

The Urgency of Ecocriticism and European Scholarship

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Simon C. Estok,

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Thematic Issue ***New Work in Ecocriticism***. Ed. **Simon C. Estok and Murali Sivaramakrishnan**

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Abstract: In his article "The Urgency of Ecocriticism and European Scholarship" Simon C. Estok argues that there continues to be unduly disproportionate attention within ecocriticism on US-based scholarship and proportionally less on ecocriticism from other parts of the world. Estok focuses on European ecocritical work written in English and published by Rodopi in recent years and argues that this work attests both to the urgency and resolve of European ecocritics. Estok looks at some of the primary contributions of twelve books published within the past ten years by Rodopi in order to show the importance of bending our ecocritical ears, to stop fetishizing US-American scholarship, and to listen to what is coming out of Europe and other parts of the world.

Simon C. ESTOK

The Urgency of Ecocriticism and European Scholarship

Prompted by an urgency that is ultimately about our survival, ecocriticism has experienced an exponential growth that is clearly unsustainable (on this, see, e.g., Náray-Szabó <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2316>>). Within a closed system, exponential growth of any kind is unsustainable, but as long as there remains room for growth, growth will certainly continue unabated. Ecocriticism gains in strength and character the more diverse it becomes, and it becomes more diverse and strong by moving into more varied spaces. The moaning and whinging about the US-American bias of ecocriticism is now passé—and I will not mind readers correcting me if I am wrong in saying that I was the first who commented on the "uniformly Americanist slant" of ecocriticism in a 1996 review of Cheryl Glotfelty's and Harold Fromm's *The Ecocriticism Reader* ("Rev. of" 1244). It was a remark that no doubt went unnoticed, has probably remained unread by the larger ecocritical community, and has certainly had no empirically verifiable impact on the course of ecocriticism. Nevertheless, my remark as a nervous young Canadian scholar about a powerful neighbor certainly reflects a sentiment that many other scholars (Canadian and other) have also felt and expressed—no doubt more eloquently and more effectively. If, as Ursula K. Heise argues, "the environmentalist ambition is to think globally" (513), then it is important and indeed necessary and empowering that ecocriticism itself come not only from the U.S. but from other parts of the world.

While I am mindful of the implications of privileging Western ecocriticism (US-American and European) at the expense of work being done in Africa, India, East Asia, Australia, and South America, much of the work coming out of Europe seems to fall on deaf ears outside of Europe and thus needs attention. Why it should fall on deaf ears may be partly, one might assume, because of the immodest price of the most popular European ecocriticism book series (i.e., published by Rodopi), but also, no doubt, because the U.S. remains a goliath in terms of global cultural capital and swat, cultural capital that is fetishized both from within and without. This said, however, environmentalism in Europe has a longer and stronger history than in the U.S., and the results of this are palpable. According to one environmental issues commentator, "Europe, particularly northern Europe, is more environmentally conscious than the United States, despite Americans' sincere and passionate resolution to be green. Per capita CO2 emissions in the U.S. were 19.78 tons according to the Union of Concerned Scientists, which used 2006 data, compared to 9.6 tons in the U.K., 8.05 tons in Italy, and 6.6 tons in France" (Rosenthal <http://e360.yale.edu/feature/what_makes_europe_greener_than_the_us/2193/>).

Without doubt, similar statistics—perhaps showing more shocking differentials—might be found comparing Asia and the U.S. Where I live, in Seoul (and we should keep in mind that the Seoul Capital Area has a population in excess of 25 million), public transport is cheap, efficient, and extensive, and the vast majority of the people (myself included) live in apartments, which are considerably more energy efficient per capita than houses. All apartment complexes have a clothes drying balcony and few people use dryers (similar to Europe). Apartment complexes also have an organized garbage disposal system wherein the residents separate their plastics, paper, glass, metals, cardboard, and styrofoam waste into separate public bags (very large) on pickup day (similar to Europe). Organic waste goes into large public bins (and most apartment complexes have many) that are available throughout the week. A person who is being truly conscientious will have little or no garbage—only recyclables. If "Europe is constructed in a way that makes it pretty easy to live green" (Rosenthal <http://e360.yale.edu/feature/what_makes_europe_greener_than_the_us/2193/>), then such is certainly true of South Korea, where I live for half of each year. But it takes work. The problem in the U.S. is that people simply do not make the effort in part because the infrastructure (despite the rhetoric) is not set up for environmental friendliness. The entire mind-set needs to change. A personal anecdote here—one I discussed verbatim in a different context (see Estok, "Afterword"), might be revealing.

