

Guest Editors' Introduction
Ecocriticism and a Conservationist Manifesto

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*The breeze will be sweet in your lungs
and the rain will be innocent.¹*

Scott Russell Sanders

World history has seen many manifestos—some political, others artistic. American author Scott Russell Sanders's environmentalist manifesto is uniquely visionary and inviting. Most manifestos are emphatic calls to action. Sanders's does more than that. In addition to offering a compelling formula for living human lives that take the future into account and will help to create "a culture of conservation," Sanders helps readers re-imagine what it means to be human in the context of the natural world, what it means to live in a way that considers the limitations and requirements, the "expectations," of the world beyond ourselves. The forty core declarations of his "Conservationist Manifesto"² urge readers not to confuse financial wealth with real wealth, to understand that we must work collectively to protect our "common wealth,"³ not only for our own good, but for the sake of generations to come.⁴ One of the important ideas in Sanders's manifesto is the notion that "[c]onservation means not only protecting the relatively unscathed natural areas that survive, but also mending, so far as possible, what has been damaged" (211). This restorationist sensibility is particularly important as we begin the second decade of the twenty-first

1 From Scott Russell Sanders's last essay, "For the Children" in *A Conservationist Manifesto* (227).

2 See Sanders, "A Conservationist Manifesto" in *A Conservationist Manifesto* (209-19).

3 See Sanders's essay, "Common Wealth" in *A Conservationist Manifesto* (25-42).

4 In "For the Children," Sanders addresses the children of the future, and states, "...I believe we can change our ways, we can choose to do less harm, we can take better care of the soils and waters and air, we can make more room for all the creatures who breathe. And we are far more likely to do so if we think about the many children who will come after us, as I think about you" (224).

century, for much of the planet, as we all know, has been meddled with on small or large scales—it has nearly all been “scathed,” so to speak. And yet that does not mean we should love altered landscapes any less than our dreams of pristine wilderness.

We have decided to launch this special ecocriticism issue of *JAST* with Sanders’s “A Conservationist Manifesto,” for it might be said that the academic field known as ecocriticism, which has existed formally for some three decades and is becoming more global in scope everyday, has contributed to the foundations of the Manifesto. Although Sanders is generally thought to be a “nature writer” rather than an ecocritic per se, he has in fact published important commentaries on American environmental writing, such as the 1987 essay “Speaking a Word for Nature.” For the most part, though, he has devoted his distinguished career to exploring the meaning of his own life in relation to other people and to the larger planet in many volumes of narrative essays. He has also demonstrated a special ability both to ask profound questions about what Lawrence Buell would call our “environmental imagination” and to call for concrete changes in individual and collective behavior. In a sense, Sanders’s work bridges the divide between reflection and engagement that many ecocritics consider to be an essential tension within the field. Ecocriticism, now institutionalized in the West thanks to the efforts of numerous writers and critics, often seeks to “reverse” the very “destructive trends” that Sanders articulates in his Manifesto, albeit by way of the relatively indirect and subtle strategies of literary criticism. It is worth stating, too, that the environmentally destructive trends typically targeted by ecocriticism are also the product of western civilization’s industrial processes, and in this sense ecocriticism is a form of self-critique and self-correction. However, since environmental destruction has now become a global phenomenon, regardless of which cultures actually started the problems that now confront us, it seems important that ways of thinking about this destruction (and about our species’ deeper relationship with the planet) become equally global.

