

Practicing Ecocriticism and the Environmental Humanities during the Age of COVID and Beyond: An Interview with Scott Slovic

Jiang Lifu & Scott Slovic

Abstract: Scott Slovic, University Distinguished Professor of Environmental Humanities at the University of Idaho in the United States, was the founding president of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) from 1992 to 1995, and he edited *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, the major journal in the field of ecocriticism, from 1995-2020. He is currently the co-editor of two book series: Routledge Series in World Literatures and the Environment (2017-present) and Routledge Environmental Humanities (2018-present). Professor Slovic has written, edited, or co-edited thirty books in the field of ecocriticism. This interview focuses on the latest ecocritical developments, as well as key issues in the environmental humanities, in the Age of COVID and more broadly, the context of the Anthropocene. It stresses mainly three aspects: new ideas and directions in ecocriticism, the clarification of some key concepts in the environmental humanities, and studies of ecocriticism relevant with China. Professor Slovic expounds the “fourth wave” and “fifth wave” of ecocriticism, scrutinizes various terms, such as Anthropocene ecocriticism, climate fiction criticism, material ecocriticism, affective ecocriticism, empirical ecocriticism, critical animal studies, critical plant studies, etc., and crystallizes the connections and differences between ecocriticism, the environmental humanities and the medical-environmental humanities. He also explores the impacts of COVID-19 on ecocriticism studies, reveals the concerns of establishing “TCM ecocriticism,” sheds light on the new possibilities for ecocriticism in the future, and offers constructive suggestions for Chinese scholars.

Keywords: ecocriticism; the interdisciplinary studies; the environmental humanities; Scott Slovic

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标题：新冠病毒时代及之后的生态批评和环境人文实践：斯科特·斯洛维克访谈录

内容提要：斯科特·斯洛维克，美国爱达荷大学环境人文杰出教授，美国“文学与环境研究协会”首任主席（1992-1995）、生态批评权威期刊《文学与环境跨学科研究》主编（1995-2020），目前担任“劳特利奇世界文学和环境”（2017至今）、“劳特利奇环境人文”（2018至今）等丛书联合主编。斯洛维克著述等身，在生态批评领域出版专著、编著和合著30余部。本次访谈聚焦新世纪新冠病毒时代生态批评的新进展和环境人文的核心话题。斯洛维克阐明了生态批评的新发展、新趋势，明晰了环境人文同生态批评以及医学—环境人文的异同，探讨了新冠肺炎疫情对生态批评研究的影响，回应了建构“中医生态批评”的关切，为中国学者开展相关生态批评提供了建设性意见。

关键词：生态批评；跨学科研究；环境人文；斯洛维克

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Jiang Lifu (Jiang for short hereafter): Hi, Professor Slovic. It has been thirty years since you published your first book in the field of ecocriticism in 1992. Being a global leader in the field, you have tried to trigger and guide the development of ecocriticism. What do you think of the latest development of ecocriticism after the outbreak of COVID-19? What is the impact of COVID-19 on the development of ecocriticism and will it be a potential turning point of ecocriticism?

Scott Slovic (Slovic for short hereafter): The COVID-19 pandemic has been a very interesting time to work in the field of ecocriticism and more generally in the environmental humanities. In June 2020, not long after the beginning of the pandemic, the Swedish website *bifrost.org* published a group of short articles on the environmental humanities in the context of the pandemic. Many contributors to this collection focused on various aspects of how the pandemic was teaching us to think in different ways about our relationships with other species (such as bats and

pangolins, the animals that may have spread the COVID virus to humans) and our relationship with the virus itself. Also, because most of us were not traveling during the early period of the pandemic and it became more difficult even to get certain kinds of foods that were coming from far away, many environmental humanities scholars began thinking about using the pandemic as a way to re-think how we use travel in our personal and professional lives and also about whether our usual dietary practices (what we prefer to eat) are ethical and ecologically reasonable. There is an Open Letter to the community of environmental humanities scholars included in the Bifrost collection that focuses on the need to reconsider our travel practices and our dietary habits.