For two weeks in the Fall of 2013, as I walked into my sabbatical office at Shanghai Normal University, a man kneeled from 8:00 in the morning until 4:00 in the afternoon plucking weeds from the grassy common in front of the university's Humanities Building. In most of North America (i.e., U.S. and Canada), such employment would not be funded and the task of weeding would be relegated to of

herbicides. One might of course ask whether weeding on a university campus is necessary at all. Nevertheless, I wondered—as I walked through the Shanghai smog (which reached staggeringly hazardous levels in 2013)—what the global scramble to live like US-Americans and Canadians means and what it would mean for them to live like Chinese. Notwithstanding the smog, the ecological footprint of the average person in China (even—perhaps especially—in big cities) is much smaller than the ecological footprint of the average person in the U.S. To repeat, the North American mind-set simply needs to change. What is the norm in Shanghai or Seoul or Rome is sacrifice and suffering in the U.S. Europe, like Asia, is set up for more sustainable living. What is galling is that it remains the US-American voice that is the loudest on matters dealing with both environmentalism and ecocriticism. The purpose of my article is to review scholarship published in Europe, specifically by Rodopi. Rodopi has published some of the best work in ecocriticism that has appeared in recent years attesting both to the urgency and the resolve of ecocritics. Covering an enormous diversity of material, the *Nature, Culture, and Literature* series of the Press casts a wide net that draws in a lot, but certainly not all of the ecocriticism that it publishes. Other series within Rodopi—such as *Cross Cultures: Readings in the Post/Colonial Literatures in English* and *Spatial Practices: An Interdisciplinary Series in Cultural History, Geography and Literature*—also house work important to the growing body of European ecocriticism. Thus, while in this article I focus and comment primarily on the work appearing in the *Nature, Culture, and Literature* series, there will be digressions into prominent ecocritical works in other series of the Press.

At the time of my writing this article in 2014, there have been ten monographs published in the *Nature, Culture, and Literature* series of Rodopi: Thomas Wilson's *The Recurrent Green Universe of John Fowles* (2008), Gerry Smyth's and Jo Croft's *Our House: The Representation of Domestic Space in Modern Culture* (2006), Catrin Gersdorf's and Sylvia Mayer's edited collection *Nature in Literary and Cultural Studies: Transatlantic Conversations on Ecocriticism* (2006), C.A. Cranson's and Robert Zeller's edited collection entitled *The Littoral Zone: Australian Contexts and Their Writer* (2007), Fiona Beckett's and Terry Gifford's edited collection *Creativity, and Environment: New Environmentalist Criticism* (2007), John Parham's *Green Man Hopkins: Poetry and the Victorian Ecological Imagination* (2010), David Ingram's *The Jukebox in the Garden: Ecocriticism and American Popular Music Since 1960* (2010), Etienne Terblanche's *e.e. cummings: Poetry and Ecology* (2012), Roman Bartosch's *EnvironMentality: Ecocriticism and the Event of Postcolonial Fiction* (2013), and Kadri Tüür's and Morten Tønnessen's *The Semiotics of Animal Representations* (2014).

Focusing primarily on three novels (although addressing at various points all of the work) of John Fowles, in *The Recurrent Green Universe of John Fowles* Wilson offers the first volume in the series. The book brings to the ecocritical fore the work of a person not really given much attention in environmental humanities. Wilson "undertakes a comprehensive examination of Fowles' engagement with nature from an ecocritical perspective" (9) and offers a picture of an imagination in flux of a green universe: Fowles, Wilson argues, does not have a singular notion of a green universe but rather has notions that change with time. Although Wilson offers a largely thematic set of readings intended less to extend the range of ecocritical theorizing than to extend the range of readings, Wilson presents a wealth of new and largely interesting approaches to Fowles. Tending as he does toward applications of existing theories, Wilson confines his readings to what at the time were the mainstream theories and theorists of ecocriticism, not venturing, for instance, into matters of feminism, ecofeminism, queer theory, gender studies, or race. Rather than depicting Fowles as a "misty-eyed nature writer who sets up the natural world as a virtuously peaceful place, the serenity of which we should try to emulate, while silently passing over the particular qualities that make us human" (46), Wilson argues that "writings such as Fowles' have a potentially important part to play in influencing the perception-shift that is needed among contemporary Westerners" (260). Wilson does not explain why this influence should be confined to Westerners and, presumably, it could play an important part in influencing people in the East and the South as well.

