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# Manifesto as Interrogation

LAWRENCE BUELL

To launch a new journal with a bang, what better than a bevy of manifestoes? The manifesto mode also befits ecocriticism's state of residual liminality. It has surely established itself for good—burgeoned in less than two decades from ASLE's first 1995 Fort Collins, Colorado, campfire-style plenary into a worldwide polylogue whose biennial gathering runs longer than the MLA—but anxieties of definition and legitimation linger. The real work seems barely to have begun. Is ecocriticism a discourse, a crossroads, a tossed salad? Yes, activity is dramatically on the rise—*Resilience* is its eighth ecocritical journal by my count; yes, the environmental humanities have gained ground; but the gravity of the real-time environmental dangers that energized them is accelerating even faster, and the place of environmental humanities among the disciplines and in the public sphere remains marginal.

Manifesto may not be the best idiom for engaging these matters, except to reinforce the urgency of doing so. Manifestoes are supposed to proclaim, define, or contest norms of practice. Peremptory foreclosure is endemic to them. Myself a repeat offender, I am resolved this time around to manifest not with precepts but with “Where now?” questions.

## Challenges of Professionalization

What might be the tradeoffs of becoming an accepted part of the academic mix? Will professionalization weaken ecocriticism's longstanding rapport between creative and critical communities for instance? Is narrative scholarship more likely to get sidelined as amateurish or to approximate the critical sophistication of reflexive ethnography? When

will it become impossible for even the most conscientious ecocritics to keep track of each others' work even if they wanted to—or has that already happened while I was asleep?

### Challenges of Broader Intellectual and Political Efficacy

Is ecocriticism likelier to attain methodological consensus or continue to evolve as a big-tent concourse featuring eclectic hybridization with critical models from different points on the spectrum of human and natural sciences from religion to biostatistics? How in the long run will it negotiate the mismatch between the geography of material environments from local to planetary and the persistence of nations as jurisdictional and cultural units? How will it navigate between critical inquiry and (discrepant) ethico-political agendas? How will it process the recognition that it occupies a space of diagnostics rather than direct action? How might it compensate for the comparative political impotence of the environmental humanities today?

### Challenges of Natureculture

Granting that the coming of the Anthropocene has made nature and culture even more indistinguishable than ever, how will ecocriticism adjudicate between the claims of an ever-deteriorating other-than-human environment and the claims of distributive social justice? Will it adjudicate them proactively or reactively, in response to whatever public issues as global socioenvironmental inequality and climate change? To what extent will future environmental criticism be driven by such public issues, by first principles, by *theoria*, by aesthetic texts and trend lines, by eloquent individual entrepreneurs, by collective practice?

I hope to live to see some of these questions clarified and to help to clarify them.