century*, invite readers to approach this academic discipline from a transversal perspective, engaging with other fields of knowledge, arguing that “the proliferation of environmental criticism in dialogue with science and technology in the last decade testifies to the robust future of environmental science studies, a field that will be sustained by a sharpening of its key conflicts and concepts” (3). They consider that canonical European literatures only offer a narrow vision of the issue. Other literary traditions, or as they put it, “the archives of global south, non-Euro-American, and indigenous peoples” (8), have in their view great potential for engaging with the current environmental crisis.

Critical responses to the representation of this environmental crisis in literature are now being adopted from the most diverse points of view, fostering the analysis of texts through innovative lenses. In this respect, it is important to highlight the significance of theories around ecofeminism and/or eco-Marxism. As Vakoch (2012) points out,

Like feminist theory, ecocriticism recognizes the discontinuities and tensions between historical and poststructuralist approaches to its discipline, as well as between Western perspectives and more globally inclusive understandings. Ecocriticism has increasingly acknowledged the complex interplay of environment and culture, and feminist perspectives have provided a guide for doing so. (2)

Traditionally, patriarchy has had vested interests in aligning women with nature. Feminism, in turn, has either denounced this equivalence, woman–nature, or appropriated it to contest this oppressive ideology. Taking this into consideration, ecofeminism fosters the analysis of the feminization of nature or the naturalization of women in literature within texts that challenge this dichotomy in contemporary literary production. This hybrid discipline opens the scope of ecocriticism to diverse, yet conflicting, perspectives questioning the value given by the dominant patriarchal culture to the role of both women and nature. Ecofeminism, as Buell, Heise, and Thornber (2011) put it, could be considered as a “politically engaged discourse that analyzes conceptual connections between the manipulation of women and the nonhuman” (425).

Eco-Marxism, similarly, advocates the analysis of literary texts according to a different paradigm. If Marxism denounces the synergies of exploitation of humans by other humans for economical purposes, eco-Marxism claims that a similar process is taking place when humans exploit nature for the same purpose. Eco-Marxism examines the subjection of both subaltern communities and the environment by capitalism.

Puleo et al. (2015) remind us that the real challenge for the 21st century is to work towards dismantling existing hierarchies of power relations. Both scholars and artists have accepted this challenge, seeking necessary transformative relations in order to

correct environmental maldevelopment and put forward arguments and policies based on subsistence and sustainability.

Inspiring epistemologies are emerging also from the intersection of postcolonialism and ecocriticism, as was suggested at the very beginning of this introduction, although reconciling the varying aims of these two fields has not always been thought possible, since postcolonial studies have been perceived as “inherently anthropocentric” (Huggan and Tiffin 2015, 3). By contrast, as already mentioned, earlier ecocriticism was exposed for placing “Europe and the United States as the epistemological centers” (DeLoughrey and Handley 2011, 8), and failing to “factor cultural difference into supposedly universal environmental and bioethical debates” (Huggan and Tiffin 2015, 3). In this context, Huggan and Tiffin (2015) have pointed out the need to approach ecocriticism from a transdisciplinary perspective. They argue that, considering the actual crisis within the humanities, ecocritical studies need to be practised from a convergent perspective with other well-established avenues of research such as gender or postcolonial studies. These scholars suggest that postcolonial studies address environmental matters not only as a paramount problem in contemporary times, but as an ideology which is inherent in the imperial past of the western world as well as in the historical dependence of the colonial past of European societies. Along similar lines, Nixon (2011) adopts a transnational perspective to expose the limitations of national and local frames in environmental writing, and coins the innovative concept of “slow violence” to describe the ravages of climate change and war, purposely overlooked by global capitalism and dictating, in particular, the environmental conditions of the poor, the disempowered and the displaced.

This special focus of the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* addresses proposals made within both postcolonial and ecocritical studies for fresher, interdisciplinary approaches; wider, more inclusive views and transnational, comparative stances; more effective focus on less well represented texts and genres; as well as more visibility for scholarship produced beyond the global north’s academic centres. Thus, global, planetary concerns at the time of the Anthropocene (such as the nefarious proliferation of waste worldwide, the slow violence of rampant capitalism that lays waste to natural environments and turns people into wasted bodies, and the anthropocentric disregard for non-human species) are addressed in texts that have emerged in various locations around the globe: Malaysia, Guyana, the Philippines. Original comparative pairings (such as that between Caribbean and Scottish poetry) and interdisciplinary dialogue (between musicology and literature); the analysis of discursive representations of nature that trace the rhizomatic presence of the postcolonial, the diasporic and the transnational as well as the Amerindian and the Native American, together with readings focusing on life-writing, poetry, fiction and unexpected spaces of narration such as marginal footnotes promote fresh readings that aim to awaken consciences and move ecological consciousness into action.

