

Editorial

Creative Writing and Arts Tenth Anniversary Issue 2020 Ecocriticism: In Europe and Beyond

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DOI: [HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.37536/ECOZONA.2020.11.2.4019](https://doi.org/10.37536/ECOZONA.2020.11.2.4019)



The English verb “to celebrate” comes from the Latin adjective *celeber* which infers, among more common implications, a form of gathering, by dint of its meanings “containing a multitude, numerous, frequent” and “crowded, populous.” In its original meaning, to celebrate thus meant not simply to honor but also to frequent, to gather with other people, and, through this gathering, to establish or rather solidify a populous community. In 2010, Carmen Flys Junquera and Axel Goodbody ended the first editorial of *Ecozon@* claiming—in something between a challenge and a wish—that the success of this new journal devoted to “the relatively new field of literary and cultural criticism called ecocriticism” would depend “on the international ecocritical community” (*Ecozon@* 1.1, p. 3). This anniversary issue of *Ecozon@* comes ten years later and, by both its very existence and its content, testifies to the success of the enterprise envisioned by the journal’s founders, gathering once again several of the voices and experiences that have been constituting such a community. We may say, in fact, that through the present issue an international community concerned with and by the environment and its degradation celebrates itself, that is to say, it gathers to recognize itself; to explore its contemporary multi-faceted and multilingual multitude; and to imagine new possibilities, alternative ecological futures. The fact that in 2020 this community is implicitly composed not only of “researchers, theorists, creative writers and artists”—as declared in the journal’s original statement, but also of the millions of young people all over the world who in the last few years have joined *Ecozon@*’s founders in voicing their concern about human impact over the nonhuman world, reveals the historical necessity of our journal as well as the forward-thinking embedded in its conception.

Yet, we would not be properly celebrating this special issue of *Ecozon@* without exploring the other crucial term in this expression: anniversary. The word anniversary comes from the Latin adjective *anniversarius*, “returning annually,” which derived from *annus*, “year,” plus, crucially, the word *versus*, which is the past participle of the Latin verb *vertere*, meaning “to turn, to bend.” Etymologically, an anniversary is thus an opportunity to turn back and reflect upon the trajectory and the time that has passed, i.e. upon the potential distance between what it was (the original event) and what it is (the present and the becoming future). From the perspective of the environmental engagement that

characterizes the scope of our journal, it is particularly bitter that measuring that distance also means to realize the shortcomings of our ecological fight. Just to take one disheartening example, between 2010 and 2020 the International Union for Conservation of Nature has declared extinct more than 160 species, a disappearance largely caused by human impact: for instance, since the first issue of *Ecozon@*, planet Earth's biodiversity has lost forever precious embodiments of life such as the Pinta Island tortoise; the Bermuda saw-whet owl; and the *Amaranthus brownii*, a small plant of the Amaranthaceae family that used to grow on the uninhabited Hawaiian island of Nihoa, and has likely been destroyed by invasive plants introduced by humans in the last few decades. It is therefore uncannily serendipitous that the tenth anniversary of *Ecozon@* lands during a global pandemic, when it seems not only that there is very little to celebrate and time itself appears to be stuck, but that we are also experiencing more than ever the truth of the fragility of existence as well as the interconnectedness of our bodies with the rest of the world.

To properly celebrate the tenth anniversary, I have thus decided to approach this issue of *Ecozon@* from the perspective of a modern Janus, the double-faced Roman god of doors, gates, and transitions: deeply rooted in the challenging present, but with one face gazing toward the future of our ecological community and the other one staring instead into the past of what has been done. Indeed, according to Roman mythology, Janus not only oversaw crucial seasonal events such as planting, harvests, and the new year—he was also present at the beginning of the world. Given the visual nature of Janus, I thus asked the artists whose work graced the covers of the last twenty issues of our journal to contribute once again with a work capable of reflecting the distance (or proximity) between their original contribution and the current one, as well as the possible changes in their artistic relationship with the environment over the time that has passed. Given the challenging circumstances of the year 2020 (among other factors), not all the artists were able to participate, but what we collected is still a remarkable mosaic of experiences, visions, and eco-aesthetic commitment. As Janus (and the Romans), so, too, do the artists in the Creative Writing and Arts section of this issue of *Ecozon@* know that events like anniversaries are, in a sense, thresholds between the past and future, and it is therefore auspicious to honor them properly.

Our first contribution comes from John Darwell, a British photographer, whose work reflects an interest in social and industrial change, as well as a deep concern for the environment and the depiction of mental health. Darwell originally contributed to the second issue of *Ecozon@* with a series of astounding images of trash, ironically intertwining wonder, beauty, and human-caused pollution. For this anniversary issue, he presents a few images from a new project entitled “The Dog Walkers.” As he writes in his own self-reflection, in the ten years since his work appeared on the cover of *Ecozon@*, his artistic inquiry has moved from observations of the effects of pollution on the wider environment to a more specific exploration of plastic pollution and of the growing problem of dog waste bags. This new series thus “reflects on the international ubiquity of dog walkers and those knotted bags we all carry as part of the process,” therefore

revealing once again our complex and at times contradictory approaches to social and environmental life.

