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# Do stories need critics? Environmental storyism and the ends of ecocriticism

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## ABSTRACT

Story, storytelling, and storying are exceptionally privileged concepts in contemporary environmental arts, humanities and social sciences research. This provocation does not set out to exhaustively describe the function of story across so large and diverse a scholarly array. It aims instead to characterise the particular, widespread tendency to posit the making of new stories, or the transforming of extant stories, or the ‘storying’ of a particular issue, place, or dilemma as the ultimate ends of environmental humanities work. We call this tendency ‘storyism’. In its broadest sense, our project attempts to construct a transdisciplinary genealogy of ‘storyism’ in relation to environmental concerns, as well as to comprehend its institutional and disciplinary orientations. For the limited purposes of this paper, we explore how ecocriticism, a field primarily interested in reading, interpreting and critiquing story, relates to the methodological innovation we describe. We hypothesise that ecocritical discourses have ironically undermined their critical values by producing and reproducing a storytier teleology which understands the generation of more, new narratives as ultimately, if not singularly, useful. We conclude by suggesting some ways in which literary ecocriticism can break out of this habit while still participating in the wider interdisciplinary field.

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## Introduction

What value have the humanities in the climate emergency we inhabit? For a large and widening array of practitioners, one prevailing answer pertains to story. What unifies their field, write the editors of *The Cambridge Companion to Environmental Humanities* (2021), are intellectual and

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methodological commitments to ‘the world-making power of narrative’, to ‘how stories mediate different registers of power’, and to ‘how narratives have historically managed the manifold vitality of the culture, bodies, and objects that shape and are shaped by them’. The scholar’s work consists, on these terms, of discerning ‘the historical shape of the stories that mediate our relationships with environmental change’ and of characterising ‘the multiplicity of stories that have been obscured’ by ‘industrialisation’, ‘modernisation’ and other agents of obfuscation.<sup>1</sup> ‘It matters which stories tell stories, which concepts think concepts’: the feminist science studies scholar Donna Haraway’s influential dictum comes from a 2015 commentary piece listed, on the website of the journal *Environmental Humanities*, high among the publication’s ‘Most Read’ and ‘Most Cited’ outputs.<sup>2</sup> ‘We need stories (and theories)’, explains Haraway, ‘that are just big enough to gather up the complexities and keep the edges open and greedy for surprising new and old connections’.<sup>3</sup>

That environmental scholarship has lately become rich in story is well-known.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, as these storyful turns have been taking shape, they have (inevitably) become objects of critique as well as of emulation.<sup>5</sup> This article takes for granted that story’s multifarious rise to prominence amidst the environmental humanities and social sciences has represented a pivotal and often galvanising response to perceived (which is often to say actual) shortcomings in standard modalities of apprehension, interpretation, and criticism. Such a response is evident in, among other places, our very own writings, several of which owe direct debts to the story-work of the colleagues whose voices have appeared and will appear in these pages. It is from positions of professional and indeed personal entanglement, therefore, that we are endeavouring to characterise a tendency that we will call ‘storyism’: a habit of positing the making or transforming of stories, the ‘storying’ of a particular place, being, or dilemma, or the revelation of the ‘storied’ as the ultimate ends of environmental humanities thought. In the limited space we have here, we seek to better understand the status of *criticism* (and ultimately of the *literary*) in our time of environmental stories. In naming this practice we are also interested in its obverse: what is lost in privileging the practice of storytelling over the diverse ways of reading and listening to them? What is the problem with backgrounding the contingent nature of meaning and diminishing the scholarly value of contentious debates about the arts of interpretation? How is such critical practice involved in our storied moment? The question of our title – ‘Do Stories Need Critics?’ – is one we pose earnestly but not rhetorically. Despite continued critical and literary concern in ecocriticism and environmental humanities work (for instance, Tom Cohen and Claire Colebrook’s *Critical Climate Change* series, Louise Westling’s *Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment* (2013), and

Lynes and Wood's collection *Eco-Deconstruction: Derrida and Environmental Philosophy* (2018)), the rise of storyism across these fields and beyond renders the *critical* in the 'ecocritical' marginal at best, and calls for our careful consideration.