The second book in the series is a collection of studies edited by Smyth and Croft and entitled *Our House: The Representation of Domestic Space in Modern Culture*. In the "Introduction," the editors explain that they "directed all the contributors towards Bachelard's classic work [*The Poetics of Space*]" (14) and to the work of Martin Heidegger. The logic here is that "If Bachelard is the great modern philosopher of 'the house,' Martin Heidegger performs a similar function with regard to the

related concept of 'the home'" (15). Perhaps the book may best be judged by how well the twelve contributors adhere to the instructions to do phenomenological readings. Although an unevenness between constructivist and phenomenological readings mar the overall effect of the book, it remains a powerful collection of new material for ecocritics. For a field such as ecocriticism that has sought both to expand and to find groundings, this "multi-disciplinary colloquy on the state of domestic space at the present time" (20) succeeds in opening discussion of domestic space from eco-perspectives. Even so, there is little in the way of actual ecocriticism in the book (the term appearing only twice: once in the introduction and once in the index). Aware of what might seem a rather tenuous eco-relevance of this collection, the editors explain as follows: "The focus of the essays in *Our House* is not 'ecological' in the narrow sense, in as much as the contributions do not appear to be oriented in the first instance towards issues of natural environment, biodiversity, sustainable resources, etc. The book *does* reflect developments in ecocriticism over the past decade, however, a period which has witnessed an initial (and entirely understandable) concern with the status of wilderness or 'natural' landscapes slowly learning to accommodate interest in the status of various urban and constructed environments" (25).

The third book in the series is Gersdorf's and Mayer's edited collection entitled *Nature in Literary and Cultural Studies: Transatlantic Conversations on Ecocriticism*. This large and wide-ranging book seeks to "further [the] development of ecocriticism as a methodology that re-examines the history of ideologically, aesthetically, and ethically motivated conceptualizations of nature, of the function of its constructions and metaphorisations in literary and other cultural practices, and of the potential effects these discursive, imaginative constructions have on our bodies as well as our natural and cultural environments" (10). It is also, the editors explain, a goal of the book to continue and expand the "transatlantic conversation" (10) among ecocritics that has been in motion since the nineties. Organized into four sections, the book contains twenty-one articles plus an introduction. The sections are organized into a range of material under the headings "Theorizing the Nature of Ecocriticism," "Locating Nature in Language, Literature, and Everyday Culture," "Nature, Literature and the Space of the Natural," and "Ethics of Nature." Among the most compelling points is one made by Hannes Bergthaller, who argues in "'Trees are What Everyone Needs': *The Lorax*, Anthropocentrism, and the Problem of Mimesis" that "a text's ethical force arises not from the facts it may be said to represent, but from its narrative form. If we seek to understand how texts reshape attitudes towards nature, we should therefore focus our attention not on a text's faithfulness to ecological facts, but on the way in which it picks up and transforms the narratives circulating in a culture. This argument is supported by a detailed analysis of Dr. Seuss' *The Lorax* (1971), a children's book that fails Buell's criteria for environmentally oriented work, but which nevertheless has played a significant role in environmental education in the U.S." (155). Bergthaller's emphasis on narrative is important because it recognizes narrative as a vehicle useful for the spread complex ideas in ways that are easy to absorb. Indeed, narrative is well suited to accomplish the work of what Glen Love has characterized as bringing "the obscure biological discipline of ecology out of the field and the science lab and into public consciousness" (54). It is difficult work. I have argued elsewhere (see "Narrativizing") that "narrative is well suited to do this work for several reasons, primarily though because its principal purpose is to convey information. Science and literature, simply put, are genetically similar" (142). Beginning with an extraordinarily clear and complete introduction, Gersdorf and Mayer offer a strong and unified collection of studies that covers the history, the current state, and the future directions of ecocriticism.