A more immersive and phenomenological experience of the environment and its materiality is instead the subject of the work of our second contributor, Michael Markwick. One of Markwick's dramatic paintings was on the cover of the issue of *Ecozon@* devoted to "Green Countercultures" (2013). Here, he contributes instead with a large-scale 2019 work entitled "Swimmer," in which an abstracted skeletal figure in the upper left of the canvas is caught in a tidal wave of bright blue water and debris. As the Art editor at the time, Isabel Hoving, suggested for the 2013 work, this new painting too offers a full immersion into the environment's overwhelming forces and, consequently, a representation of our own fragility in the nonhuman world.

Some astonishing images created by Françoise Lucas appeared on the Spring 2014 issue of our journal. For this anniversary issue, Françoise offers another one of her mysterious photos, which manage to transform the material details of our daily interactions with the nonhuman into images of environmental poetry and wonder. Yet, the image that appears here alludes also to a darker narrative: as the author writes in her artistic statement, a plastic bag has been put between the lens of the camera and the plant. Although the initial aim was to achieve an aesthetic effect, the result—as Lucas states—"points rather to an effect of confinement, of entrapment, or even of suffocation" of nature, insinuating a problematic, and somehow unexpected, commentary about the relationship between aesthetics and environmental awareness.

Lucía Loren was the author of the image appearing on the cover of the Fall 2015 issue of *Ecozon@* devoted to "Artistic Ways of Understanding and Interacting with Nature." The series of images she selected for our anniversary issue bears witness to a more recent work of land art by this Spanish eco-artist. While the 2015 contribution dialogued with the landscape of the Natural Park Sierra María-Los Vélez (in Andalucía), "Ciclo Seco" engages instead with the environment of Montejo de la Sierra, a municipality of the Community of Madrid. It is no coincidence that Madrid is the city of the artist's birth and also her current residence: as Loren writes, her artistic practice in the last few years "ha derivado hacia una búsqueda y comprensión del propio territorio como generador de ecosistemas naturales y culturales que nos vinculan de modo muy estrecho al lugar" (has led to a search for and understanding of the territory itself as a generator of natural and cultural ecosystems that closely link us to the place). In this new work, located so close to her own dwelling, it is as if the artist is trying to repair environmental damage, patching up with wool an ecological wound caused by the lack of water and the increasing desertification of the soil due to climate change. The outcome is a powerful display of ecological resilience, the result of an imaginative combination of traditional artistic labor and love for the materiality of the land.

Less material environments are those created by Tamiko Thiel, whose *Gardens of the Anthropocene*—an augmented reality installation—appeared in the "Green Computer and Video Games" issue of *Ecozon@* (2017). For this special issue of our journal, Thiel, who is an artistic pioneer in the fields of VR and AR, introduces us to another interactive augmented reality large-scale project, entitled *Evolution of Fish*. Created while she was

artist in residence at the Digital Graffiti Festival in Florida, USA, *Evolution of Fish* “turns the surroundings into an underwater reef, filled with schools of fish,” controlled through special iPads given to the visitors who use them to guide the fish in swarms to the left and right. Yet, as in any real habitat, the visitor’s narcissistic excitement can be disastrous: as Thiel writes in her introduction to the project, the more the iPads agitate the fish, “the more the fish turn into plastic garbage. Only a period of rest allows the garbage to turn back into fish.”

The last artistic contribution to the tenth anniversary issue of *Ecozon@* comes from Thomas Feuerstein. Feuerstein’s *Prometheus Delivered* was on the cover of *Ecozon@* 9.2 (2018) and was picked to encapsulate—through biotechnological lenses—the overall theme of that issue, i.e. the natural encounter between mythology and ecocriticism. His new contribution, entitled *Metabolic Machines*, further explores the fusion of the real and the symbolic, the biological and the political, that characterizes Feuerstein’s artistic research, as all the eponymous machines revolve around a particularly cogent preoccupation of how to tell stories of transformation processes, biological metabolism and entropy. For instance, the series of installations entitled “Manna Machines” represented here is a collective device which relates “the story of an artist who produces his own food and materials, cultivating a form of manna that serves as a pigment for his paintings and as a source of food and energy, whilst freeing the atmosphere of carbon dioxide at the same time” (from the artist’s own statement). This imaginative and suggestive narrative materializes through a series of sculptures that function technically like photobioreactors, from which Feuerstein obtains a fine powder, which he binds in resin or linseed oil as a pigment for his paintings entitled “Harvest.” Through this futuristic process, Feuerstein’s artistic production not only becomes self-sufficient, it also acts as “a symbolic apparatus, absorbing strands of reality (food, energy, climate) in order to concentrate them artistically and socially.”

This introduction to the Creative Writing and Art section would not be complete, however, without me reflecting upon what it was and what it is. As I felt and still feel individually honored to be part of the *Ecozon@* community, I also realize more than ever that my job as editor would not be possible without continuous, collective, generous collaboration. I therefore want to conclude by thanking all the artists and writers and poets who have worked with us—those whose work made the cover and those whose work did not; those whose circumstances allowed them to contribute to the anniversary issue and those who are dealing with other present and somehow more cogent issues. What I have had the opportunity to do since joining our journal in 2018 would also not have been possible without the effort put forward by my predecessors in this position. An anniversary issue would thus not be completed without celebrating, that is to say, “gathering,” with Isabel Hoving and Serenella Iovino, who blazed the trail and continue to share their energy, professionalism, and commitment with me and with our present and future community.