

## Editorial 12.2

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In light of the Anthropocene's industrial agriculture based on petroleum products, toxic chemicals, deforestation, and factory farms, one might be tempted to describe human cultivation primarily as destructive. There are, of course, many other ways of practicing agriculture and of thinking about the human being's food systems ecologically, and other strategies for interactions with our living world beyond anthropocentric exploitation, dominance, or efforts to control while all-too-often wreaking havoc. In particular, I note Robin Wall Kimmerer's discussion of Indigenous practices in her 2013 book, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, which combines the insights of Native Americans with scientific botany in order to describe long-term and productive *collaborations* among human, plants, and the non-human or more-than human broadly. Kimmerer makes clear that the titular sweetgrass best thrives when interacting with human beings, a fact in direct contrast to the expected scientific assumption that any human interference would be negative. She found the opposite to be true: the scientists' "predictions for sweetgrass were consistent with their Western science worldview, which sets human beings outside of 'nature' and judges their interactions with other species as largely negative. They had been schooled that the best way to protect a dwindling species was to leave it alone and keep people away. But the grassy meadows tell us that for sweetgrass, human beings are part of the system, a vital part" (Kimmerer 163). Indeed, Kimmerer uses the fact of human-sweetgrass collaboration such that both species best survive together as the framework for the entire book, which nevertheless does not shy away from documenting extreme pollution, extinctions, and misunderstandings of other living things. Collaboration is a possibility, she writes, and not just for bees and flowers: "With a long, long history of cultural use, sweetgrass has apparently become dependent on humans to create the "disturbance" that stimulates its compensatory growth. Humans participate in a symbiosis in which sweetgrass provides its fragrant blades to the people and people" (Kimmerer 164). Active collaboration is the basis of such relationships, as we see in so many plant-animal or plant-human interactions such as fruit production and dissemination, and even in the face of the struggle and labor necessary to maintain these living relationships. Other recent authors similarly consider agricultural methods that are not based on short-term profit and the neglect of our own ecological dependency, seeking especially sustainable options that produce at the large-scale now necessary to feed our current human population. Mark Bittmann, journalist and cookbook author extraordinaire, for example, writes in his 2021 book, *Animal, Vegetable, Junk: A History of Food from Sustainable to Suicidal*, of

“agroecology” as another kind of collaboration that simultaneously enriches humans, the living soil, and the other living things dependent on the land around farms. He writes: “The word ‘agroecology’ was first used about a hundred years ago, and it remains the best descriptor for the movements that are rebuilding our relationship with food” (Bittmann 314). In his definition, Bittmann emphasizes the ecological health of this system: “agroecology is a set of practices that integrates ecological principles into agriculture. As a scientific approach to farming that works with all of nature’s power and gifts, rather than seeing nature as something to be conquered, it stands in opposition to industrial agriculture. It is more serious and comprehensive than ‘organic,’ and not constrained by USDA definitions” (Bittmann 315). Such a practice emphasizes social justice, cuts back on use of toxic chemicals in fertilizer and pesticides, and focuses on sustaining people, soil, and plants: “Agroecology regenerates the ecology of the soil instead of depleting it, reduces carbon emissions, and sustains local food cultures, businesses, farms, jobs, seeds, and people instead of diminishing or destroying them” (Bittmann 317). Bittmann’s book offers a broad ranging history of human agriculture with horrific descriptions of its use to dominate, and enslave, and its destruction of ecological systems, yet he ends with hopeful documentation of actual farms now undertaking successful efforts at agroecology with the potential for large-scale production.