As more and more scholars in the literary profession begin to incorporate ecocritical perspectives in their studies, various methodologies are gaining popularity.⁵ Glen A. Love’s forceful statement back in 1991 that “the most important function of literature today” might be to “redirect human consciousness to a full consideration of its place in a threatened natural world” helped to spur the ecocritical movement during its formative years (213). Lawrence Buell’s

5 Among a number of books on the pedagogical approaches, *Teaching North American Environmental Literature* by Laird Christensen et al. is a valuable collection on ecocritical praxis.

four criteria⁶ in his seminal *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), that helped to clarify what it means to categorize texts as “environmental,” was crucial to the growing institutionalization of the field. Cheryll Glotfelty’s groundbreaking introduction to 1996 collection *The Ecocriticism Reader*, titled “Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis,” argues that “[a] strong voice in the profession will enable ecocritics to be influential in mandating important changes in the canon, the curriculum, and university policy” (xxv)—and indeed many of these “important changes” have come to pass during the decade and a half since that book was published. Peter Barry’s breakdown of “what ecocritics do”⁷ in the final chapter of his second edition of *Beginning Theory* (2002) expands into new tasks for the ecocritic, such as those explained by Buell in *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, all contributing to Sanders’s “culture of conservation”:

But how much will environmental criticism in literary studies matter to those outside its own disciplinary cloister, let alone to the lay world outside the academy? ... [T]he answer so far looks more encouraging in the pedagogical arena than in that of critical discourse. As teachers and citizens,

6 Buell’s four criteria, in brief, are: the nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history; the human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest; human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation; and some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text (7–8).

7 According to Barry, “[ecocritics] re-read major literary works from an ecocentric perspective, with particular attention to the representation of the natural world; They extend the applicability of a range of ecocentric concepts, using them of things other than the natural world--concepts such as growth and energy, balance and imbalance, symbiosis and mutuality, and sustainable or unsustainable uses of energy and resources; they give special canonical emphasis to writers who foreground nature as a major part of their subject matter, such as the American transcendentalists, the British Romantics, the poetry of John Clare, the work of Thomas Hardy and the Georgian poets of the early twentieth century; They extend the range of literary-critical practice by placing a new emphasis on relevant factual writing, especially reflective topographical material such as essays, travel writing, memoirs, and regional literature; They turn away from the ‘social constructivism’ and ‘linguistic determinism’ of dominant literary theories (with their emphasis on the linguistic and social constructedness of the external world) and instead emphasise ecocentric values of meticulous observation, collective ethical responsibility, and the claims of the world beyond ourselves” (264).

ecocritics of both first and second waves have been highly inventive, indeed exemplary, in breaking down classroom walls to send students into the field, in inspiring them to move on to postgraduate destinations of various sorts in the environmental area, in joining forces with artists and activists, and sometimes in undertaking significant creative or activist endeavors themselves. On the other hand, the market for ecocritical publications so far has been chiefly academic, and within academia chiefly largely confined to professors and students of literature, with relatively modest lateral percolation effect. (Buell 132)

Briefly sketching the history of ecocritical scholarship today reveals some especially significant developments in its evolution: for instance, a more socially-oriented ecocriticism in the past decade energizing global and regional activism and a growing readership. One only needs to remember Buell's statements in *The Future of Environmental Criticism* on the role of the environmental justice movement in second-wave ecocriticism. Another important development in the field is an increasing emphasis on the intersections between the arts and the sciences, which is now surfacing in ecocritical praxis. Some of the modes of ecocritical scholarship today that seem especially rich in spurring the evolution of a new culture of conservation emphasize the practice of textual analysis in conjunction with ideas drawn from neo-bioregionalism, global concepts of place, evolutionary biology, risk theory, feminist theory, ecotheology, postcolonial theory, environmental justice, and environmental ethics, to mention a few examples.

While preparing this special issue of *JAST*, in light of its being the first Turkish publication devoted to ecocriticism, we envisioned the various essays in this special issue to reflect the expansive field ecocriticism has recently become, in its progression from the study of the rich vein of American nature writing to a highly diverse field, now encompassing ecocritical readings of world environmental literatures and cultures, all contributing, yes, to "a culture of conservation." Indeed, the essays in this issue, ranging from new approaches to timeless American nature writing by the likes of Henry David Thoreau and John Muir to the exploration of a recent nature writing, from studies of literary representations of environmental racism to examinations of ecodrama, reflect some of the current diversity in the field.

