

Forum

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Ecocriticism's Growth and Diversity

TO THE EDITOR:

As an insider to the history of ecocriticism, I was familiar with most of the information reported by Cheryl Glotfelty in "The Formation of a Field: Ecocriticism in America" (127.3 [2012]: 607–16), Michelle Balaev's interview with her, but I appreciated its appearance in *PMLA*. A number of additions can be offered here to supplement Glotfelty's recollections, which, ironically, omit the role of the MLA in the natal phase of ecocriticism in the early 1990s. Her historic 1989 letter proposing the creation of a new discipline and our subsequent meeting in Chicago jolted me into a Monsieur Jourdain-like awareness that I had been unwittingly writing ecocriticism all along—and so had a lot of other people. As we hatched plans for the now canonical *Ecocriticism Reader* I got the idea to propose and chair an MLA convention session on the greening of literary study. My call for papers in 1990 brought many replies, from which I could have chosen a few outstanding panelists, but the proposed session got turned down. When the proposal was resubmitted, in 1991, the result was *Ecocriticism: The Greening of Literary Studies*, a landmark session at the 107th MLA convention, in San Francisco, which predated by a few months the Western Literature Association conference that Glotfelty alludes to as the genesis of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE). Modestly requesting a meeting room with twenty-five seats, we were stunned by the more than one hundred attendees who forced us into a last-minute search for a larger space. After all the papers had been delivered, we passed around a sign-up sheet so that we could stay in touch with all the attendees.

My own earliest ecocritical essays, which found their way into the bibliography that led Glotfelty to write her famed form letter (reproduced in Balaev's interview), discussed air pollution's effect on body and brain

and had little, if anything, to do with nature writing, the originating genre of the ecocritical movement, now vastly expanded into multiple disciplines. Lurking under the surface of those early writings were intimations of Darwinian evolution, the force of the environment on the human body, and the nature of consciousness. Today a proliferation of fields, such as behavioral ecology, treats subjects like these. In June 2001 Joseph Carroll's talk at the ASLE conference at Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, "Adaptation, Environment, and Literary Study," gathered up some of the ecocritical threads woven through his already influential book *Evolution and Literary Theory* and offered life-changing epiphanies for the humanities. What there began as a Darwinian ecology opened doors from the humanities into the sciences—most recently, into paleoanthropology and archaeology—and, in my case, into consciousness studies. This trajectory can be seen in my 2009 book *The Nature of Being Human: From Environmentalism to Consciousness*. After the book's final chapter, "My Life as a Robot," I pursued its theme—"eco" with a vengeance!—even further in my essay "Free As We Need to Be." Few readers of that overview will fail to notice the extent to which "[t]he old order changeth, yielding place to new." My article "How We Became So Beautiful and Bright: Deep History and Evolutionary Anthropology" entails still broader perspectives (see <http://hfromm.net/professional>). Most of these writings would not exist without the generative force of ecocriticism, extending well beyond the earlier social challenges of ecofeminism, environmental justice, capitalist critique, environmental law, and subaltern-cultures studies, among other disciplines.

Indeed, as I write this letter, *Science*, *Nature*, and the news media dependent on them are reporting on the trillions of microbes constituting a microbiome in our guts and on our skins. These almost invisible life-forms (our own personal Higgs bosons), like the more visible, biologically diverse animals from whom we derive, dissolve the traditional, humanist boundaries between an imperial "us" and a merely ancillary

"environment." Even a discipline as modest as ecocriticism, having expanded so greatly over the past twenty-five years, can be sure that infinite worlds remain for exploration.

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Reply:

I appreciate Harold Fromm's emphasis on the diverse approaches found in the ecocritical field and on the relevance of ecocriticism to the goals and activities of the MLA because this was the future envisioned by the early scholars. Ecocriticism is an expansive, interdisciplinary field of study that arose from a shared desire for a new literary theory and practice. This shared interest has made ecocriticism a robust field that continues to grow, as seen in the newest ecocriticism program in the United States: the literature-and-environment program that started in the fall of 2012 in the English department at the University of Idaho, spearheaded by Scott Slovic, Jennifer Ladino, Erin James, Janis Johnson, and Jodie Nicotra. The field is also becoming rooted as an academic discipline around the world, in countries such as China, India, Brazil, and Australia, to name only a few.

Although it may be enticing to try to pinpoint the exact second when ecocriticism was born, the formation of a discipline is never that clean. The field grew out of a community of scholars interested in the wide relations between peoples and places, society and nature, literature and the environment. The ecocritical field was building across conferences, disciplines, and institutions over several decades to gain a critical momentum in the early 1990s that led to the founding of ASLE in 1992.

In foraging in the ecocritical past to find stories of the field's origins, I chose to start with Cheryll Glotfelty, who initiated the idea for the first ecocritical anthology in the 1989 letter that she wrote as a graduate student. My longer project entails a series of interviews of the major ecocritical scholars who were active in