University of Groningen

The Value of Ecocriticism

Vos, de, Ruby

Published in:
English Studies

DOI:
[10.1080/0013838X.2019.1676015](https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2019.1676015)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2019

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Vos, de, R. (2019). The Value of Ecocriticism. *English Studies*, 100(8), 1022-1024.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2019.1676015>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

The Value of Ecocriticism

Ruby de Vos

To cite this article: Ruby de Vos (2019) The Value of Ecocriticism, English Studies, 100:8, 1022-1024, DOI: [10.1080/0013838X.2019.1676015](https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2019.1676015)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2019.1676015>

Published online: 14 Nov 2019.

Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)

Article views: 7

View related articles [↗](#)

View Crossmark data [↗](#)

the hegemony of the US in world politics. As such, Spencer exceptionally demonstrates the value that Saidian post-colonial theory can gain from combination with works from political economy. With this case study, Spencer articulates the utility of political economy in developing a richer understanding of the key contemporary debates that post-colonial theory grapples with. It is an excellent conclusion to this book as it applies the theoretical frameworks that have been argued for and developed throughout the volume. This analysis is both salient and insightful; it shows that the methodology debated throughout this volume has tangible application, and an event as imminently impactful on the modern world as the Iraq war is the ideal concluding case study.

Overall, each of the contributors brings a unique and fresh perspective on Said's academic legacies, and this volume remains true to the interdisciplinary focus of Said, demonstrating his utility and limitations in a wide array of fields and perspectives, whilst augmenting his ideas for the modern world. *After Said* opens innumerate directions for future research and development. As such, it succeeds in its goal of showing, in astounding detail, nuance and scope, the many possible directions of postcolonial studies after Said.

Jonathan Lench
Leiden University, Leiden, Netherlands
jonathan.lench@gmail.com

© 2019 Jonathan Lench
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2019.1676016>

The Value of Ecocriticism, by Timothy Clark, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019. 186 pp., £41.99 (hardback), ISBN: 9781107095298

Timothy Clark has never been one to mince words when it comes to the problems and pitfalls of the field of literary ecocriticism. His last book, *Ecocriticism on the Edge* (2015), concluded with the suggestion that that “environmental readings of literature and culture may need to engage more directly with delusions of self-importance in their practice, keeping alert to the need for more direct kinds of activism”.¹ With that in mind, I was surprised to find that Clark's latest book is entitled *The Value of Ecocriticism*: Clark previously did not play on the defence. Yet despite the title, the book does not signal a change of heart. Instead, *The Value of Ecocriticism* critically addresses the many changes that ecocriticism has undergone in the last five to ten years in the light of the intensifying environmental crisis.

Clark succinctly defines ecocriticism as a discipline that “asks fundamental questions about the nature and causes of environmental crises, the ways they are represented in language and culture, or contested or interpreted in literature, in art or daily discourse” (p. 5). Although predominantly concerned with the study of literary texts, ecocriticism has decidedly branched out and includes many other objects of study today. Clark notes this development briefly, but does not really delve into what this might mean for ecocriticism as such, or why it would engender such a cross-pollination of disciplines. Instead, he keeps a sustained focus on the literary. In the first four chapters of *The Value of Ecocriticism*, Clark addresses the changes the field and the literature it engages with have undergone in the light of various environmental crises. The fifth

¹Clark, 198.

chapter addresses the popular subfield of material ecocriticism, while the sixth chapter aims to look beyond the Anglo-centric tradition that remains dominant in ecocriticism.

One way to see *The Value of Ecocriticism*, then, would be as an addendum to Clark's *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* (2011), in which he lucidly laid out the workings of the field: its initial re-affirmation of a particular canon – Thoreau, Wordsworth, Dillard – and its emphasis on reconsidering the value of nature and the environment in literature. In his newest book, Clark shows how over the last decade ecocriticism has rapidly become the field that facilitates thorough theorisation of climate crisis, the sixth extinction, overpopulation, and other environmental concerns that threaten not only the wellbeing of “Nature”, but of the entire planet and all its inhabitants. The environmental crisis demands that ecocritics acquire “scalar literacy”, as Clark puts it: an ability to think beyond the human, the individual, and the local on a *planetary* scale (without falling prey to superficial universalisms). “The import of thinking about climate change has been that many ecocritical arguments had been taking place on the wrong scale,” Clark writes, for ecocriticism in its early years was marked by a tendency to focus on and argue for the local (p. 42). This is but one example of the historical connections that Clark draws throughout, and they are very helpful in reconsidering ecocriticism's current weaker points.