The fourth volume in the series is Cranson's and Zeller's edited collection entitled *The Littoral Zone: Australian Contexts and Their Writer*. It constitutes what many consider the first book to look at Australian works from the perspective of ecocriticism. The field itself begins in earnest in Australia with the inaugural conference of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment-Australia/New Zealand at Monash University in 2005. Aware of the important contribution of their collection, the editors argue that "the introduction of Australian literature as a body of works available for ecocritical approaches also deepen and enrich the practice of such literary criticism" (8). More than just saying it, they go on to give a list, one well worth repeating here in full, explaining precisely why people outside of Australia should care about Australian ecocriticism: "1. It is a means of extending the range of texts to which we apply ecocriticism. 2. Although Australian literature is written in English, it grows out of different physical and cultural landscapes from that of North America; and different historical and social circumstances, including different, though comparable, relations between Eu-

ropean and indigenous peoples (whose culture has been comparably appropriated in environmentalist discourse). 3. Environmentalism has developed in similar ways in Australia and North America. 4. Thus, ecocritical studies of Australian literature not only can serve as a means of comparison to the critical practices of North American and European literary scholars, but also, and perhaps more importantly, could foster a mutually beneficial transnational exchange" (9-10).

The fifth book in the series is entitled *Creativity, and Environment: New Environmentalist Criticism* edited by Fiona Beckett and Terry Gifford: this collection demonstrates in twelve studies how "our ability to transcend the ethical and aesthetic categories and discourses that have contributed to our alienation from our environment is dependent upon an enlargement of our imaginative capacities" (Back cover). The editors summarize how the contributions "develop further some of the debates that currently characterise ecocriticism, including the status and character of ecocriticism itself. They attempt, sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly, to decentre the human subject from certain kinds of intellectual investigation. Some deal with representation, some with discourse, and others deal with 'world.' There is also speculation about the future agendas for ecocriticism, aware as the contributors are of the limited reach of current debates. All together the essays demonstrate the opportunities ahead for the emerging field of ecocriticism in its heterogeneity, within and beyond the academy" (8-9). However, the volume as a whole does far more than this: it voices ecocriticism largely from well outside of the North American nexus that characterizes so much of early ecocritical commentary (although the contributors are all White), and it does so with an eye to praxis, to engagement with the material realities of environmental derogation, and to the realities of globalization and corporate capitalism. This collection raises penetrating questions. Gillian Rudd notes that we face "a question about the consequences of attempting to maintain an affective relation to the world through cultivating a sense of wonder" (111). Rudd goes on to ask whether "such an endeavor retain[s] a sense of being part of it, or does it simply bring home to us our innate anxieties?" (111). Indeed, questions about our anxieties regarding our connection with the natural world come up frequently in this collection. Graham Huggan writes that "the production of a nonhuman 'ecological subject' by no means precludes human social and political concerns" (167). Politics and ecology, ethics and environment, human and nonhuman are each intimately connected. The central focus on ethics in this volume perhaps reflects a current direction ecocriticism seems headed, with two major ecocritical conferences in Asia on the topic in 2014: a conference in Goa entitled *Toward Ecocultural Ethics: Recent Trends and Future Directions* and the 2014 Shanghai *Fourth International Symposium on Ethical Literary Criticism*. As the editors explain, the "volume evaluates the aesthetic and ethical issues thrown into relief by imaginative engagements with environment" (9).

John Parham's *Green Man Hopkins: Poetry and the Victorian Ecological Imagination* is the sixth book in the Rodopi series. Parham looks at Gerard Manley Hopkins as an ecological writer and makes a case for a "green Hopkins"—important because the bulk of Hopkins's scholarship has been on the poet's religious commitments rather than his ecological ones. There is good reason to make such a case. For one thing, Parham explains, Hopkins died "from a Victorian environmental hazard, at the age of 44" (220). Parham further explains that Hopkins "perceived [a] link between the human body and the surrounding environment, particularly (though not exclusively) through the state of the air" (219) and wrote his complaints about the weakness he felt. Moreover, Parham maintains, "Demonstrating (albeit rather starkly) the real, material basis to Hopkins' concerns about health what these complaints also engendered was what one might call a corporeal ecology" (220). What is particularly compelling about Parham's argument (and language) is that it pre-dates Stacy Alaimo's theorizing about transcorporeality and what was to become material ecocriticism. Further, Parham maintains that "Hopkins developed a two-fold understanding of ecology—as a scientific philosophy constructed around ecosystems theory; and as a corresponding theory of society organized around the sustainable use of energy—as well as a corresponding poetic practice" (Back cover). Perhaps the book's greatest potential contribution, however, is the notion of "humanist ecocriticism" and Parham includes a chapter entitled "Muddying the Waters: Toward a Humanist Ecocriticism," wherein he makes a case for "Hopkins as a prototypical ecological writer ... [and offers a] nuanced account of how Victorian writers negotiated the same dichotomies as those that bedevil contemporary ecology" (54). In the process, Parham argues from the position of British ecocritic Martin Ryle for the need to connect ecocriticism with the development of human nature (46-47; see also Ryle 13). A more detailed explanation might have been

