

# Forum

## Ecocriticism's Past and Future

TO THE EDITOR:

The recent cluster of essays on sustainability (127.3 [2012]: 558–606), Michelle Balaev's interview of Cheryll Glotfelty ("The Formation of a Field: Ecocriticism in America" [127.3 (2012): 607–16]), and the subsequent exchange of Forum letters among Balaev, Glotfelty, and Harold Fromm (127.4 [2012]: 1016–20) were fascinating in themselves and as a sign of how far *PMLA* has moved toward engaging literature and language with real-world issues.

Although it may be perceived as egocentric, I need to point out that the first MLA conference session on environmental literature was organized and moderated by me, as Special Session: Literature and the Environment, on 26 December 1976. As I remember, there were so many interested presenters that I had a hard time limiting them, and as a result each one had a dearth of allotted time.

This session suggests that even before William Rueckert's famous coinage of *ecocriticism* ("Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" [*Iowa Review* 9.1 (1978): 71–86]), many academics were doing scholarship and organizing courses from what would become an "ecocritical" perspective. The first Earth Day, in 1970, has been underestimated in its effect on literary pedagogy and interpretation. I saw strong evidence of this in the number of syllabi (including one from Glotfelty) I received after soliciting them for *Teaching Environmental Literature* (MLA, 1985). The 1970s saw the publication of many environmental-literature anthologies, including the first American one, *Ecological Crisis: Readings for Survival*, edited by Glen and Rhoda Love (Harcourt, 1970).

The preexistence of so much uncoordinated enthusiasm for teaching and studying literature ecologically only enhances the achievement

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of Glotfelty, Fromm, and many others in bringing so many teachers and students together in a vital and directed endeavor. That the effectiveness of this endeavor and nature of its goals can be openly debated in forums such as *PMLA* reflects ecocriticism's influence and success.

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#### Reply:

I am thrilled to see more interest in the origins of the ecocritical field, a field that has become housed in English departments of universities across America. Fred Waage's 1976 special session on literature and the environment reinforces my earlier point about the MLA's long support of academic innovation in literary theory and criticism. I invite more scholars to contact me with information about their work in ecocriticism as I compose my book of interviews in an effort to record a history of the field ([michellebalaev@gmail.com](mailto:michellebalaev@gmail.com)). The interest generated by my article on ecocriticism reflects the continued relevance of a literary theory and criticism that are here to stay.

Although Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's anthology *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (U of Georgia P, 1996) was not the first to address the topic of environmental literature, it was the first collection of (ecological) literary criticism to use *ecocriticism* in its title and to deliberately outline the parameters of the field with a theoretical vision for a new type of literary criticism. The anthology begins with Glotfelty's clarion call for organizing the field in an introductory chapter (which also refers to Waage). It contains twenty-nine contributions, from twenty-seven literary scholars and two creative writers, and is organized into three sections: "Ecotheory: Reflections on Nature and Culture," "Ecocritical Considerations of Fiction and Drama," and "Critical Studies of Environmental Literature" (which includes a chapter by Glen Love).

Glen and Rhoda Love's anthology, *Ecological Crisis: Readings for Survival* (1970), is important for its focus on pollution and preservation issues as well as for its apocalyptic urgency, which sought to encourage social action. The urgency to act was a prevalent environmental theme in society and literature during a period that saw the enactment of the Clear Air Act (1963) and Clean Water Act (1972). This anthology addressed environmental literature, but it would be difficult to read as ecocriticism because its focus is not literary criticism. Rather, it gathered primarily scientists and social scientists; of the twenty-two contributors, only one was a literary scholar. However, the anthology was preceded by much earlier American collections that addressed environmental literature, nature writing, or literature about nature.

The early- to mid-twentieth-century predecessors of ecocriticism are too numerous to name here, but significant examples of environmental literature or nature writing from this period include the pioneering work of Anna Botsford Comstock (a professor of "nature study" at Cornell University) in her *Handbook of Nature-Study* (Cornell UP, 1911), Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* (Oxford UP, 1949), Joseph Wood Krutch's *Great American Nature Writing* (Sloane, 1950), and Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (Houghton, 1962). Additional contributions made to the field before the 1990s, among many others, include Joseph Meeker's *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* (Scribner, 1974), Annette Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (U of North Carolina P, 1975), and Vera Norwood and Janice Monk's *The Desert Is No Lady: Southwestern Landscape in Women's Writing and Art* (Yale UP, 1987).

Much like a major river that has no single source but is composed of multiple feeder streams in the headwaters and joined by many more streams along its course, ecocriticism is formed by the work of multiple scholars