In what follows, we first illustrate an emblematic example of storyism. While part of our purpose here is to show the ubiquity of story across environmentally-attuned fields of scholarly work, we start with this example to illuminate tendencies that cut across many of these and that have come to fruition in this case in point. The novelist and critic Amitav Ghosh's recent *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (2021) is an erudite work of popular nonfiction which marshals the theoretical affordances of Indigenous studies and the environmental humanities to advocate for an end to the anthropocentric idea that 'meaning-making and storytelling' are only human affairs and for the recuperation of a 'world of storytelling' better-attuned to this planet's epistemological, agential, and narrative multiplicities. We observe that for Ghosh, 'official modernity' and its "'serious" literature' have heralded lamentable declines in imagination and ethics. In response, *The Nutmeg's Curse* evokes an extra- or even *pre*-literary realm of stories where the uses of literary *criticism* may appear correspondingly undecidable.<sup>6</sup>

We turn subsequently to map a broad genealogy of storyism's rise, examining how it intersects with a range of developments in the academy in the wake of the theory wars of the 1980s and 1990s and the neoliberal university's emphasis on utility and praxis. We identify key moments in this genealogy – postcritique, post-representationalism and the more-than-human turn, including the rise of material ecocriticism and its antecedents – which have informed the concept of storyism as a certain kind of scholarly writing that proliferates today and imagines stories as both infinitely pluralisable and also somehow purified of rhetorical instability. In this section, we also examine the strange antagonisms and internal and external positioning of the storyteller and story-reader or critic in this space.

Finally, in section three, we worry on storyism's implications for the status of criticality in the interdisciplinary field of the environmental humanities and specifically its literary studies sub-field, ecocriticism. If storyist logics imagine the story as a means to pre-package 'matters of concern'<sup>7</sup> and gift the insight to every reader who will walk away from the encounter with the tale and share an approximately similar concern, what is the role of ecocriticism or environmental literary studies? If storyist work is inviting affirmative engagement with fully formed matters of concern rather than critical deconstructions, how does this shape the responses of those who want to pull apart, interrogate, closely read, disagree or critique? These are some of the questions we address in the conclusion.

Before we move into an account of storyism via Ghosh, and its contextual rise within the academy, we need to emphasise that we are talking

about a very specific, scholarly mobilisation of ‘story’ and ‘storytelling’, concepts which belong to the span of human (and more-than-human, Ghosh would argue) cultures in diverse and ancient ways. Within scholarly frames, too, ‘story’ has multiple significations, notably in First Nations scholarship which – while also diverse – tends to mobilise the concept through Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies, wherein stories are ‘living and active rather than fixed, archived products’.<sup>8</sup> Certain stories, such as Creation Stories (in the position that Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Simpson writes from), ‘set the “theoretical framework”, or give us the ontological context from within which we can interpret other stories, teachings and experiences’.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, there is a particular politics attached to storytelling in institutional settings for these thinkers and writers, that, Simpson argues, is ‘at its core decolonising, because it is a process of remembering, visioning and creating a just reality where Nishnaabeg live as both *Nishnaabeg* and *peoples*’.<sup>10</sup> As we will go onto discuss, the situated meaning of ‘story’ – what it is, and what it can do – is not always visible in its embrace by the environmental humanities, pointing to a necessary role for criticalities as urgent complements to storyisms in our time of climate emergency.

## The world of storytelling

‘To respond to the existential socio-ecological challenges we currently face, we need new narratives’.<sup>11</sup> Amidst atmospheres of unprecedented precarity and ‘uncertainty’, place-relations demand ‘new ways of storying matter’.<sup>12</sup> In our moment of incalculable and compounding extinctions, ‘the time has long since passed to learn a genuine appreciation for other forms of life’, each and every one endowed ‘with its own unique ways of inhabiting richly storied worlds’.<sup>13</sup> Voices such as these contribute to recent, generative, and heterogeneous turns to story across the environmental humanities and social sciences. As these examples indicate, those turns are taking numerous and meaningfully different forms. Through some, we find the conventional idea that since ‘ecological crises’ are ‘fundamentally cultural processes’, a humanist’s contribution to co-creating ‘a more sustainable world’ might centrally involve identifying historically useful ‘narratives and images’ as well as ‘generating new’ ones.<sup>14</sup> Elsewhere, practices of scholarly ‘storying’ venture the distinct and explicitly ‘performative’ project of narrating ‘encounters in the larger-than-human world’ in ways ‘that give others vitality, presence, perhaps “thickness” on the page and in the minds and lives of readers’.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, visions of a complexly ‘storied world’ inform an ecocriticism devoted essentially to the disclosure of such ‘narrative emergences’ as already inhere ‘within’ all matter.<sup>16</sup> These are, among other things, visions of more-than-human capacities for storying and agency that decentre human authorship and undermine its exceptionalisms.