My own contribution to the collection “COVID World, COVID Mind: Toward a New Consciousness” focuses on how we might learn new things about the way humans think as a result of the pandemic. Perhaps the most important way of thinking that has been impressive to me during the pandemic is the feeling of vulnerability, of fragility and exposure to risk. Remember how at the beginning of the pandemic all of us were afraid to be in contact with other people, afraid to be exposed to this mysterious and potentially deadly disease? To me, this sense of vulnerability—what cultural theorists would call *precarity*—is actually a potentially good thing. If we felt more precarious during our ordinary lives when we’re not thinking about the pandemic, perhaps we would behave more carefully, more cautiously, more mindfully. And this would enable us as individuals and as a species to have a lighter, less destructive impact on the planet.

One of the main projects I’m trying to work on now, in my own research, is a study of how pandemic literature might inspire a sense of healthy precarity in readers, guiding us to apply the sense of precarity to aspects of our lives not directly related to the pandemic. For instance, if reminded about our precarity when exposed to disease, might we also be inclined to be more careful with regard to our use of fossil fuels, animals as food, air conditioning, and various other modern conveniences that can potentially have detrimental effects on planetary ecology?

We are still experiencing the pandemic in mid-2022. It is certainly not finished. But I believe we can learn a lot from this experience if we take the time to pay attention and to apply our experiences to the kinds of concerns—such as the meaning of precarity—that we work on in the environmental humanities.

Jiang: You mention your study on pandemic literature. This is a very interesting research area, which is becoming increasingly popular in China. Can you share with us a little bit of your research, a definition of pandemic literature, and also some

thoughts about how to approach it?

Slovic: I had never really thought much about pandemic literature—what some people refer to as “plague literature”—until we all began to experience the pandemic in 2019 and 2020, and at that time I found myself looking for things to read that would help me to think about our current pandemic situation. I would define pandemic literature as any kind of literary text that represents the scientific phenomenon of viruses, public health crises as a result of large-scale spread of disease, or the phenomenon of trans-species disease transfer (also known as “zoonosis”). Back in 2012 or 2013, I read a book by the American environmental writer David Quammen, a writer I’ve worked with many times over the years, titled *Spillover: Animal Infections and the Next Human Pandemic*, and this book, which focuses on the transfer of disease from other animal species to humans (thus the term “spillover”), led me to begin thinking about pandemics much more carefully than had been the case before. When the COVID-19 pandemic arose, I went back and reread *Spillover*, and I began also reading various examples of pandemic fiction, such as Albert Camus’s *The Plague* (1947), Geraldine Brooks’s *Year of Wonders* (2001), Peter Heller’s *The Dog Stars* (2011), and Lawrence Wright’s *The End of October* (2020).

In my own scholarship, I have been writing especially about Heller’s *The Dog Stars*, a novel set in a post-pandemic North America, following an influenza outbreak that has led to the deaths of most human beings. The male narrator has lost his wife and the rest of his family. He lives alone with his dog in the mountains of Colorado and has almost no other contact with other surviving humans, except when he is threatened by strangers who want to harm him or steal his food. The narrator, whose name is Hig, flies a small airplane over the countryside and looks down at what seems to be an almost “normal” landscape, peaceful and even beautiful, but at the same time he is haunted by the knowledge of the disease that has wiped out most of humanity. The novel raises deep questions about how human beings respond to crises and restore a psychological sense of normalcy, even after such a crisis has occurred.

I have been working to develop empirical ecocritical studies of how to use pandemic texts, such as Heller’s novel *The Dog Stars*, to instill in readers a sense of what I call “healthy precarity,” feeling of vulnerability that might lead to more cautious and mindful behavior, not only in the context of disease but even with regard to such phenomena as global climate change. I believe that we must be more mindful of the effects of our lifestyles, our use of too much fossil fuel (coal, oil) to support our energy habits. If we were more mindful, more aware, that our

lifestyle is leading to catastrophic global climate change that could imperil our entire species and many other species, perhaps we would live more carefully. So I've been working with colleagues from the social sciences to develop experiments to test whether readers of pandemic novels (or at least key passages from the novels) that depict extreme human vulnerability might also become more careful with regard to other aspects of our contemporary lives. This is ongoing research, and my colleagues and I do not yet have any results from our work. But I would like to pursue this further after I gather some research funding that will enable me to conduct the empirical studies I have in mind.

Jiang: Can you tell us the connection and difference between ecocriticism and the environmental humanities which has been developing very fast in the 21st century?