productive here of exactly what "humanist ecocriticism" might be, how it might look, and how it might relate with less anthropocentric, more ecocentric models. Yet, Parham is well aware of the problem: he argues that "notwithstanding the premise of this book, to assert a more technocentric ecological literary criticism, it is only in the conjunction of eco- and technocentric tendencies that a fully-realized ecological theory can emerge. This, as it happens, is the final thing that a contemporary ecology might learn from Hopkins ... In all this his work offers, then, an extended, ecocentric and technocentric, understanding of the ways in which poetry, that most cerebral of forms, might shape an ecological awareness" (275-76).

The seventh book in the series is David Ingram's *The Jukebox in the Garden: Ecocriticism and American Popular Music Since 1960*. This is an impressive book by any standard. Ingram begins his book with a firm theoretical grounding about the relationships between music and environmental ethics and shows that trends in music since the 1960s and the rise in environmental awareness over the same period deserve discussion together: "the rise of the modern environmental movement in the 1960s saw the notion of ecological crisis enter popular debates on the natural and built environments. Further, Ingram traces the ways in which US-American popular musicians reacted to such developments" (11). As Ingram explains, the theory section "establishes the key concepts and theories that inform the rest of the book" (15). Among these theories is what Ingram offers in the first chapter—namely that "music is a form of utopian expression that prefigures a better society in the future" (15). Ingram's book is a deep and complex study that covers a range of material both musical and theoretical. Ingram moves across a great musical spectrum, from blues to country, from folk to rock, from country rock to R'n'B, from punk rock to indie rock, from hip hop to electronica, from US-American jazz to "world music" and argues about the varying involvements of particular songs to points on a spectrum of environmental comment. Rather than assigning a genre an indigenous commitment to an ethical position, Ingram argues that no genre toes a specific line. Confining "the critical emphasis ... [to] more or less explicit representations of either ecology or the natural world in popular music" (18), Ingram argues that "music is obviously not a solution to environmental problems in and of itself. Yet the idea that it prefigures a better society, including a better relationship between human beings and the natural world, is an attempt to account for the profound effect that music has on its listeners" (240). This said, however, there is something jarring about the realities of human effects on the natural environment in the period that Ingram discusses. In precisely this period, human-caused environmental despoliation and anthropogenic changes to all terrestrial ecosystems and to climate have been exceptional: never before has the planet seen such an anthropogenic impact. One wonders, then, precisely how much impact music has in changing the world for the better. Although Ingram presents a fascinating study on the thematic importance of music (in terms of its concerns with environmental issues), it is dubious indeed how this concern translates into empirically verifiable benefits for the reversal (or, at the very least, halting of the rate of) the journey down the road of environmental destruction that humanity is currently taking. Perhaps, however, such a request for empirical evidence is impossible (or, at the very least, profoundly difficult) to collate and present. Indeed, such a critique and call as I am making here for empirically verifiable data about activist effects may equally be made of ecocriticism itself (on this, see Estok, "Tracking"). Do we really think we have saved a single blade of grass?

