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Book Review



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Book Review: *Empirical Ecocriticism: Environmental Narratives for Social Change*

by Lydia Nixon



About the Author

Lydia Nixon is a PhD candidate in English at Indiana University, Bloomington. Her research explores intersections between contemporary American literature, environmental justice and decolonial studies, empirical ecocriticism, and the digital humanities. Her dissertation examines climate change temporalities in contemporary ecopoetry.

Book Review

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Schneider-Mayerson, Matthew, Alexa Weik von Mossner, Wojciech Małecki, and Jèmeljan Hakemulder. 2023. *Empirical Ecocriticism: Environmental Narratives for Social Change*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

As the climate crisis and its attendant states of emergency increasingly become the dominant context for scholarship in the environmental humanities, we ecocritical scholars must ensure that our work remains grounded in the material reality of a planet in crisis. However, this is not always the case, as the chapters in *Empirical Ecocriticism: Environmental Narratives for Social Change* (2023) illustrate. As Schneider-Mayerson, Gustafson, Leiserowitz, Goldberg, Rosenthal, and Ballew argue in the chapter titled “Does Climate Fiction Work?” empirical data gathered from readers of environmental texts shows that theoretical claims made by ecocritical scholars about the impact of these texts do not always align with readers’ own assessments of this impact.

This disconnect between theoretical interpretation and material reality is not new. Indeed, the field of ecocriticism has had a turbulent relationship with theory since its emergence in the late twentieth century. While the development of theoretical frameworks and specialized language is necessary to establish the focus, parameters, and legitimacy of a new field of study, ecocriticism is inherently rooted in a concern with the natural, material world. Its increasing emphasis on abstract concepts and theoretical jargon—a trend identified by Slovic and Markowitz’s empirical study in this volume—can thus find itself in tension with the field’s original aims. As Serpil Oppermann has explained, theory—in the tradition of Western scholarship—“produces a framework that is initially independent from experience and is prior to contact with the material world. It is in this sense . . . that theory has become a highly controversial and a contested issue in ecocriticism, which, by contrast, draws inspiration from its activist impulse grounded in a firm belief of actual experience with the world” (2011, 159–60). The editors

of *Empirical Ecocriticism* argue that a robust integration of empirical methods is necessary, in order to derive ecocriticism's theoretical claims from our "actual experience with the world," as Oppermann puts it. In short, they suggest that "environmentally engaged scholars ought to . . . ground their theories in available empirical scholarship" (1).

In the introduction to the book, the editors begin by identifying the specific contribution of an empirical ecocritical framework: shedding light on "the psychological, social, and political work of environmental narratives" (8). It is a fundamental premise of ecocriticism that narratives matter—that they play, or can play, a vital role in shaping how humans understand and relate to the more-than-human world. Yet, as a field that has historically not integrated empirical methods or data into its various methodologies, there is quite simply very little hard evidence to support this claim. It does seem intuitively clear that narratives should matter: as the editors point out, while there is a tendency to perceive climate change solutions as the purview of governmental policies, science, and technology, the reality is that, "the world we're shaping is being determined not by science, technology, and policy but by the desires, values, and priorities of those who wield these world-shaping tools, as well as the systems in which they're embedded" (3). In other words, narratives *do* matter, and a newly empirical ecocriticism may help us better understand *how* they matter.

The empirical ecocritical framework outlined in this book offers an important supplement to ecocritical studies. The editors and authors in this work argue that adding empirical methods to the ecocritical toolkit introduces a way of testing theoretical claims about the impact of narrative and artistic works. Because empirical ecocritical projects have only begun to gain recognition within the past few years, this book is primarily concerned with defining a new set of approaches and offering an introduction to what empirical ecocriticism is, or could be. The book's introduction overviews the three fields that empirical ecocriticism is chiefly in conversation with: ecocriticism, environmental communication, and the empirical study of literature. The introduction proceeds to outline how empirical ecocriticism integrates methodologies and approaches from each of these fields, and how empirical ecocriticism can be used to strengthen methodological rigor and uncover new insights within these fields.

As an introduction to a new subfield, the book is structured effectively. It begins by summarizing some useful methodologies for empirical ecocritical work; it then provides six different case studies on a variety of texts, genres, and approaches to illustrate the possible contributions and delineate the limitations of empirical ecocriticism; and it closes with a few brief essays from leading scholars in the fields of ecocriticism, empirical

studies of literature, and environmental communication who offer critiques and possible directions for future work.