In his influential and controversial *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), Ghosh sought to characterise an historically contingent, specifically ‘Western modernity’, the really ‘distinctive’ feature whereof has been ‘its enormous intellectual commitment to the promotion of its supposed singularity’.<sup>17</sup> This myth-making takes literary shape as what Ghosh sardonically calls ‘serious fiction’ – and especially as a type of carefully circumscribed, ‘realist’ Western novel that ironically undermines its own claims to authenticity by insistently performing the limits of its temporal, geographic, and agential imaginations.<sup>18</sup> A sweeping and really damaging case of cultural narcissism gets diagnosed, in *The Great Derangement*, through detection of an inflated sense of literariness and an extreme self-consciousness with regard to genre.

With *The Nutmeg’s Curse*, Ghosh aims to push beyond all this. The ‘great burden’ presently weighing upon ‘writers, artists, filmmakers, and everyone else who is involved in the telling of stories’, he writes, is ‘the task of imaginatively restoring agency and voice to nonhumans’. This cuts against the grain of what Ghosh impugns as a ‘mechanistic metaphysic’, the delusion that ‘humans are the only storytelling animals’ and that ‘nonhumans cannot make, or discern, meaning’. These falsehoods derive, for Ghosh, from a ‘circular’ logic which holds, first, that experience requires linguistic expression and narrative organisation to be meaningful – and second, that humans are the only organisms equipped for such protocols. Why, asks Ghosh, would we accept that ‘experiences cannot have any meaning in the absence of language?’ Take humpback whales, whose shifting sonic repertoires and spectacular migrations manifest nothing if not ‘meaningful sequences’ in time and place. We are overdue, *The Nutmeg’s Curse* argues, for abandoning the exceptionalist ‘construct’ that stories are the special province of the human, a fantasy that is not just wrong but caught up in world-historically devastating ‘structures of power’ and their corollary agencies of ‘repression’.<sup>19</sup>

We take for granted that whaly (and other) songs and journeys are worldly articulations of various and irreducible significance. But why call them stories? One clue derives from Ghosh’s invocation of the concept of ‘meaningful sequences’, the ‘creation’ whereof the critic Peter Brooks has recently affiliated with a ‘precisely narrative’ sort of ‘reasoning’.<sup>20</sup> Some further answers come from Ghosh’s own reading, which prominently encompasses Haraway’s call for sympoietic, multispecies storytelling and the extinction studies researcher Thom van Dooren’s account of how birds and untold others inhabit ‘storied’ places and worlds.<sup>21</sup> If Haraway and van Dooren help Ghosh prove that an anthropocentric understanding of story is theoretically outmoded, his other informants reveal its insidious genealogies. Citing the prolific Native American writer Leslie Marmon Silko’s *The Turquoise Ledge* (2010),<sup>22</sup> Ghosh places the suppression of interspecies

'narratives' at the heart of settler-colonialism's general project of subduing Laguna Pueblo (among other) spiritualities. The path Ghosh is treading among these sources leads him to the appealingly counterintuitive idea that the 'narrative faculty' is in fact an emblem of something like human exceptionalism's opposite – an emblem, that is, of 'the most important residue of our formerly wild selves'. Unlike 'more prosaic domains of thought' – not least such domains as 'official modernity' regards as "serious" literature – the 'world of storytelling' is one 'where anything is possible', and where 'everyone' has the chance and responsibility to restore 'agency and voice' to the planet and its multifarious denizens.<sup>23</sup>