Slovic: Ecocriticism is a sub-field within the environmental humanities. The environmental humanities consist of numerous other disciplines—environmental anthropology, environmental history, environmental literary and cultural studies (or “ecocriticism”), environmental philosophy, environmental psychology, environmental religious studies, etc. Ecocriticism is not separate from the environmental humanities—ecocritics do a specific kind of environmental humanities research and teaching that is focused on cultural texts. But when ecocritics describe themselves as environmental humanities scholars, it means that ecocritics are especially interested in doing their work in an interdisciplinary way that brings history, philosophy, psychology, and other disciplinary perspectives into the discussion of cultural texts.

I have been using ideas from philosophy and psychology for many years—in fact, since I began my work in the field of ecocriticism as a postgraduate student in the 1980s. So when people began using the term *environmental humanities* in the early 2000s to describe interdisciplinary environmental research focused on humanistic topics, I immediately recognized what I was doing to be part of this trend, this movement. These days I describe myself as an environmental humanities scholar who is especially interested in doing interdisciplinary ecocriticism.

Jiang: I think there will be more and more ecocritics tending to study in an interdisciplinary way, to be described as environmental humanities scholars. Should we study in a transdisciplinary way? And what will the digital humanities bring to ecocriticism and environmental humanities?

Slovic: To be honest, I am not an expert in the digital humanities. However, I do have an article coming out in a new book on empirical ecocriticism that uses the

digital humanities. I worked with communication scholar David Markowitz to conduct a corpus linguistics study of all of the issues of the journal *ISLE* from 2004 to 2018, using an automated text analysis method known as Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) to identify language patterns in a total of 713 texts published in the journal during this time period, including editor's notes, articles, book reviews, and even creative writing (poetry, literary essays, and excerpts from novels). What we discovered is that there is a general trend toward more abstract language and more jargon during this fifteen-year period when the field of ecocriticism was rapidly developing its identity as a field of study. I interpret this as evidence of the discipline's growing sophistication and the creation of a new theoretical vocabulary to match this sophistication. In general, ecocritics tend to be somewhat suspicious of theoretical jargon and inaccessible language, but a certain amount of jargon can actually enable scholars to be more precise in analyzing particular kinds of problems. So I view the early twenty-first century as a time of rapid development in the discipline of ecocriticism, and this idea is reinforced by what David Markowitz and I have described in our new article titled "Tracing the Language of Ecocriticism: Insights from an Automated Text Analysis of *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*," which will appear in a book on empirical ecocriticism in 2023.

I'm sure there are many other ways to use the digital humanities in ecocriticism, but what I've mentioned here is one particular example I'm familiar with.

One other example that I'll mention briefly in an article by Canadian scholar Lai-Tze Fan titled "Digital Nature," which has appeared in 2022 in the book *Nature and Literary Studies*, a book I co-edited with Peter Remien. Lai-Tze uses N. Katherine Hayles's concept of "technogenesis" to describe how humans have coevolved with technology (Lai-Tze 340), both influencing new technologies and, in turn, being shaped by technologies in how we think about and exert impacts on the environment. In her article "Digital Nature," Lai-Tze Fan analyzes what she calls "electronic literature"—storytelling that has been created with the special assistance of computers and mobile devices as well as digital photography, film, and art—to understand the "multimodal, multimedial, multilinear, and interactive" aspects of this "e-literature" (Lai-Tze 340). For example, she writes about a 2017 video game and electronic literary text by Eugenio Tisselli called *The Gate*, in which "the user is made aware of their own dependency on the larger ecological network to which they belong, not that which they rule" (Lai-Tze 347).

Jiang: Your newly published book *The Bloomsbury Handbook to the Medical-Environmental Humanities* (edited together with Swarnalatha Rangarajan and Vidya Sarveswaran) in 2022 represents the latest development of environmental humanities in the context of the COVID-19. It is timely effort to ally the medical humanities and the environmental humanities. Can you tell us more about it?

Slovic: Sometimes we find that there are parallel disciplines—such as ecocriticism and environmental communication studies—that seem to have much to say to each other but that don't come into direct contact unless scholars make an explicit, conscious effort to bring them together. Swarnalatha, Vidya, and I tried to do this when we worked on our book *The Routledge Handbook to Ecocriticism and Environmental Communication*, which came out in 2019.