In *e.e. cummings: Poetry and Ecology*, the eighth volume of the Rodopi series, Terblanche suggests "that at the center of poetic projects which we now refer to as modernist exists a radical openness towards and engagement with concrete, physical life on earth—and the actuality of its dynamic continuation or unfolding in particular: and that it is through turning to the apparently 'smaller,' highly significant poets, and cummings above all, that this natural engagement or poetic ecology becomes clear" (12). Terblanche begins his provocative book with questions about the very possibility of viewing modernist poetry as nature poetry, a question he quickly answers noting, among other things, that cummings is properly seen as ecological rather than environmental. What Terblanche means by this is that "the justification for the use of the term 'ecological' rests primarily on the recognition that a unique and important turn of his poetic phraseology overall—indeed, a prevalent texture in his poetry—is precisely his *eco-logos*. This means that his *logos* is unique, and that it is uniquely slanted towards natural engagement" (12-13). Terblanche makes his arguments "with a view to cummings's Taoist propensities of humility, fluidity, serendipity, and ... his renewed affirmation of culture-nature uni-

ty or dimensionality beyond the apparent flatness of a dualistic or 'two-minded' perception which would continue to hold nature at bay, at a rational, linguistic distance" (15). One of the admirable accomplishments of the book is that it rescues Cummings from a critical milieu that had "little or no appreciation" of the context out of which Cummings wrote (16). Critical here, Terblanche maintains, is Cummings's interest in Taoism, an interest that makes him different from other modernists and how they express commitments to nature. While it would have been perhaps useful if Terblanche had defined what he means by "ecology" at least somewhere in the book, he nevertheless succeeds where no one else has: Terblanche discusses Cummings in a full length monograph from an ecocritical perspective.

Bartosch's *EnvironMentality: Ecocriticism and the Event of Postcolonial Fiction* is the ninth book in the series. Bartosch works on the assumption that "it is reasonable to theorize *through* literature rather than to describe theoretical *a priori* notions, which then have to be applied to the texts in a second step" (90). He sees ecocriticism as having "two main objectives: that ecocriticism constitute an active contribution to meeting a contemporary social challenge—environmental crisis—and that it provide a way of re-assessing scholarly critical practice with regard to the role nature has been assigned in academic studies" (10). In its unique and novel ways of understanding the Otherness of "nature," fiction, Bartosch argues, challenges accepted forms of knowledge and thought. Bartosch moves away from analyses of literary texts and their mimetic representations of environmental crises and issues we face and he explains that he "tried to focus on the effects certain formal elements have on the reading process. I regard this interplay of the textual gestalt and the ecocritical potential of literature as the crucial aspect for what I call *EnvironMentality*" (15). The reach of this book is broad and Bartosch presents readings of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness* and *The Whale Caller*, Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* and *Beatrice and Virgil*, Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, and J.M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* and *Elizabeth Costello*. In the process, Bartosch theorizes on a variety of matters including but not limited to questions about narrative and focalization, fiction and metafiction, posthumanism, animals, and, obviously, postcolonialism. Indeed, all of the texts Bartosch discusses are postcolonial favorites and thus it is not surprising that the bulk of the analysis in the book is about both "the employment of tensions, between centre and periphery, for instance, but also between nature and culture and even between these kinds of dichotomies and the attempt to do away with them" (12). It is not just postcoloniality that characterizes the texts Bartosch chooses to discuss, but also the more focused genre of fiction devolving on postmodern animality.

A bit slow in garnering serious ecocritical attention, "the animal question" has become a central concern of the field and the tenth book to date in Rodopi's series manifests this central concern (on animal studies, see, e.g., Prater <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2054>>). Indeed, Tüür's and Tønnessen's edited collection *The Semiotics of Animal Representations* is all about the ways in which the representation of nonhuman animals "says a lot about who we are, or who we strive to be" (7). One of the assumptions of the collection is that it is both possible and necessary to bridge "the gap between the natural sciences on one hand and the social sciences and humanities on the other" (28). With chapters covering topics as varied as the representation of insects, shepherding, birdsong, fish, and so on with methodologies that "include philosophical, ecocritical, autobiographical, postcolonial, historical, and phenomenological research" (7), this collection offers varied and nuanced readings that ultimately show what the editors call "a rich semiotic approach to the study of animal representations" (8).