As we have seen, Ghosh draws significantly on Indigenous storytelling in his critique of western literary culture and practice, reflecting the growing visibility, strength, and influence of First Nations knowledges in the academy in the twenty-first century. In settler colonial contexts, this growing prominence of Indigenous thought in the academy has informed a commitment to centre and respond to a 'resurgence of First Nations, Black, Asian and non-Western onto-epistemologies of being and relationality' in environmental humanities scholarship.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, however, Indigenous scholars such as Métis anthropologist Zoe Todd have drawn attention to the ambivalence that underscores this 'resurgence'. Indigenous peoples do not need to be told that stories matter or are real and agential in the world, nor is it a revelation in First Nations cultures that ontologies are multiple and worlds more-than-human. And yet, as Todd and others point out, the rise of posthumanism is dominated by white, western thinkers who – unlike Ghosh – rarely acknowledge the proximate and deep Indigenous traditions that their attention to relationality, non-human agency, and ecological entanglement echoes. Indeed, as she and fellow critic Vanessa Watts point out, western posthumanism's rejection of essentialism has resulted in a failure to acknowledge Indigenous ontological concepts such as 'spirit', while universalising the pathology of a nature/culture divide rather than acknowledging it as a 'reality located in specific knowledge traditions'.<sup>25</sup>

This suggests that the mobilisation of story is neither universal nor benign; it is tactical and political. For Ghosh, story and its kin operate as phenomenally flexible signifiers that collectively comprise a conceptual and rhetorical exemption from certain histories and inheritances. Thus, for example, the opposition *The Nutmeg's Curse* draws between so-called 'serious' literature – Ghosh's quotation marks are overtly derisory – and the so-called 'world of storytelling', a realm of narrative liberation that appears to lie before and behind – and potentially *after* and *beyond* – the literary modern and its generic (among other) pretensions. In a logic like this one, modernity, anthropocentrism, the West, settler-colonialism, and the literary mutually corrupt one another, and prospects for avoiding some (or all) of

their deleterious operations may hinge on circumventing them *in toto*. Story seems to furnish such an alternate path, one that is hospitably – and uncoincidentally – indefinite. More radically, this is a path that looks to offer its traveller a form of narrative, epistemological, and ontological refreshment, an encounter with the extra- or indeed *pre*-literary that might lead, in turn, to some more thoroughgoing recomposition of meaning.

This section's close regard for Ghosh's world of storytelling has not been suspiciously pitched; nor, for that matter, is it building toward a critical dismissal of either *The Nutmeg's Curse* or its author. What we have been venturing, rather, is a companionable characterisation of one rich and much-read version of storyism, the better to comprehend its implications for certain proximate realms of thought and practice. One of those is criticism, the interventionist possibilities whereof have been receiving renewed attention, lately, alongside a far-reaching sense that the literary-modern and its critical apparatuses have been at least ineffectual, and at worst really damaging, contributors to intellectual and imaginative worlds. The emergence of the latter sense, as it takes shape particularly through the domains of the environmental humanities and social sciences, has been a complicated and significant phenomenon, one that the proceeding pages will endeavour to partially describe.

## A genealogy of environmental storyism

### *Poststructuralism and postcritique*

The turn away from critical theory and certain kinds of literary criticism occurred concomitantly with the move towards environmental concerns in the interdisciplinary arts and humanities. The two movements are related but not in a straightforward way. In the first instance, contemporary storyism could not have emerged without the theoretically informed critiques of grand narratives beginning in the 1970s. Leila Harris maps this history in a comprehensive survey article on environmental storytelling.<sup>26</sup> She notes explicitly how calls for the pluralisation and proliferation of story developed via feminist, anti-racist and anti-colonial traditions within the academy, supported by poststructuralist theory. At this moment, 'the meaning of the sign is thrown open', producing a specific form of 'power struggle which intersects the sign'.<sup>27</sup> This created contexts for literary critics to closely interrogate the political capacities of normative narratives and the possibility contained in counter-narratives. Story's ascendancy, says Harris,

can be thought of in part as a "narrative turn" or "cultural turn" building from poststructuralist work, but might also flow from a diversification of epistemologies and approaches more generally, including the rise of community-based work, feminist work, or diversification of the academy (e.g. the inclusion of more Black and Indigenous scholars).<sup>28</sup>



We agree with the general importance of a genealogical link between storyism and the linguistic turn.