In the new Bloomsbury book, we tried to bring together two existing fields that seemed mutually relevant but that hadn't been formally, explicitly brought together before this. People have often noticed, of course, that human physical and mental health is affected by what's happening in the external environment, so it was not difficult to find a number of colleagues who were interested in writing articles that bring this connection to light. We recruited nearly thirty authors to write about a wide range of topics for this handbook to medical-environmental humanities, a collection of articles that seeks explicitly to write about issues of individual and public health from environmental angles and about environmental experience from the perspective of medical knowledge and concerns. Some of the fundamental ideas related to the book emerge from previous research such as Pramod K. Nayar's *Bhopal's Ecological Gothic* and *Ecoprecarity* and Sarah Jaquette Ray and Jay Sibara's collection *Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities: Toward an Eco-Crip Theory*. On the most basic level, the medical-environmental humanities highlights how human mental and physical health are tenuous, precarious qualities—we cannot take our health for granted. And what we do to the planet will sooner or later have a serious impact on our own wellbeing.

One of my favorite aspects of the book is the section devoted to ideas about the conjunction of human and environmental health in various cultures around the world. The idea that a healthy environment is necessary for healthy human lives is not really new, but we seem to have forgotten this in the modern world. Several of these chapters focus on traditional cultures that have much to teach us in the twenty-first century about the intersections between nature and human health. One of the chapters, by Kiu-wai Chu from Hong Kong (who is currently a professor in Singapore), focuses on how Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) is being represented to the Chinese public by way of popular culture, such as television

series devoted to teaching general audiences about TCM, offering not only medical information but environmental education.

For me, the idea of emphasizing how our physical and mental health are deeply connected to the natural world is very personal. I became interested in ecocriticism many years ago because I love being physically active—running, climbing mountains, going for long hikes in nature. But that was almost forty years ago! Even now I love being physically active and having as much contact as possible with nature, but I realize now that we cannot take our physical health for granted, especially as we get older. So in the epilogue to the book, for which Swarnalatha, Vidya, and I each wrote a short essay, I called my part “You Don’t Know What You Got ‘Til It’s Gone” (a line from a popular environmental song by Joni Mitchell titled “Big Yellow Taxi”), and I wrote about the challenge of appreciating our personal health while we still enjoy it and appreciating the importance of the nonhuman environment before we destroy the environment. We often don’t really know what we have—what we should celebrate and value—until “it’s gone.” For me, this is a key message from the effort to bring together the medical and environmental approaches to the humanities.

Jiang: You talked about the connection between the environmental humanities and the medical-environmental humanities, but what are their differences?

Slovic: Not all scholarship in the environmental humanities explicitly touches upon the medical aspects of our environmental experience. The medical-environmental humanities compels a more conscious effort to make the connection between health and environment. In producing the new book, we are not trying to say that all environmental humanities scholars should be adopting this medical approach, but we did want to point out that it could be helpful for scholars and teaches, and for students, to be aware of the possibility of making these connections. Perhaps it would make sense to say that the medical-environmental humanities is a subset of the broader field called the environmental humanities, just as the medical-environmental humanities constitutes a small part of the larger field known as the medical humanities.

Jiang: What do you think of the relationship between ecocriticism and the medical-environmental humanities?

Slovic: Many of the articles in the new *Bloomsbury Handbook to the Medical-Environmental Humanities* are works of ecocriticism, using literature or film—or sometimes works of popular culture, such as television series—as lenses through

which to show various things about the intersection between human health and the nonhuman environment. For instance, Samantha Walton's chapter "Eco-Recovery Memoir and the Medical-Environmental Humanities" focuses on a particular type of autobiographical book that tells the stories of how the authors recovered from depression or other forms of mental distress by way of contact with nature. One example she writes about here is Helen Macdonald's well-known memoir *H Is for Hawk*. The chapter is ecocritical because the author writes in detail about specific literary works that illustrate her argument. Another ecocritical chapter is Tobin Chen-Hsing Tsai's "Toward an Ethics of Transcorporeality and Public Health in Taiwanese Ecopathodocumentary," which analyzes several documentary films from Taiwan (China) that focus on air pollution and public health. This chapter is also ecocritical because it uses cultural texts—the films—as lenses through which to understand a public health and environmental issue: air pollution.