The quest for literary expressions of such efforts describing more sustainable and collaborative agricultural practices in the Anthropocene reveals a wide array of options, not all good. For example, in the early Anthropocene—if we accept the industrial revolution as this era’s starting point—Johann Wolfgang Goethe’s famously idyllic sense of farms fill his 1796-97 epic, *Hermann and Dorothea*, in which lavish fields, lovely gardens, and ripening fruit trees exist in peaceful and luxurious contrast to the violence of the French Revolution, or his best-selling international hit of sentimental literature from 1774, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, in which Werther declares his wish to be like a maybug flitting joyously among the peaceful plants. Yet those texts both express primarily the longing for a kind of pastoral harmony without much sense of the actual labor of working with the land despite the massive floods. The Austrian Adalbert Stifter’s mid-nineteenth-century novella *Brigitte* from 1844, in contrast, dedicates extensive attention specifically to the never-ending work necessary for farming in the steppes of Eastern Europe, part of what is now Hungary, but the narrative primarily concentrates on the anthropocentric control and re-shaping of the land by draining swamps and cutting trees to improve it for human use. In the twentieth century, many postcolonial novels present farm labor instead as a means of attaining freedom and independence from colonial rule such as Bessie Head’s exemplary 1968 novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, that takes place in Botswana and celebrates the potential of cash crops. Despite the compelling story of hope and the promise of intense labor for farmers, even female farmers, to make their own way, cash crops tend to immerse farmers in the large-scale banking-heavy equipment-pesticides-seeds-cycles of debt including starvation, as explained at length in both Bittmann’s book and Vandana Shiva’s works, *Stolen Harvest* (2000) and *Soil Not Oil* (2009).

In contrast to these works written during the Anthropocene, the special section in this volume of *Ecozon@* turns quite productively to a much older literary tradition from antiquity as inspiration for reconsidering historical agricultural practices that feature actual labour instead of idylls or future dreams: the georgic mode. Inspired especially by Virgil's *Georgics* (29 BC), our guest editors of *Eco-Georgic: From Antiquity to the Anthropocene*, Philipp Erchinger, Sue Edney, and Pippa Marland, describe both ancient and new forms of the georgic in which grappling with nature in order to develop agriculture involves serious, ongoing work and, potentially, a less anthropocentric perspective. Growing food means engaging with the natural world and thus struggling with storms, pests, and predators, rather than the idyllic peace of pastoral fields or the nineteenth- and twentieth-century sense of human control and profit. Above all, the editors promote the georgic mode as a frame positing the ongoing labour as inherently ecological if not necessarily environmentally positive: "the georgic world is always in excess of, or out of tune with, people's endeavours to work in consonance with it. This georgic imbalance of human labour and its surrounding medium entails an ecology, according to which forms of disequilibrium and inadequacy are an unavoidable part of all our efforts to make ourselves at home in the earthly world." Finding labour, the work of care, to be at the core of the many depictions of Virgil's work, the editors suggest that new forms of georgic from many eras up through contemporary texts provide promising models of human interactions—even collaborations—with the natural world. These perspectives are especially pertinent in the many crises and ambiguities of human-non-human interactions in the Anthropocene: "The georgic is relevant today, we want to suggest, because it shows us that such local care for and about the earth can take various, often contradictory forms. Being about 'intervening in nature' rather than 'about admiring nature,' as Laura Sayre points out, the georgic is deeply aware of the compromises and mistakes that are an inevitable part of all such intervention." The eight essays in the section demonstrate a wide array of possible forms of the "New" or "Eco" Georgic, exploring examples ranging from Virgil's idea of land, Mushrooms in Irish poetry, Wendell Berry's "Mad Farmer," a Victorian Eco-Georgic, Georgian Georgic in the Modernist Moment and Beyond, an Ecofeminist Revolution of the Georgics from Suzanne Verdier to Anna Barbauld, to Cynan Jones's twenty-first century portrayal of Welsh farming. Besides inspiring new readings of texts from antiquity through today, Erchinger's, Edney's and Marland's introduction and the essays in the special section offer important insights into existing examples of alternative human-non-human interactions for producing food, as well as an exemplary demonstration of how literary works and non-fiction both can broaden and historicize current cultural discussions of land-use in the Anthropocene.

The general section of this volume includes three essays which also highlight old and new approaches to ecological practices, but here in terms of different media. These essays nicely complement the special section's attention to the challenge and labour of revising perspectives on human-non-human relations by expanding the type of texts considered, including an eco-noir television crime series, gaming, and new nature writing utilizing the new materialisms. The first essay, Helen Mäntymäki's essay, "Polar Bear in *Fortitude*. Affective Aesthetics and Politics of Climate Change" insightfully dismantles

