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Abstract

Empirical Ecocriticism: An Environmental Narrative of Social Change, authored by Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, Alexa Weik von Mossner, and other scholars, stands as a groundbreaking academic contribution. It was published by the University of Minnesota Press in 2023. This transformative work seamlessly integrates perspectives from environmental humanities and social sciences to meticulously scrutinize the profound impact of environmental narratives on societal transformation. The scholarly review of this seminal work highlights its exploration of various empirical methods within ecocritical research, showcasing a range of methodologies and case studies. It underscores the pivotal role of the book in uniting environmental humanities and social sciences, providing valuable insights into narrative persuasion, and fostering interdisciplinary collaboration. Positioned as a transformative and comprehensive volume, this work not only contributes to the academic discourse but also serves as an invaluable resource for scholars and activists engaged in exploring environmental narratives and their role in driving social change.

Keywords

Book review, Empirical ecological criticism, Environmental narrative

1. Introduction

When we embark upon the journey within the pages of Empirical Ecocriticism: Environmental Narratives for Social Change, it is akin to setting sail on an exploration ship destined for the uncharted waters of empirical ecocriticism. Each page unfolds like a vast landscape, each paragraph a distinct island, and the entire volume serves as our map guiding us into the enchanting realm of empirical ecocriticism. In this remarkable world, the method acts as our compass, navigating us through the uncharted territories of ecological narratives. We traverse diverse natural landscapes and finally immerse ourselves in the uncharted universe that is the “foreground” section of the volume.

The title of the volume encapsulates several pivotal concepts that unveil the core themes within its pages. First and foremost, “empirical ecocriticism” signifies that this volume is a compendium of empirical ecocritical works, firmly emphasizing the research focus of the volume—the role of environmental narratives in effecting social change through empirical research.

The second important concept, “environmental narratives”, describes the stories and images of the environment that can be created through media such as literature and film. The second section of the volume provides a wealth of examples of the impact of different media on environmental narratives, such as novels and documentaries.

Finally, “social change” alludes to the effectiveness of the natural sciences, social sciences, humanities, and arts (Shrivastava, Smith, O’Brien, & Zsolnai, 2020) in bringing about change in society, and the volume explores how...
environmental narratives can stimulate wider concern and social action by presenting us with examples of different empirical methods and their concrete applications. We have to learn to live with anthropogenic climate change while addressing the causes and reducing the negative impacts on our planet, humans, and other species (McManus, 2023).

The rich array of empirical methods and specific cases presented within the volume serves as a valuable resource for researchers in the field of empirical ecocriticism. Acknowledging that environmental issues encompass a complex, multidimensional phenomenon that intersects with various aspects of human society, culture, and psychology, empirical ecocriticism necessitates drawing upon research methods from diverse disciplines to yield comprehensive, multifaceted research outcomes. As the editors write in the Introduction, “The first section, methods, presents a range of empirical methods borrowed from social science disciplines such as psychology, communication studies, and anthropology that can be used productively by empirical ecocritics, along with some pertinent examples” (Schneider-Mayerson, Mossner, Malecki, & Hakemulder, 2023). The editors admirably sort out the different empirical methods for the reader and collate many different categories of cases based on the application of empirical methods.

2. Methods and Processes

Throughout the volume, the editors introduce empirical methods derived from social science disciplines, encompassing both qualitative and quantitative approaches. These methods cater to both newcomers acquainting themselves with ecocriticism and specialists seeking to apply these methods more deeply to garner profound insights. For instance, W. P. Malecki elucidates the application of experimental methods, underscoring the value of experiments in studying environmental humanities issues. He meticulously catalogs various types of experiments while analyzing the strengths and limitations inherent to experimental methods, and he deftly highlights the epistemological and ethical challenges that can arise in experimental research. Additionally, Paul Sopcak and Nicolette Sopcak delve into the rationale behind employing qualitative methods for in-depth analyses, particularly when researchers confront concepts or processes that lack complete understanding. Their guidance takes readers through the three primary research traditions, exploring the alignment of research methods with specific research questions, elucidating data collection techniques, and outlining the anticipated findings. Furthermore, the volume introduces a novel participatory action research methodology, wherein the authors engage in the production of a music video to gain insight into the culture-making process. This unique approach is invaluable, as it enables researchers not only to contribute their professional skills but also to acquire a culturally and socially uncharted understanding. It fosters interactions with local communities and raises awareness regarding the application of empirical ecocriticism. The chapter authored by Rebecca Dirksen, Mark Pedelty, Yan Pang, and Elja Roy describes their research and data collection across four different sites based on practical examples. These three approaches, intertwined, form a comprehensive ecocritical research model, enabling readers to comprehend the core concepts, research methods, and cognitive models of empirical ecocriticism. They also pave the way for innovative inquiry by engaging readers more deeply in specific studies. It is expected that this innovative approach will unearth new veins of inquiry into the prospects and potential of empirical ecocriticism, providing researchers with fresh perspectives on the field and innovative research methods.

To augment the field of ecocriticism with new perspectives and approaches and to catalyze social change through narrative and artistic creation, the “Case Studies” section of the book showcases six diverse case studies, each employing a wide array of research methodologies and textual forms. These case studies span controlled experiments, qualitative interviews, and corpus linguistics, and explore various text types, including literature, film, theatre, and novels. This section not only yields both quantitative and qualitative results but also extends the boundaries of traditional ecocriticism in a tangible manner. It advocates for a “narrative scholarship” approach aimed at reshaping environmental perceptions and actively engaging in ecological action.