Some of the articles in this book are more historical, others more theoretical or philosophical. But the chapters that clearly use cultural texts seem to fit within the scholarly category that we would call ecocriticism.

Jiang: Inspired by your study, I have one immature idea about the further development of medical-environmental humanities from the perspective of China. Yin-Yang Wu-Xing (Yin-Yang and Five Elements, subsystems of human body) is the theoretical basis of traditional Chinese for more than 5,000 years. The fundamental idea is "Tianren Heyi" (Oneness of Heaven and Man) which emphasizes the interconnection and interaction between the health of man and nature (Earth as a living organism), and it has a set of unique terms such as *Yin*, *Yang*, *qi*, *Wuxing*, etc. Do you think it is possible or meaningful to explore or develop TCM ecocriticism by referring to the ideas and terms of TCM?

Slovic: I really like where you're going with these suggestions. There is some of this already in Kiu-wai Chu's article on TCM for the *Bloomsbury Handbook*, but I think he would agree that TCM ecocriticism could be developed much further. I really like the phrase "TCM ecocriticism," by the way. What you say here makes a lot of sense to me—the ideas and terms of TCM can certainly be used as lenses through which to examine cultural texts. There is also some of this happening, I think, in Kathryn Yalan Chang's chapter for the *Bloomsbury Handbook*, which focuses on food and medicine in Taiwan (China) and the United States. Perhaps there are other elements of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) in China and other countries where traditional ideas and terms related to medicine and food could be brought into ecocritical contexts.

Jiang: Can you name another one or two newly developed and important specific approaches to the study of ecocriticism?

Slovic: A number of ecocritics who once were focused on specific authors and texts have now shifted to write about broader historical trends in human culture vis-à-vis the larger planet. If I look at the book series *Elements in Environmental Humanities*, published by Cambridge University Press, I see that ecocritic Louise Westling has a new book titled *Deep History, Climate Change, and the Evolution of Human Culture*. This is what I mean by expanding beyond specific textual analysis to a broader, more sweeping view of human history. Also in that series, Marco Armiero has published *Wasteocene* (a book about the phenomenon of waste as a definitive aspect of our time in history), and Christopher Schliephake has written *The Environmental Humanities and the Ancient World*. So this effort to describe and define vast periods of time from an ecocritical or an interdisciplinary environmental humanities outlook is happening.

I also see a trend to look at different kinds of places from an environmental angle, using various types of cultural texts as examples. Allison M. Schifani has just published *Urban Ecology and Intervention in the 21st Century Americas: Verticality, Catastrophe, and the Mediated City* (2021), which is an example of analyzing urban material culture (architecture and city planning) from an environmental humanities angle; at the same time, Michael J. Gormley has recently published *The End of the Anthropocene: Ecocriticism, the Universal Ecosystem, and the Astropocene* (2021), which offers readings of fiction that weaves together astrophysics and ecology, moving beyond the planet Earth. So there are some recent projects that seem to be looking at non-traditional spaces in innovative environmental ways.

I find that I am always trying to look in new directions in my own work, too. I believe there is much more research to be done from an empirical ecocritical perspective, studying how audiences respond to specific kinds of texts. This is what I'm doing with my studies of pandemic literature and how such work influences readers' thinking about precarity and vigilance (a sense of urgency) with regard to public health and ecological threats. There is a new book on empirical ecocriticism forthcoming in 2023, and this will help to greatly advance the field, I believe.

I would also point to the special issue of the new journal *Lagoonscapes: Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities* that Serena Chou and I are guest co-editing on the topic of "arboreal ecocriticism" (tree-related ecocriticism). In recent years, a number of colleagues from around the world have been telling me they are interested in connections between trees and literature, so it occurred to me to pull

together a journal issue on this subject. Serena and I came up with the term “arboreal ecocriticism” to describe such scholarship. We have contributors like John C. Ryan writing about human relationships with trees in Australian Aboriginal stories and poetry and Françoise Besson talking about the theme of tree-planting and forestry in a classic work of French literature by Jean Giono titled *The Man Who Planted Trees*. I am hoping Serena and I can develop the journal issue into a larger, book-length collection of arboreal ecocriticism for the new book series on Critical Plant Studies that Lexington Books, a leading American publisher of ecocriticism, has just started recently.