simplistic responses to the challenge of changing human actions and attitudes about non-human lives. Studying the first season of the television Eco Noir crime series *Fortitude* (2015) and its depiction of the polar bear so typically associated with images of global warming, Mäntymäki addresses two discourses relating to the bears: “The first one relates to violence, essentially present in crime narratives, and how the human and nonhuman animal are positioned in relation to global warming, violence and each other.” But the second discourse, she notes, is a more complex process in which “human animals looking at photographs of bears both constructs and deconstructs the subject-object relation, hierarchy and agency.” In other words, the bears become “sticky objects” as violent predators and, simultaneously, as victims of human violence, and the “charged representation of the polar bear evokes ambiguous affective responses in viewers” as per affect theory. The complexity and ambiguity, Mäntymäki asserts, have more of an impact towards understanding human-animal interactions than, say, simpler images evoking merely pity or fear. Indeed, her essay’s focus on portrayals of the iconic polar bear, like the Eco-Georgic work in the special section, offers noteworthy emphasis of art’s and narrative’s ability to produce affect in more complex and impactful ways than simple environmental messaging.

In “Materiality, Responsibility and Anthropocene: Thought in Robert Macfarlane’s and Kathleen Jamie’s Nature Writing,” Iris Zechner, like the special section on the Eco Georgic, also productively discusses updates of older forms, in this case of nature writing. She contextualizes her study of the “New Nature Writing” in terms of the Anthropocene debate regarding the extreme impact of human beings on the earthly ecosystems in contrast to the new materialisms’ “post-humanist” focus on placing human agency in the context of other, larger agential forces both living and geological. Zechner defends the new materialisms against Clive Hamilton’s critique of posthumanism that diminishes, in his view, the significance of human power thus possibly overlooking our responsibility. In contrast to Hamilton, Zechner suggests “a reading of the new materialisms as a way of endorsing respect for the Earth System that we co-inhabit with various other matters, a respect that implies an invitation to act with caution and care. It is exactly this invitation that we can find in the NNW, too.” Of Robert Macfarlane’s *Underland* and its treatment, for example, of fungal networks, Zechner therefore sees an “intimacy towards nonhuman matters that emphatically illustrates their intrinsic value.” The second part of the essay considers the new materialist stance of Kathleen Jamie’s collections of naturalist essays, and reveals how Jamie “nevertheless question[s] the implications of this ontological framework, in particular with regard to ethics and human responsibility in times of the Anthropocene.” That is, Jamie raises the highly relevant question of the precise actions we could and would actually undertake in the Anthropocene that could truly make a difference on the scale necessary to shift climate change.

Finally, Lykke Guanio-Uluru’s “Embodying Environmental Relationship: A Comparative Ecocritical Analysis of *Journey* and *Unravel*” studies the ecological aspects of the games *Journey* and *Unravel*, with particular attention to the player’s experience of embodiment in vibrant landscapes that combine natural and cultural features as puzzles to navigate. Building on John Parham’s ground-breaking work in *Green Media and Popular*

*Culture: An Introduction* (2016), Guanio-Uluru highlights how the player is confronted with an agential landscape in *Journey* while existing as a figure without hands to manipulate its world so that it can only sense it: “Since the avatar lacks arms, the player can only interact with the landscape by moving through it, feeling and seeing the effects of the wind, sand and sun,” which means that the player functions less as an agent than as “the receiver of an at times agential landscape.” Of *Unravel*, Guanio-Uluru describes a similar “bodily” and immersive experience such that: “A lot of the enjoyment in *Unravel* comes from moving around in and experiencing the beautifully rendered landscapes of the game world, which are naturalistic representations of the Swedish countryside, from Yarny’s perspective.” In other words, playing these games engages a new kind of awareness that is ecological in its altered sense of labour necessary to proceed through the active and forceful energy of either the Swedish landscape or the sand and wind actively shaping the player’s progress.

This issue’s Creative Writing and Arts section then provides inspiring examples of the New, or Eco Georgic with its vibrant poetry and art works. As the section editor, Damiano Benvegnù opens the section with a brief foray into messy, untended North Eastern United States forests that still show the massive human impact from previous years in contrast to well-tended forests of Italy, that are “agro-pastoral cultures” which “are accustomed to view and interact with forests in terms of intergenerational obligation.” Benvegnù thus leads us into the stunning, post-pastoral images and poetry of the section with intense focus on responsible interactions through ongoing labour, or to borrow again from Kimmerer, collaborations.

Finally, the seven book reviews in this volume address some of the major threads in the environmental humanities today, including postcolonial ecocriticism of the Global South and of Indigenous voices; reconsiderations of Nature Writing and Nature Essays; Climate-Change poetics and aesthetics; Ecosemiotics; and Famine Studies.

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