

ECOCRITICISM IN ENGLISH STUDIES

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## INTRODUCTION

This special issue of *RCEI* is devoted to “Ecocriticism in English Studies,” a school of criticism that has been constantly growing, since its emergence in the decade of the late eighties, to the point of being in full force nowadays. Like some other critical tendencies, such as Postcolonialism, Gender Studies or Post-structuralism, among others, the study of the interrelationship between literature, culture and the environment, as Ecocriticism can be roughly defined, is manifold and interdisciplinary, and appropriates contents from other theoretical thoughts to emphasize the important role that nature, place, or non-human species, among other elements, have for human existence. Thus, this section consists of nine articles written by internationally reputed specialists in the field that vary from eco-feminist approaches, climate change issues, animals and philosophy, or eco-oriented literary studies, to name just a few. It opens up with a theoretical prospection of some of the possibilities of cross-fertilization of Ecocriticism with other disciplines and critical schools, such as Pastoralism, Postcolonialism or Environmental and Ecological Justice, written by the editors of this issue, Carmen Flys Junquera and Juan Ignacio Oliva in collaboration with Terry Gifford. The three of us (together with Esther Rey and Patrick D. Murphy) are members of the GIECO group (Grupo de Investigación en Ecocrítica), that forms part of the Franklin Institute for American Studies of the Universidad de Alcalá (Alcalá de Henares, Madrid), to which this monographic issue is especially indebted.

The introductory essay is followed by Joni Adamson’s article, in which Native-American author Linda Hogan’s novel *People of the Whale* (2008) and Niki Caro’s film *Whale Rider* (2002) are studied for the purpose of seeking the age-old wisdom of the indigenous American peoples through the motif of the whale as an archetype of a general, inclusive and “cosmic” knowledge of the world. The relationship between human beings and animals is thus represented by two powerful metaphors, say, the proximity of children to transformational animals that prove the ancestral contact with nature of these ethnic groups; and the traditional hand-made carved canoes that travel across the “road of the whale” (as old Anglo Saxon culture would put it), which shows the various cross-fertilizations established between humans and nature. Adamson analyses the updating of such ancestral wisdoms, using multi-species ethnography and contemporary Indigenous cosmopolitics, as appropriate ecocritical tools to re-vision the entanglement of species in a wiser and more intimate inter-relationship for the sake of the sustainability and equilibrium of the planet.

Simon Estok’s essay, in turn, revises the ecocritical research done in the literature of the Early Modern English period using Shakespeare as the prominent case. These critical works recognize and deconstruct the thematic content of the period as a material that is mainly nature-unwise and (hu)man-centred but, at the same time, acknowledge the didactic possibilities that the study of its virtues and



flaws offer for the improvement of the actual environmental imbalance we are suffering nowadays. Estok poses several questions concerning the purpose of theoretical ecocriticism not only in academic writings but also in formation schools that have mainly to do with new insights, “presentism” vs historicism, anxieties, and relevance of the environmentally oriented study, to conclude that the re-reading of relevant literary and cultural periods in the history of humanity (such as the Early Modern one, in this case) forms very productive scientific alliances.

The fourth essay in the series is Greta Gaard’s exploration of contemporary Buddhist literature written by women in the United States, following a feminist ecological perspective. Going beyond Gary Snyder—but acknowledging also his legacy— as the most celebrated American author with strong Buddhist influence, Gaard traces class, gender and race issues with strong environmental justice orientation in the novels, documentaries and essays written by Joanna Macy, Stephanie Kaza, Barbara Gates, Jeanne DuPrau, Melody Chavis, Ruth Ozeki, bell hooks, and Alice Walker. All of them challenge patriarchal history, especially in relation to racism, heterosexism, or ageism, to offer a new perspective (centred in Western Buddhist wisdom) that differs from the traditional one, rooted in the revision of the white European American literary canon. As far as Patrick D. Murphy’s contribution, it is a profound insight into the concept of the “sublime” from an ecofeminist perspective. After a perceptive revision of the origin of our traditional masculinist and hierarchical vision of the sublime, traced back to renowned philosophers such as Burke and Kant (echoing Longinus), Murphy alleges that especially in 19th-century women writing, the sublime adopted other qualities, like engagement, democracy and domesticity, that have been reworked by feminism and ecofeminism to favour human participation and integration in nature. However, the critic ends his paper expressing his growing scepticism about the use of this term in ecocriticism and gives alternatives to cope with the feeling of rapture in front of extreme aesthetic beauty.

The fruitful encounters of American metafiction with ecocriticism are the subject of analysis in Serpil Oppermann’s essay. Focusing on Raymond Federman’s *To Whom It May Concern* (1990), and after a careful revision of the linguistic metafictional experiments of the novel, Oppermann alleges that what matters most for an ecocritical reading of *To Whom...* is Federman’s treatment of landscape as an immanent concept that transcends time and does not constitute an abstract feature secondary to the text; on the contrary, she affirms that the bonds and attachments with place in the novel constitute a meaningful identity to find a sense for life in the reservoir of nature. As far as John Parham’s article is concerned, contemporary English poetry, in general, and British-poet Alice Oswald’s *Dart*, in particular, will be the goal of his study. With a threefold perspective that tackles ecocriticism, posthumanism and “ecopoetics,” Parham discovers a new ecocritical vein that unites environmental awareness and social and human ecology, putting the emphasis in four specific items: duality in the continuity with (or discordance from) non-human nature, which is described as having a post-humanist sense in Oswald’s poetry; sustainability of human industrial activity amid the natural milieu; the role of humankind as integral body in the quest for environmental justice; and Oswald’s urge to unveil the transcendence of ecology for the very existence of humanity.



Next essay explores the representations of place in the work of mid-20th century Irish writer Elizabeth Bowen. Esther Rey Torrijos justifies the ambiguous presence of supernatural and anthropomorphic elements in her novels, as a way to emphasize the problematic relationship of the author with Ireland—especially with the troublesome colonial past of the country. Rey acutely identifies the tight relationship established between sense of place, culture and identity for Bowen as a means to give a new sense of dignity to the land. Items such as agency or nationalism do mix with contradictory feelings of hostile and menacing depictions of the landscape, on the one hand, and a hidden veneration for the green beauty of Ireland, on the other. Thus, following an ecocritical approach, Rey verifies that amidst the social turmoil in which Bowen lived, tensions caused by alternating feelings of dislocation and topophilia remain obsessively described in her works, but also seem to give transcendental meaning to her life and to the very existence of the nation.

To conclude, the last essay in the collection deals with current visual material which depicts climate change and its deadly consequences. The three raising-consciousness documentaries analysed are Paul Lindsay's *Before the Flood* (2004), Briar March's *There Once Was an Island: Te Henua e Nnobo* (2010), and Michael Nash's *Climate Refugees* (2010). Through this study, Alexa Weik von Mossner shows in depth how human emotions and dramas produced by environmental injustice are globally interconnected, focusing on both, ecologically conscious forms of cosmopolitanism and socially engaged environmentalism, or what is called by Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martínez-Alier "the environmentalism of the poor." The conclusion that arrives here can also be applicable to the rest of ecocritical essays in this monograph: that is, without emotional implication, educational formation and communal activism on the part of the readers (or viewers), there will not be a turning point in the actual ways of the world.