Jiang: You advocate that ecocritics should “go public” (Gasman 127). Can you provide a further explanation?

Slovic: As I suggested in my 2008 book *Going Away to Think: Engagement, Retreat, and Ecocritical Responsibility*, there is a central tension in the field of ecocriticism (and in the minds of individual ecocritics) between, on the one hand, the desire to experience beautiful art and the beauty of nature and, on the other hand, the desire to contribute to social reform and environmental protection. More recently, I published an article titled “Environmental Humanities and the Public Intellectual” in the book *Imaginative Ecologies: Inspiring Change through the Humanities* (2022), in which I place not only ecocriticism but the broader field of the environmental humanities within the tradition of what Edward Said called “the public intellectual.” My argument here is that many ecocritics hope that their work, as teachers and as scholars, will reach audiences beyond traditional academic audiences and will contribute positively to the well-being of society. I first mentioned the fifth wave of ecocriticism during a lecture at Beijing Forestry University in the summer of 2019, and then I wrote about the fifth wave in my editor’s note for the Summer 2019 issue of *ISLE*, where I stated: “It seems to me that there has been increasing focus in recent years, in this fifth phase of ecocriticism, on information management, the psychology of information processing, and on the efficacy of various communication strategies and these concerns appear to work in tandem with the efforts of ecocritics to reach out beyond our traditional academic audiences by writing op-eds and blog entries, speaking at public meetings, publishing creative writing in addition to scholarship, and using other creative outlets.” (Slovic, “Editor’s Note” 514) I mention, too, that there is a clear effort among ecocritics in the recent fifth wave “to connect with lay audiences and practical decision-makers: to make our work count for something in the world, not merely within the academy” (Slovic, “Editor’s Note” 514).

I certainly find this to be the case in my own life. Of course, ecocriticism and interdisciplinary environmental humanities research and teaching are my career, my job—I earn a living doing these things. But I have also long been interested in writing articles for newspapers and organizing conferences and literary events for the general public. In 2015, I began writing op-ed articles (short opinion essays) for both national newspapers like *The New York Times* and regional papers in Idaho and in my home state of Oregon, sometimes for websites that publish articles relevant to current public issues. In my environmental writing course for the University of Idaho’s Semester in the Wild Program (which takes place each fall at a research station in the Idaho wilderness), the final writing assignment for my students is a short piece of “personal testimony,” in which students write 500 words or so about a social or environmental issue that concerns them, weaving together their personal stories with information and suggestions regarding the issue of concern, which could be the importance of protecting predators (such as wolves) in particular ecosystems or the value of having community gardens where students can grow healthy food on university campuses. There is no limit to the range of topics students—and people in general—can write their testimonies about. Testimonies are a very practical form of social engagement—these are the kinds of statements people can present at public meetings, send as letters to academic, corporate, or government officials, or publish in newspapers or on website. During the past decade, in addition to teaching testimony writing in my environmental writing classes, I have also been offering public workshops for community groups on writing testimony—sometimes when I travel to conferences in various parts of the world, such as Guam or Pakistan, I have been asked to teach such workshops for local groups. I consider such public teaching to be a way of extending the reach of ecocriticism (and the ideas of the humanities) to broader audiences.

The phrase “going public” came to me when I became aware of Marybeth Gasman’s 2016 book *Academics Going Public: How to Write and Speak Beyond Academe*. This little book is focused specifically on the idea that experts in the study of university education might want to take their ideas beyond academic conferences and journals and find ways to communicate with the broader public. However, I believe the idea of going public is also extremely relevant to many other fields, including ecocriticism, so I began using the phrase “ecocritics going public.” The Gasman collection includes chapters on “Writing Opinion Articles” (or op-eds), “Using Social Media to Promote Scholarship,” and “Writing an Influential Press Release.” When I was a graduate student and a young professor, none of my own teachers and mentors suggested to me that I might want to consider writing