Reading the classics of American nature writing from new angles, we experience the intellectual recharging that seems to be forever needed. With

François Specq's essay, "Thoreau's Environmental Humanism," focusing on the winter work of the Walden Pond ice-cutters [the profit-oriented "busy husbandmen"], the concluding chapters of *Walden*, the seminal 1854 book that arose from the author's experiences on the outskirts of Boston, Massachusetts, in the 1840s, gains new dimensions. Specq's essay makes a strong case that the land-surveyor Thoreau's intention was to re-transcendentalize the lake. In view of the ongoing destructive effects of the *market economy* upon the American landscape (and throughout the world) more than a century and a half after the publication of *Walden*, the spiritual maxim "to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life" remains profoundly important, but it is easier said than done.

Ecocriticism, in its most basic definition, is the study of human expressions (artistic and otherwise) of the relationship between human beings and the natural world. But, one could argue, it is also the study of how science and technology, over the ages, influence, or have an impact on, that relationship. Jean-Daniel Collomb in "John Muir and the Ambivalence of Technology" delves into the nature of this influence. Collomb states: "Muir's hesitations and qualms regarding technology are worth studying in that they may provide us with a dissenting account of America's technological coming of age at the dawn of the American century." His insight into a little explored area in the prominent nature writer's work—Muir's "reluctant fascination for technical progress"—is important in showing both the counter-technological strand of American culture and the ironic affinity for technology in the mind of one of America's leading environmental thinkers and writers.

The exploration of recent nature writing texts is what feeds ecocriticism with new energy. Wendy Harding's "Scripting the Wilderness" is a close reading of a recent example of place-oriented writing: Don Scheese's "The Inhabited Wilderness." Published in the spring 2009 issue of *ISLE*,⁸ Scheese's meditative account of a hike in the Manti-La Sal National Forest, explores the ruins of the ancient native people known as "Anasazi"—the ruins that "remind us" not only "of the inevitability of our own mortality,"⁹ but also of the way nature heals itself

8 Scott Slovic, in the "Editor's Note" for this issue of *ISLE*, states that Scheese's text "delicately engages with the wilderness debates of recent decades by showing how our solitary experience of remote places might bring us to consider the paradox of an 'inhabited wilderness,' a paradox some would argue is inherent in the very phenomenon of wilderness" (201).

9 See Scheese, "Ruins fascinate us with their enigmatic silence. Ruins haunt us with their lonely and poignant beauty. Ruins remind us of the inevitability of our own mortality" (352).

in the absence of humans. In Harding's essay, though, Scheese's text gains new dimensions; it becomes a *montage* of "scripts." "Scripts are an integral part of social experience," says Harding, "and they are also our way to insert ourselves in the world. To script the wilderness is a way to inhabit it, to mark it with a human trace while still conserving it. Scripts occupy a middle ground between reality and imagination, in other words, the terrain of the aesthetic."

Ethnic minority communities' exposure to environmental hazards, a significant topic in the field of environmental justice ecocriticism, is taken up by Alexa Weik's "Mysteries of the Mountain: Environmental Racism and Political Action in Percival Everett's *Watershed*." Weik's ecocritical reading of the 1996 novel, *Watershed*, by a contemporary African American writer, emphasizes the issue of *environmental racism*, a term that was coined by the African American civil rights leader—also a leader of the environmental justice movement—Benjamin Chavis¹⁰ back in 1987. The essay is important not only for its emphasis on local engagement, but also for the parallels between the civil rights movement and "the continuity between the civil rights struggle and the environmental justice movement that Robert Bullard and other influential scholars in the field see," as Weik points out.

