



## **Introduction: Special Issue on Ecocriticism**

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### **Abstract**

The field of ecocriticism dates back to the earliest days of humans commenting on cultural expressions of our relationship to the more-than-human world, but we are now living through a particularly vibrant era of ecocritical engagement with various planetary crises, ranging from climate change and rampant industrial toxicity to the plight of refugees and the hardships caused by the coronavirus pandemic. In addition to exploring timeless philosophical and aesthetic questions, ecocritics seek to gain intellectual traction in explaining and mitigating contemporary humanitarian and ecological problems. The articles included in this special issue of *NALANS* demonstrate a wide range of traditional and cutting-edge ecocritical approaches and concerns.

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No one really knows when ecocriticism began. Many of us were practicing what we now recognize as environmentally-oriented literary studies long before we had the name “ecocriticism” to describe what we were doing, back in the 1980s or much earlier than that.

The term “ecocriticism,” of course, was first used in William Rueckert’s 1978 article titled “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism,” which was reprinted in Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm’s field-defining collection *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* in 1996. As I described in an article on the connections between literature and ecology for the *Routledge Handbook on Religion and Ecology* (2016), I feel that the boldest aspect of Rueckert’s early article “was his notion that ecological concepts are somehow embedded in the very essence of literary expression” (p. 355)—that is, in the living energy of poetic language, which Rueckert described as the “verbal equivalent of fossil fuel (stored energy),” while also recognizing that such language is a “renewable source of energy” (*Ecocriticism Reader*, p. 108).

So, for Rueckert, ecocritical practice seems to have entailed recognizing the fundamental ecological features of human language, its energizing, inspiring, motivating qualities and its fertile relationship with the imagination. This view of the role of critical analysis—to tease out the worldly qualities of language and imagination—is broad and flexible enough to encompass a wide range of approaches to human cultural expression, contemplating the relationship between human experience and imagination and the broader realm of nonhuman existence.

In her introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Glotfelty offered her well-known definition of the field, describing it as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical world” (xviii). Although Glotfelty and Fromm seem to point to Rueckert as a kind of founding father of ecocriticism because he first used this catchy name, the field is actually much older than 1978. David Mazel suggests in his collection *A Century of Early Ecocriticism*, that it’s possible to trace a clear lineage of North American ecocriticism from 1864 to the appearance of Leo Marx’s book *The Machine in the Garden* in 1964. The earlier versions of ecocriticism consisted primarily of describing nature imagery and motifs in literary texts. This may seem very different than the kinds of ecocriticism that have evolved in the past several decades with their intense focus on cross-cultural comparison, social justice, philosophies of materiality, cognitive processing of information, and scholars-as-activists. But there is a common thread in all ecocritical practice, even if it’s not always stated explicitly. This is the idea that human beings and all forms of human expression (not only literature) exist in relation to something outside and larger than ourselves.

The goal of ecocriticism, if I may be so bold as to offer such an overarching claim, is to place human thought, expression, and all other human activities within a planetary context—of course, as soon as I make such a claim, other colleagues will begin to contemplate the relationship between our species and the broader cosmos, not only the Earth that we have always inhabited. Many ecocritics nowadays—such as Sidney Dobrin and Stacy Alaimo—are engaged in something known as the “blue humanities,” studying the sea and other aqueous dimensions of the planet from a humanistic perspective, not only the terrestrial features of the Earth. What’s to stop us from thinking about the meaning of the vast universe for the human imagination. Indeed, as I write this, I remember that only a few days ago I wrote the foreword to a forthcoming book by Paul Bogard and Beau Rogers titled *To Know a Starry Night*, which explores the aesthetic and emotional significance of dark night skies. I guess I have already offered an initial foray into the field of “cosmocriticism,” a potential new wrinkle in ecocritical studies.