for “the public,” for non-academic audiences. In fact, I was trained to write for highly specialized audiences in academic journals—and readers of academic books. But I began to realize later that if I hoped to make a difference in the world through my work as a scholar and thinker, I needed to adapt my writing style to make it appropriate for other kinds of readers—and I needed, at times, to attend public events and share my ideas with different kinds of listeners. In recent years I have begun to include this idea of going public in my own classes on the environmental humanities for postgraduate students, asking the students not only to write traditional scholarly papers but also to take the research they do for their final papers and prepare either a press release that explains their research in a way that journalists might find interesting or to write a short op-ed essay (500-800 words long) that could be submitted to a newspaper or a website for publication. My students have often succeeded in having their op-eds published in places that reach large audiences and actually could contribute to public conversations much more quickly than a traditional academic article would. For instance, last year one of my environmental humanities students published her op-ed in *The Washington Post* newspaper (one of the major newspapers in the United States, based in the national capital) before the semester was even finished. She submitted it to the editors at the paper, they found it relevant to the Thanksgiving holiday in November, and they published it within a few days. I find this to be a very impressive example of going public with the ideas we’re talking about in university classes.

I encourage other colleagues to consider sharing their own research or training their students to share their work with readers and listeners beyond academia. If we believe our work has relevance to society’s important issues, we should probably be trying to communicate with people beyond our colleagues and students, in addition to our colleagues and students.

Jiang: What do think of the biggest feature of ecocriticism in the 21st century?

Slovic: As I’ve mentioned above when talking about the fifth wave of ecocriticism, there does seem to be an increasing practical dimension to the field, an engagement with various forms of human cultural expression (transportation, food, architecture, etc.) in addition to art and literature, and also an increasing willingness to speak out to general audiences, not only to a small group of fellow scholars. Perhaps these new waves of ecocriticism reflect the increasing sense of the urgency of our ecological predicament. The situation of the planet is not good, to put it mildly. Planetary temperatures are steadily rising, the weather patterns are becoming more and more erratic with huge storms and raging wildfires affecting many different

regions. Species continue to disappear—to go extinct—at a frightening pace. And various forms of contamination, from microplastics in the sea to the release of dioxins into the atmosphere through the burning of commercial, industrial, and medical waste, are creating dire public health crises. And the list of problems goes on and on.

There is something hopeful about doing our best to respond to these crises as teachers and scholars in the humanities. As Donald Worster wrote in his foundational essay “Paths Across the Levee” from *The Wealth of Nature* (1993), “We are facing a global crisis today, not because of how ecosystems function but rather because of how our ethical systems function. Getting through the crisis requires understanding our impact on nature as precisely as possible, but even more, it requires understanding those ethical systems and using that understanding to reform them. Historians, along with literary scholars, anthropologists, and philosophers, cannot do the reforming, of course, but they can help with the understanding” (Worster 27). Global environmental crises have increased tremendously since Worster published those words thirty years ago, but the environmental humanities—including ecocriticism—has also become much more sophisticated and aggressive in responding to these crises.

I imagine that ecocritics and other colleagues will continue to find new and increasingly high-profile ways to go public. Some of my colleagues, such as the postcolonial ecocritic George Handley, have actually run for political office in the United States and become policy makers in their communities (Handley is a city councilman in Provo, Utah), not merely writing to government decision makers but becoming part of the government. I look forward to seeing how the fifth wave of ecocriticism—the going public phase—continues to develop in the coming years.

Jiang: According to your understanding, what will be the major trends of ecocriticism in the coming years?

Slovic: Sometimes I try to imagine what micro-disciplines within ecocriticism might develop in the coming years, but it’s very hard to predict the field’s coming directions. I think there may be new projects focusing on specific cultures and regions of the world that have not yet been explored sufficiently by ecocritics—perhaps more work on Arabic language texts. I know there are quite a few students studying ecocriticism in countries like Morocco. And many are working with English-language texts or working in Farsi in Iran. There must be other countries and regions, too, where there is room to develop important new focuses within ecocriticism.