The first section, “Methods,” introduces readers to three of the most relevant methodologies for empirical ecocriticism: experimental methods, qualitative methods, and a recent and innovative method known as “field to media,” which draws on participatory action research methods. Each of the three chapters focuses on one method, offering an overview of the method, a case study (or multiple studies) to illustrate how this method has been applied in an empirical ecocritical study, and a thorough discussion of the benefits, limitations, and ethical considerations associated with the method. W.P. Malecki’s chapter on experimental methods, for example, demonstrates how a randomized controlled experiment can be used to study causal phenomena—in this case, the ways in which environmental narratives influence readers’ attitudes and behaviors toward environmental issues such as animal rights and climate change concerns. In their chapter on qualitative approaches, Paul Sopcak and Nicolette Sopcak argue that qualitative research—including methods such as phenomenology and grounded theory—is particularly well suited for empirical studies of works of art because “it allows for ambiguity, messiness, and rich polyvalence without sacrificing rigor” (85). The final chapter for this section highlights a methodology that may seem somewhat niche, and thus perhaps not as widely applicable as the methodologies described in the previous two chapters. However, the importance of this chapter lies in what the methodology endeavors to accomplish. Authors Rebecca Dirksen, Mark Pedelty, Yan Pang, and Elja Roy use the “field to media” method to integrate scholarly study with environmental activism—a growing area of interest for many ecocritical scholars.

In the second section, “Case Studies,” readers will encounter six different empirical ecocritical studies that serve as a further illustration of the wide variety of methods that might be applied, as well as their advantages and limitations. The first three chapters represent some uses of experimental methods, beginning with the chapter by Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, Abel Gustafson, Anthony Lieserowitz, Matthew H. Goldberg, Seth A. Rosenthal, and Matthew Ballew that attempts to answer one of the most fundamental questions at the heart of empirical ecocriticism. Appropriately titled “Does Climate Fiction Work?” this chapter demonstrates how experimental methods can be used to identify both immediate and delayed effects of climate fiction on readers’ beliefs and attitudes toward climate change issues. The subsequent chapter similarly studies the impact of environmental narratives on readers, focusing in this case on how exemplar voice in news reports, here defined as “direct quotes from victims of environmental injustice” (154), might impact readers’ feelings of compassion and pity. Continuing the trend, chapter 6, “The Reception of Radical Texts,” likewise uses experimental methods

to consider the impact of Alice Walker's well-known animal rights work, "Am I Blue?" (1986) on readers' feelings toward various animal rights and civil rights concerns. The surprising, and somewhat counterintuitive, results of these experiments offer strong support for a key premise of the field—that ecocritical claims about the impact of literature are not always substantiated by empirical data. As Weik von Mossner, Malecki, Schneider-Mayerson, Mayorga, and Slovic point out, "the results [of empirical research] often generate as many questions as they answer" (179). What ecocritical scholars can and should do with this reality thus becomes an important question.

The final three chapters in this section highlight some relevant non-experimental methods. In chapter 7, Nicolai Skiveren employs qualitative empirical methods in a reception study to examine how audiences respond to representations of what Rob Nixon has famously termed "slow violence." Chapter 8 features a participatory action research method as authors Sara Warner and Jeremy Jimenez use applied theater to consider how "the performing arts [might] contribute to activism, public opinion, and policy debates about the climate crisis" (251). The section closes with a chapter that may be of particular interest to readers who are attuned to the development of the ecocritical field in the United States: an automated text analysis of publications from *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* conducted by corpus linguistic analyst David M. Markowitz and, fittingly, longtime editor of *ISLE*, Scott Slovic. This case study offers a methodology for studying the field of ecocriticism itself—its history, trends, and trajectory.

The book's concluding section, "Reflections," features invited essays by leading scholars in fields relevant to empirical ecocriticism. In their respective essays, ecocritical scholar Ursula Heise and environmental communications scholar Helena Bilandzic offer broad support for empirical ecocriticism and suggest possible directions for development. Heise argues that empirical ecocritical methodologies will be particularly relevant to eco-narrative studies, and Bilandzic suggests that empirical methods might be particularly useful for considering the relation between environmental texts and audience action or activism. Greg Garrard and David I. Hanauer, leading scholars in ecocriticism and empirical studies of literature, respectively, offer support for the new sub-field, though with some reservations. Garrard's essay lists several broad concerns about empirical methods that should warrant caution in their application to ecocritical studies, emphasizing, in particular, that due to the tendency to perceive data as a "true" or factual representation of reality, the integration of empirical methods has the potential to be even more problematic than the theory that comes under fire in this volume. Yet, Garrard concludes on a note of optimism about the direction of empirical ecocriticism as

indicated by the volume, and he encourages a focus on pedagogy in future empirical ecocritical studies. Hanauer's essay adds to Garrard's list of critiques, pointing out that empirical ecocritical studies have thus far focused primarily on reader awareness of environmental issues, yet awareness is a far cry from the action and activism that is necessary for meaningful change. He concludes with some suggestions for how empirical ecocriticism might more productively focus on "political persuasion and mobilization" (338) rather than awareness.

On the whole, this volume makes a strong case for the value of integrating empirical methods with traditional ecocritical studies, and it offers a thorough introduction to the new sub-field and its various methodologies.

References

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