As the editor of the journal *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* from 1995 to 2020, I witnessed the development of ecocriticism during a particularly energetic era. If the field has existed since the mid-nineteenth century, according to Mazel, I would argue that it probably goes much further back than the 1860s. In my article “Ecocriticism 101: A Basic Introduction to Ecocriticism and Environmental Literature,” I mention some ancient cave paintings of antelope-like animals I had the opportunity to witness on the subterranean walls of Grotte de Niaux in southern France, which brought me to think that there were probably people some 14,000 years ago, in Niaux, who viewed these images by torch-light and commented on the information conveyed in these dim pigments. Such gestures of interpretation and similar commentaries in many other parts of the world may well have been the initial ecocritical expressions, long before Rueckert’s article and *The Ecocriticism Reader* and the convulsion of ecocritical activity in the late-20<sup>th</sup> and early-21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

During the ongoing burst of millennial ecocritical expression, I have found myself attempting to “micro-historicize” this era that we are living through, noting multiple phases of ecocriticism, which we tend to describe as “waves.” Although I have expressed some misgivings about this hair-splitting process of discerning the subtle shifts the field is undergoing (see “Seasick among the Waves of Ecocriticism”), I have nonetheless detected five, overlapping phases between roughly 1980s and 2020. Although it is possible to approximate the beginning point of each phase, it is important to note that the waves do not seem to end but rather begin to merge with other, newer tendencies in the field. I won’t take the time here to elaborate in detail on all five of the waves, but I will sketch them very briefly:

**Wave 1 (c. 1980 to the present):** emphasis on Anglophone environmental literature, particularly with a focus on wilderness and other non-urban settings and concerns; ecofeminist critique of patriarchal social structures, and other forms of conservation activism expressed through literary analysis.

**Wave 2 (c. 1995-present):** the arising of social justice as a key lens through which to read environmental texts (“environmental justice ecocriticism”); a broadening of interest in cultural expression by non-Euro-American artists/writers; an increasing interest in artistic texts emphasizing environmental experience in varied locations, not only wild or ex-urban places; the study not only of literature but various other forms of human cultural expression through environmental lenses.

**Wave 3 (c. 2000-present):** the emergence of postcolonial and other forms of cross-cultural ecocriticism; critical animal studies begins to converge with ecocriticism.

**Wave 4 (c. 2008-present):** the recognition of how the human body exists in constant physical relationship with the more-than-human world and how material phenomena express embodied narratives; a growing interest in practical aspects of human experience (food, waste management, transportation, architecture, etc.) as forms of cultural expression; a tendency to view cultural texts as information and to study how the human mind processes information.

**Wave 5 (c. 2015-present):** an increasing tendency of ecocritics to publish their work in publicly accessible fora (websites, newspapers) for general audiences or to use ecocritical insights when writing to corporate, governmental, and academic administrators and decision makers; this might be known as the phase when ecocritics began to “go public” in order to have a more direct influence on society.

The articles included in this special issue of *Nalans: Journal of Narrative and Language Studies* cover a wide range of important topics and clearly demonstrate how far ecocriticism has evolved since the early days of proto-ecocriticism described in Mazel’s 2001 collection and in the initial wave of ecocriticism. The titles display a strong interest human and nonhuman “rights” (this reveals the social and environmental justice ethos that plays such a strong role in contemporary ecocriticism). Materiality is also a prominent theme in many of the contributions to this issue, especially in the articles that address questions of toxicity, disease, and militarism. Several of the articles concern psychological/emotional issues vis-à-vis environmental experience. There is also an overriding engagement with “crises” of various kinds, ranging from climate change to the degradation of land, health, and ecological wholeness, crises that we tend these days to associate with 21<sup>st</sup>-century manifestations of the Anthropocene (the Age of Humans). Increasingly, scholars in the field of ecocriticism have come to recognize our work as a guilty product of our anthropocenic lives, given the fact that all of us currently performing this kind of scholarship and teaching have spent our entire lives during the Anthropocene, even though the word “Anthropocene” was used only informally in the 1980s and didn’t become a shared part of our vocabulary until around 2000.

David Mazel described ecocriticism as a form of academic research practiced “as if the earth mattered” (1). If there any kind of humanities scholarship for which the earth does not matter, I have yet to encounter it—and thus, perhaps it would make sense to consider any form of research to be a kind of ecocriticism, implicitly or explicitly recognizing the vital importance of the planet to our own existence and to our efforts to live healthy lives in just communities. This issue of *NALANS* represents the vibrancy and potency of the maturing discipline of

ecocriticism. I congratulate Barış Ağır and Z. Gizem Yılmaz Karahan for their work in compiling this exciting special issue, showcasing cutting-edge examples of ecocritical research.

## References

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