Another area that might develop in the coming years would be in combining trans-species empathy from disciplines like anthropology and psychology with textual studies to form a new trans-species ecocriticism or empathic ecocriticism or something like that. What makes me think of this is the work of anthropologist Eduardo Kohn at McGill University in Canada, who published the book *How Forests Think: Anthropology Beyond the Human* in 2013. Recently I was in touch with one of Kohn's Ph.D. students, Amy Donovan, because of a fascinating article she wrote about trans-species empathy and whales. Her article "Raw, Dense, and Loud: A Whale's Perspective on Cold Water Energy" came out in 2022 in the book *Cold Water Oil: Offshore Petroleum Cultures*. I interviewed the author about her fascinating essay, which includes ecocritical analysis of whale-related poetry as one of several ways of sensing how whales perceive the world, for the website [www.arithmeticofcompassion.org](https://www.arithmeticofcompassion.org/blog/2022/3/18/communicating-trans-species-empathy-an-interview-with-amy-donovan): <https://www.arithmeticofcompassion.org/blog/2022/3/18/communicating-trans-species-empathy-an-interview-with-amy-donovan>.

My point is that there will likely be many new styles or sub-movements within ecocriticism in the coming years. There is a lot flexibility for scholars to invent approaches to the field that match the intellectual and cultural problems they are trying to understand. This is a wonderful thing.

Jiang: There seem to be some differences between the studies of ecocriticism in the North and the Global South. Do you have any suggestions for scholars who study ecocriticism in China?

Slovic: I've always been interested in how Chinese culture seems to include both the Global North and the Global South. There are many communities in China that are quite wealthy and technologically advanced, while there are nearby communities that do not seem to have much access to wealth or advanced technology.

In my experience, ecocritics from the Global South have a very strong sense of social justice. They often apply vocabularies and methodologies from environmental justice ecocriticism and postcolonial ecocriticism in their research, and they tend to choose authors and texts who are highly sensitive to social justice issues when doing their work. For instance, in the collection *Ecocriticism of the Global South*, which I edited with Swarnalatha Rangarajan and Vidya Sarveswaran, we included Zhou Xiaojing's article titled "Scenes from the Global South in China: Zheng Xiaoqiong's Poetic Agency for Labor and Environmental Justice," which focuses on the poetry of Zheng, a former migrant worker who was born in Sichuan Province before moving to work in factories in southern Guangdong Province for seven

years. A key aspect of ecocriticism of the Global South is the decision to focus on writers or artists whose work illustrates social justice issues that are often associated with inequality that comes from industrial and economic development. Other works of art that could possibly be studied by Chinese ecocritics include the paintings of Liu Xiaodong of workers involved with the Three Gorges dam-building project and the 2015 art film *Behemoth* (bēixī móshòu) by Zhao Liang, which represents coal-mining in China and Inner Mongolia. Focusing on these texts and asking the kinds of questions typically asked in the fields of environmental justice and postcolonial ecocriticism would be appropriate ways of bringing Global South perspectives into Chinese ecocriticism.

Jiang: As an original critical theory formulated by the Chinese scholar Nie Zhenzhao, ethical literary criticism, has received a large amount of attention from academics. Is it possible to make an alliance between ecocriticism and ethical literary criticism?

Slovic: There is a strong ethical aspect to ecocriticism and to the environmental humanities more generally. When considering the most important features of ecocriticism in the twenty-first century, I referred to historian Donald Worster's famous statement from thirty years ago that the humanities help us to understand the ethical questions about why we behave as we do toward the environment. I think Worster and many other environmental humanists, including literary scholars, would strongly agree with Nie Zhenzhao about the importance of focusing on the ethical features of cultural texts, but in the environmental humanities we would be concerned not only with the implications of literary texts for human rights and human wellbeing but with the broader environmental implications of ethical questions. In fact, you could say that the environmental arts and humanities have sought to broaden the sphere of ethical concern from human-centeredness to a larger concern for all living beings. With the development of new materialist philosophy and material ecocriticism, you might even argue that ethical considerations apply to non-living phenomena, such as rivers and stones, oceans and mountains.

Indigenous communities throughout the world have long understood that ethical responsibility applies to our behavior toward the natural world. We are now catching up to such ancient ideas in modern humanities scholarship, re-learning ethical perspectives that our tribal ancestors knew centuries ago. If we had not forgotten or ignored these ways of thinking, we might not be in such a terrible ecological predicament today.

In any case, I certainly agree that it makes sense for ecocritics to consciously

bring together ecocriticism and ethical literary criticism. This sounds like a good idea for a new book project!

Jiang: Yes. That is really a good idea! Also, I think there will be more Chinese scholars who will get into and make more contributions to the field of ecocriticism. Thank you very much for all of your responses.

Slovic: You're welcome.

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