3. Case Studies and Analyses

Among these case studies, two stand out, both from emotional and narrative perspectives. The first is the experimental study titled “Does Climate Fiction Work? An Experimental Test of the Immediate and Delayed Effects of Reading Cli-Fi”, conducted in collaboration with Matthew Schneider-Mayerson et al. This study reports results from the first experimental study to test the immediate and delayed impacts of climate fiction on readers’ beliefs and attitudes about climate change (Schneider-Mayerson, Gustafson, Leiserowitz, Goldberg, Rosenthal, & Ballew, 2023). By dividing participants into experimental and control groups and having the experimental group read novels related to climate change, the researchers discerned that reading climate fiction positively impacted participants’ cognition and
emotions. Those who read climate novels exhibited heightened environmental awareness and concern, which had a lasting, positive impact on their attitudes. This case study validates the efficacy of climate fiction through empirical research, underscoring its potential to motivate readers to engage in activism. Another compelling case study is “The Roles of Exemplar Voice, Compassion, and Pity in Shaping Audience Responses to Environmental News Narratives”, authored by Jessica Gall Myrick and Mary Beth Oliver. This study delves into the influence of exemplar voice, compassion, and pity in shaping audience responses to environmental news narratives. It illuminates the profound impact of environmental news narratives on viewers’ attitudes and actions from an emotional standpoint, highlighting the pivotal roles that sympathy and empathy play in shaping audience responses and the intricate link between emotion, behavior, and politics. In addition to these two cases, another case that stood out to me was “Tracing the Language of Ecocriticism: Insights from an Automated Text Analysis of ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment” in which authors Scott Slovic and David M. Markowitz used automated text analysis to track the language of this journal to gain insight into trends and research priorities in ecocriticism. By computationally analyzing a large number of texts, the researcher reveals key topics and research methods in the field of ecocriticism. This case not only provides valuable insights and guidance for the evolution of ecocriticism but also sheds light on potential avenues for future research. It exemplifies how the fusion of scientific methodology with environmental humanities can pave the way for innovative interdisciplinary research approaches. Furthermore, the volume’s exploration of interdisciplinary collaboration and the integration of social sciences mirrors the sentiments expressed in Donna Haraway’s *Staying with the Trouble*. Haraway calls for collaborative efforts that transcend disciplinary boundaries to address complex environmental issues. The volume’s embrace of cross-disciplinary research methods and its commitment to effecting social change aligns seamlessly with Haraway’s vision. This section of the volume effectively demonstrates the profound impact of environmental narratives on social change and their potential through a series of illuminating case studies. These studies encompass a spectrum of narrative forms, ranging from climate fiction and environmental news narratives to radical texts, environmental documentaries, and theatre projects. Collectively, these cases exemplify how environmental narratives can mold individual perceptions and emotions and catalyze social action. The volume aligns with the ideas presented in Timothy Morton’s *Ecology without Nature*. Morton challenges traditional notions of nature by highlighting the interconnectedness of all living beings and advocating for a more nuanced and ecological view of the world. Morton’s “weirdness” of the world, conceived as a looped structure of constant becoming, marks the prospect of a possible way out of the impasse of anthropocentric separation from otherness (Szaj, 2023). This perspective resonates with the volume’s emphasis on empirical research and its potential to stimulate broader concern and social action by reshaping narratives surrounding the environment. The detailed content of this volume serves to summarize and underscore the significance and direction of environmental narrative studies, rendering it an exceptional and enthralling work.

4. Reflections

The third section of the volume offers a reflective exploration of the values, limitations, and future directions of empirical ecocriticism. Ursula K. Heise situates empirical ecocriticism at the confluence of literary studies and global methodologies. She emphasizes its pivotal role in bridging the realms of environmental communication and environmental literary studies, all while reinforcing its capacity to foster dialogues on social radicalism and justice-seeking. Despite dissent, empirical ecocriticism “signals a welcome commitment to facts, procedural rigor, and interdisciplinary harmony” (Schneider-Mayerson, Mossner, Malecki, & Hakemulder, 2023) challenging untested assumptions while remaining open to interpretive and quantitative approaches. David I. Hanauer emphasizes the critical importance of narrative persuasion, calling for approaches similar to those of Warmer and Jimenez to address issues such as climate change. Helena Bilandzic accentuates the need for multifaceted and synergistic research methods, emphasizing the necessity of cross-disciplinary collaboration. In essence, empirical Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary theory of literary criticism (Şensoy, 2019), striving to expand narratives, broaden audiences, and diversify methods, all with the ultimate goal of promoting justice within environmental literature, art, and media.

5. Conclusion and Discussions

In sum, “Empirical Ecocriticism: Environmental Narratives for Social Change” is a transformative work that draws inspiration from influential predecessors and paves the way for a new era of empirical ecocriticism and this volume serves as a comprehensive compendium, encompassing elements of a manifesto, toolkit, proof of concept, and
practical applications for empirical ecocritical research. It stands as a guiding “compass” for those who are novices embarking on their ecocritical journey, aiding them in navigating the uncharted waters and charting a course toward broader and more captivating horizons. Simultaneously, it acts as a steadfast “safeguard” for experienced sailors, shielding them as they venture deeper into the waters of exploration. On a personal note, as a fervent advocate for environmental conservation and social justice, the volume resonates deeply with my own values and aspirations. The power of narrative in shaping perceptions and driving action has always fascinated me, and “Empirical Ecocriticism” reaffirms my belief in the potential of storytelling to inspire positive change. This remarkable work is an insightful and groundbreaking contribution to the fields of environmental studies and social change. It is undoubtedly a must-read for individuals actively engaged in the pursuit of these critical endeavors.

References