While important, these interesting and diverse ecocritical explorations are only a part of the large amount of work being done in Europe. Keeping within Rodopi, but outside of the Nature, Culture and Literature series, there are at least two more volumes worthy of discussion here: Catrin Gersdorf's 2009 *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert: Landscape and the Construction of America* and Sean Cubbitt's 2005 *EcoMedia*. Gersdorf seems "by examining the poetic function of the desert in the discourse of America" to locate her critical position in the desert and "in doing so ... [to] acknowledge the significance of landscape as a serious category of literary and cultural studies" (22). Gersdorf works on the assumption that "the transformation of nature into civilization, land into landscape, landscape into text, and text into a social and political tool for producing and reproducing a nation's cultural identity is a process foundational for our understanding of America" (13). The book is divided into four sec-

tions, each corresponding to one of the main spatial metaphors through which to imagine US-American landscapes: garden, wilderness, the Orient, and heterotopia. As Gersdorf explains, "while garden represents a primarily economic response to desert, Orient, wilderness, and heterotopia primarily signify, respectively, an aesthetic, ethical, and socio-cultural response to this space" (34). Gersdorf builds on Michel Foucault's ideas about heterotopia, articulated in a 1982 interview as "a space whose function follows a different order and serves different purposes [which] also marks it off from the surrounding or dominant space" (39). For Gersdorf, heterotopia is a radical paradigm that allows for deep critiques of sexism, heterosexism, and racism: "heterotopia (literally 'places of otherness') are spaces situated outside the center of social and political order at a given historical moment yet not totally disconnected from that center. That is, the reformatory (or even revolutionary) impulses emanating from heterotopic spaces are as much an effect of resistance to as they are dependent on contact with the spaces representing dominant forms of social and cultural ordering. At the same time, and paradoxically so, the dominant order depends for its continuity on mechanisms for absorbing and incorporating the reformatory impulses from the so-called margins" (237). At 355 pages, *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert* is a large and dense book, but one well worth the read, filled, as it is, with refreshing and honest insights. In a discussion of Edward Abbey's work, one of the most canonic US-American authors associated with the desert, Gersdorf claims that "on a political level, it is problematic to advertise Abbey's work as supporting ecological awareness because it suggests that a major way to achieve this is by turning a blind eye to America's imperial history" (206). Even more pointedly, Gersdorf goes on to argue that "Abbey's retreat into a sublime desert, his philosophical and literary support of environmental anarchism, his radical defense of the desert as a refuge for rugged individualists from authoritarian government, and his call for (minority) population control amounts to a celebration of the white male as the exclusive hero in the story of America" (207). This is an important book that nudges ecocriticism into an acceptance of landscape as an essential area of study.

Cubitt's *EcoMedia* is a similarly important book, one written well ahead of its time. When it was published in 2005, ecomedia was a fledgling area of research, certainly not the thriving cottage industry that it has since become. Cubitt begins with a startlingly provocative quotation from Walter Benjamin: "Mankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order" (Benjamin qtd. in Cubitt 1; Benjamin 242). It is a quotation with which I begin my own discussion of information fatigue, environmental fatigue, and ecomedia (see Estok "Information"). For Cubitt, "we have no better place to look than the popular media for representations of popular knowledge and the long-term concerns so little addressed in dominant political and economic discourse" (1). Rather than looking at environmental themes as they are represented in filmic media, Cubitt is more interested in the translation of data among three realms: nature, the human, and technology. Admittedly, these rough-hewn categories could use a more nuanced handling, but they suffice to make Cubitt's main points. The fact that we do not yet know how to translate various data into usable forms does not mean that we should stop or even slow down our data collection and storing (which is precisely what some ecocritics have suggested). Cubitt notes that "the mere absence of a common code does not pre-empt the desire for dialogue: on the contrary, it spurs on invention of means for mediating between distinct and asymmetric entities" (134). Digital ecohumanities collects and works with these data and with the narratives that are necessary for making them accessible. It is here that we find an answer to what Cubitt sees as a central challenge to the future: "the challenge is to restore to futurity a sense of hope" (137). In many ways, Cubitt's dense book points clearly to such a futurity, a book remarkable for its time.

In conclusion, all of the books I discuss articulate in diverse ways the urgency of ecocriticism. The nuanced rhythms of topics in the European corpus of ecocriticism—both a response to and interrogation of US-Americanist ecocriticism—has clearly arrived. This corpus needs global attention and Rodopi deserves recognition for the publication of such outstanding scholarship (note that as of 2015 Rodopi is merged with Brill and it remains to be seen whether the new publisher follows Rodopi's efforts).

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