### **Eco-fictions: Emergent discourses on nature and the environment in postcolonial literatures**

The articles that follow in this special focus section, and the literary works that they engage with, participate in the concern over the global environmental crisis, and aim to

inspire further thinking on how we inhabit the world we live in and how we discursively represent it. These five articles emerge from a particular moment in ecocriticism in order to propose readings of postcolonial and contemporary texts that address environmental concerns about literature but also about the condition of the world.

Leonor María Martínez Serrano's inspiring study of the multiwoven, polyphonic poetic discourse of Canadian writer Robert Bringhurst in *New World Suite No. 3* opens this section by constructing a non-anthropocentric semiotics in order to affirm a biocentric understanding of every species' right to live. The interdisciplinarity that characterizes the environmental humanities informs this analysis, in which musicology and ecocriticism are linked in order to analyse Bringhurst's poetics and his environmental philosophy. Martínez-Serrano discerns in Bringhurst echoes of R.W. Emerson and H.D. Thoreau, as well as of the cosmology of native peoples of North America and diasporic communities that reached the continent from Asia.

Colonial legacies and the contribution of diasporic communities to the construction of contemporary selves – in this case in Malaysian life-writing in English by female writers – is the subject of Kavitha Ganesan's article. Ganesan engages with a literary tradition which has thus far been widely ignored by the academic community, thereby opening up new avenues of research in the field of postcolonial and ecocritical studies. Life-writing in texts by transnational and diasporic Indian, Malay and Chinese women writers lies at the core of her approach to ecocriticism, as she explores the way in which Adibah Amin, Christine Ramsay and Muthammal Palanisamy use tropes and images related to nature to construct a particular sense of identity and female agency.

Legacies of empire emerge also in Marta Frątczak-Dąbrowska's article "Living in Paradise: The Ecological Conscience of Contemporary Anglo-Guyanese Fiction as Seen through the Examples of *Dark Swirl*, *The Ventriloquist's Tale* and *The Timehrian*". Frątczak-Dąbrowska deals with local and global environmental and ecological discourses in Caribbean fiction from current critical standpoints such as animal ecofeminism. She engages with theories related to rationalism and scientific knowledge by examining three complementary texts by Anglo Caribbean authors Pauline Melville, Cyril Dabydeen and Andrew Jefferson. This approach offers a historical view of the colonial interventions that have conditioned the life of Guyanese communities in the post-imperial era, where neocolonial agents have continued to exploit both the land and the population. Frątczak-Dąbrowska draws on Lawrence Buell's approach to ecocriticism in order to engage with a new conceptualization of Nature within this context. The dichotomy between western and non-western cosmologies features in her analysis of texts that are dominated by a strong sense of ecological justice. Amerindian, African and Hindu philosophies are characteristic of the works here explored. Frątczak-Dąbrowska compares the perceptions found in the corpus between human and non-human ontologies, economic progress, imperial legacy and globalization, showing how these texts by authors from different ethnic backgrounds nevertheless share an interest in the Amerindian vision of nature.

Alexandra Campbell's "Atlantic Exchanges: The Poetics of Dispersal and Disposal in Scottish and Caribbean Seas" connects the eastern and western shores of the Atlantic Ocean from the critical point of view of blue ecology in an illuminating comparative study of the transnational poetics of Kamau Brathwaite and Derek Walcott on the one hand and Scottish ecopoetry on the other. This analysis utilizes the trope of archipelagic

aesthetics to suggest a connection between colonial and capitalist exploitation, and transnational poetics. Placing the works of Kei Miller, Jen Hadfield and Kathleen Jamie alongside those of Brathwaite and Walcott, Campbell examines what she refers to as a “tidalectic” modality to question ecological and political interactions operating on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. According to Campbell, the tidalectic connects the existing relationship between maritime history and cultural production. The hidden historical, cultural and ecological legacy of the ocean is recovered here through the lyrical juxtapositions found in the texts under analysis.

Finally, Begoña Simal-González’s “‘The Waste of the Empire’: Neocolonialism and Environmental Justice in Merlinda Bobis’s ‘The Long Siesta as a Language Primer’ ” takes readers to the Philippines. The author constructs an insightful analysis of the (un) natural environment as portrayed in the fiction by this Filipino Australian writer, seeing it in terms of Buell’s concept of the “environmental unconscious” and Heather Sullivan’s (2012) “dirt theory”. The disposables produced by contemporary overconsumption of material commodities are at the heart of Simal-González’s approach to Bobis’s work. Her article interrogates the “politics of waste” from different perspectives, not only drawing upon environmental consciousness but also upon the socio-economics, as well as theories deriving from postcolonial, ecocritical and globalization studies. Toxic environments equal toxic configurations of power relations in this analysis, which persuasively postulates a “waste theory” that closes this section on “Emergent Discourses on Nature and Environment in Postcolonial Literatures” in a timely and urgent manner.

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