In relation to this, one of the most exciting impressions one takes away from this book is how very quickly the most urgent environmental concerns have been integrated in ecocriticism. Key to these recent developments, Clark suggests, is the notion of the “Anthropocene”, which is the focus of the first chapter. “Anthropocene” refers to the idea that we are now living in an era when geological processes are affected by human presence on earth. It is a hotly debated term, with opposition coming both from within the humanities and from geology. Rather than adding yet another voice to this debate, Clark makes the observation that in ecocriticism, the Anthropocene is often actually employed as a historical (as in “Renaissance”) rather than a geological concept. In the absence of geological unanimity about the validity of the Anthropocene, this is also the more prudent approach, he claims – for even as a historical concept the notion has radical implications for how we think about nature, non-human agency, and modernity, for example. This pragmatic approach is typical of much of Clark's work. It also highlights how he convincingly pushes against the tendency in ecocriticism to fetishise concepts from other – often scientific – disciplines. Geological terms are sometimes turned into metaphors that effectively “rebrand what are in fact well-established modes of cultural-political and postcolonial analysis from earlier generations” (p. 46). Clark's common sense approach here feels refreshing.

In the third and fourth chapter, Clark turns from theory to ecopoetry and prose. It is not only criticism, he suggests, that has to find new ways of writing and thinking to engage with the environmental problems, but also literature itself. What would “Anthropocene poetry” look like, for example? And can literature engage effectively (and affectively) with the temporal and spatial scales of climate change? In these chapters, as well as in the later two, Clark offers readings of predominantly fictional texts and poetry to illustrate ecocriticism in action. Sometimes the readings are his own, sometimes they are indicative of a certain practice; sometimes Clark critiques the literary text, sometimes the critic – and at times the readings also help him to develop his own critique further. The poetry by Edward Kamau Brathwaite, for example, is evoked both as a possible example of ecological poetry and as an object used in an essay that Clark critiques. While both functions are valuable, and can of course easily co-exist, the set of examples and the different and sometimes contradictory functions they serve here make it hard for the reader to determine where the power of the book lies as a whole.

As a result of this, it becomes hard to pinpoint what exactly the value of ecocriticism *is* (and what is meant by “value” in the first place). Perhaps the reason this aspect feels unresolved is

also due to the question Clark asks himself at the beginning of the book: “is it too late for environmental criticism in any case?” (p. 11). It is a discomfoting question, which echoes the ending of his 2015 book *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, and one that he is never able to answer satisfactorily throughout. How can we think the future of a field, if that field itself puts in doubt the very notion of the future as we knew it? How can we value ecocriticism if it seems so hard to value the earth?

While the book’s inability to answer to its own challenge with true conviction is apt to the humble position Clark envisions for ecocritics, this tension also stems from how ecocriticism and literature are positioned in relation to environmentalism in the book. Clark opens with a reference to *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975) by Edward Abbey, followed by a description of a protest demonstration in the 1980s the site of the Glen Canyon Dam that was attended by Abbey. Clark compares the two, arguing that “[b]oth the novel and the protest stunt are interventions in the realm of cultural representation and public debate, not real actions upon concrete and river” (p. 2). The idea that cultural representation is a powerful tool in the shaping and re-shaping of ideas about climate change is central to ecocriticism, Clark argues. While such works matter, he suggests they should not overstate their own importance, as they are not quite the same as those “real actions upon concrete and river.”

A more explicit vision on the relation between text, criticism, and activism would have been helpful here. The “real” versus “symbolic” binary that Clark identifies reads somewhat simplistic, allowing little space for the continuum that exists between the two. It obscures that “symbolic” actions often have “real” impact (leaving aside here what “real” might mean in any case). This is especially true for the case of climate change, where the changes that are needed must come from governments and industries, not from individuals, and direct interference is mostly achieved through symbolic actions such as Fridays for Future or the lie-ins by Extinction Rebellion. Consistent with this particular critique of ecocriticism, Clark also pays relatively little attention to more explicitly socio-political ecocritical approaches that underline the importance of reflection on cultural values that are often taken for granted. This becomes clear in his rather terse summary of queer ecocriticism, or in the final chapter’s striking absence of a discussion of decolonial critiques of ecocriticism – both of which have had a significant impact on the field’s development.

Yet Clark does put his finger on a sore spot. The question of whether criticism is a form of activism is an old one, but one that acquires new urgency given the looming reality of irreversible climate change. The discomfort the question produces confronts ecocritics with another scalar discrepancy: that of the impact of their work and the impact that is needed to halt climate change as much as possible. Perhaps the value of *The Value of Ecocriticism*, then, is this: that it attunes readers to the wry irony that is present in the title, thus encouraging scholars to pause and reflect on their own practice in a rapidly changing world.

Reference

Clark, Timothy. *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015.

Ruby de Vos
University of Groningen
r.e.de.vos@rug.nl

© 2019 Ruby de Vos
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2019.1676015>