Yanoula Athanassakis's essay, "L.A. and T.J: Immigration, Globalization, and Environmental Justice in *Tropic of Orange* and *Sleep Dealer*," offers a fresh perspective for ecocriticism by looking at a literary text in dialogue with film. This essay, focusing on the issue of environmental justice at the U.S.-Mexico border, contributes to current ecocritical and environmental justice studies, revealing the significant connections between these two fields. Athanassakis argues that Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* and Alex Rivera's sci-fi film *Sleep Dealer* help illuminate how issues of environmental justice—environmental degradation and corporate greed—manifest themselves specifically in the U.S.-Mexico border regions. Her reading of the two texts in the context of "biopolitical violence" and the processes of economic globalization seems to intensify the need for "a culture of conservation."

10 See the "Introduction" to *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics, & Pedagogy* in which Adamson, Evans, and Stein discuss the background to Chavis's coining the term *environmental racism* and his own definition of the term: "racial discrimination in environmental policy-making and the enforcement of regulations and laws, the deliberate targeting of people of color communities for toxic waste facilities, the official sanctioning of the life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in our communities, and history of excluding people of color from leadership in the environmental movement" (4).

Lawrence Buell, in *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, pointed to a significant gap in ecocritical studies: ecological drama criticism. A contribution to the newly emerging drama studies in ecocriticism appears in the form of Pembe Gözde Erdoğan's "Hunger and Lead: An Ecocritical Reading of Robert Schenkkan's *The Kentucky Cycle*." Erdoğan points out that in *The Kentucky Cycle* "land is not important just because it is 'the setting' of the play, but also because it is one of the play's major characters." Weaving together Aldo Leopold's "land ethic" and Theodore Roszak's ecopsychology, Erdoğan brings to the fore how the play, with its focus on environmental degradation of a place and the complex connection between place and its human communities spanning generations, can be an important medium in creating environmental awareness in the theatre-goers.

Turning back to where we started, let us remember that Scott Russell Sanders states: "[c]onservation means not only protecting the relatively unscathed natural areas that survive, but also mending, so far as possible, what has been damaged." This reminds us of a heart-warming forecast by E.O. Wilson: "Here is the means to end the great extinction spasm. The next century will, I believe, be the era of restoration in ecology." Ufuk Özdağ, in her "An Essay on Ecocriticism in 'the Century of Restoring the Earth'" articulates her vision of a new *restoration ecocriticism*, which might soon become a future focus in ecocritical scholarship. The devastation of the planet we have witnessed in recent years has been beyond words—in fact, as Özdağ was drafting her essay, the explosion-damaged Deepwater Horizon drilling rig was spewing millions of gallons of crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico, along the southern coast of the United States. But in an archetypally American spirit, thinking hopefully even in the face of disaster, she argues that now is the time to restore the damage . . . both with our pens and with the actual collective effort of the human race.

In addition to expressing our appreciation to the authors who contributed the above-mentioned articles, we wish to offer special thanks to Scott Russell Sanders for generously allowing us to reprint his "A Conservationist Manifesto"; and to Shirley Geok-lin Lim, the internationally acclaimed writer and critic, and the recipient of numerous awards, for contributing her evocative recent poem, "Domestic Garden." We are honored to publish Vidya Sarveswaran's new interview with renowned American nature writer Terry Tempest Williams, who was recognized by the Utne Reader as a "visionary," one of the Utne 100 "who could change your life." Williams is the author of such classic works of environmental literature as *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (1991) and *Finding Beauty in a Broken World* (2008), among many others. For the Book Review section of the special issue, we approached our colleague

Elizabeth Schultz and Scott Slovic's graduate students Shaun O'Reilly and Meredith Privott. We thank them all for their engaging and in-depth reviews of *Ecopoetics 6/7* (2006-2009), edited by Jonathan Skinner; Ian Marshall's *Walden by Haiku* (2009); and the 2010 second edition of Sandra Steingraber's *Living Downstream: An Ecologist's Personal Investigation of Cancer and the Environment*. In the Film Review section, our gratitude goes to Michael Oppermann for his review of Michael Moore's *Capitalism: A Love Story* (2009). We would also like to note that although this is officially the Fall 2009 issue of *JAST*, we actually compiled the issue during 2010.

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