Despite Harris's convincing argument about the importance of poststructuralist critique to the rise of environmental storytelling, the same writers often take the perceived abstractions of the high theory moment – if not the practice of theoretically informed literary criticism itself – as its *raison d'être*. An early exemplar of environmental storyism that contains this specific post-theoretical paradox lies in the work of William Cronon.<sup>29</sup> In 'A Place for Stories' from 1992, Cronon argues for the importance of returning to plain language storytelling for environmental reasons, while acknowledging the value of critiques of master narratives via poststructuralist literary analysis. He frames the tension between storytelling and analysis as follows:

The disease of literary theory is to write too much in abstractions, so that even the simplest meanings become difficult if not downright opaque ... on one hand, I hope to acknowledge the deep challenges that postmodernism poses for those who applaud "the revival of narrative"; on the other, I wish to record my own conviction – chastened but still strong – that narrative remains essential to our understanding of history and the human place in nature.<sup>30</sup>

While the theoretical critique of master narratives poses a necessary challenge to dominant stories, Cronon pathologises those same tools of critique in order to argue for the value of a simple story. In the move to retell environmental history as a 'story', critical analysis or interpretation of narrative is constructed as the antagonist. He repeats the point several times: the 'assault on narrative'<sup>31</sup> by 'postmodern' literary scholars results in the ascendance of 'abstractions, so that even the simplest meanings become difficult if not downright opaque'.<sup>32</sup> 'My goal', Cronon writes, is 'to acknowledge the immense power of narrative while still defending the past (and nature) as real things to which our storytelling must somehow conform lest it cease being history altogether'.<sup>33</sup> Here Cronon's concern is that the poststructuralist troubling of relations between words and things thwarts the storyteller's capacity to tell straightforward stories about reality.

The most widely recognised way to navigate this tension between storytelling and criticism is to conflate the practices. For the sociologist of science and technology Bruno Latour, the critic is a kind of storyteller. With the enduringly influential 2004 essay 'Why has Critique Run out of Steam?' Latour issued a paean to a revised form of narrative truth: matters of concern. Latour is polemical in his characterisation of the problem as a systematic bias towards a certain style of negative critique:

entire Ph.D. programs are still running to make sure that good American [sic.] kids are learning the hard way that facts are made up, that there is no such thing as natural, unmediated, unbiased access to truth, that we are always

prisoners of language, that we always speak from a particular standpoint, and so on, while dangerous extremists are using the very same argument of social construction to destroy hard-won evidence that could save our lives.<sup>34</sup>

The remedy to the ubiquity of critique is not to necessarily reject the insights of theory, but to change the structure and tone of their presentation from negative to positive. In this article, he does not call matters of concern storying or storytelling, but rather *criticism*.<sup>35</sup> 'The critic', he writes, 'is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles. The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naïve believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather'.<sup>36</sup> For Latour the critic is, in other words, a storyteller: someone capable of bringing together elements of a matter together in a new way and to make you concerned about it. A critic can spin a good yarn.

Setting aside the potential overlap between championing a straightforward message and making propaganda, there are epistemological issues with the privileging of storytelling over critical reading. Our shared interest in this point stemmed from a conversation at an Australian literary studies conference in 2019. One of us gave a paper called 'Composting feminisms as critical reading method'. Composting is a theoretically informed research method for Environmental Humanities scholarship interested in how certain scholarly traditions, especially feminisms, are '*named but not claimed*'<sup>37</sup> in the formation of the field and what the implications of this practice are for the knowledge we generate. When shifting this idea to the discipline of literary studies specifically, what we agreed is that some of the central tenets of literary studies that hooked us in as undergraduates – that the meaning of a text is unstable, that different theoretical lenses and broader understandings of contexts can generate different interpretations of the same text, and that the histories of reception are often as wildly interesting as the texts themselves – are newly valuable in this moment. The reason is that they head off at the pass the wholesale uptake of the idea of 'storying' and 'storytelling' as a straightforward practice of meaningful and impactful communication. On the contrary, we reckon our storyteller moment calls for more careful attention to the unwieldy, unpredictable and unsettling powers of story. So, underpinning this paper's titular question is the secondary question of if and how we can revalue the tools and practices of literary studies given the way elements of the discipline are explicitly disavowed in the formation of storyism? To do this while accounting for the influence of thinkers like Cronon and Latour, we can look to a figure who has largely been overlooked in environmental storyism but is central to the formation of the related development of postcritique: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.

Sedgwick and Latour are theoretical touchstones for postcritical literary studies. According to Zalloua<sup>38</sup>, for example, both 'find the paradigm of

(the hermeneutics of) suspicion too mechanical, deprived of its earlier inventive energy'. Any distinction in their work is lost in many accounts of post-critique conflate if not their ideas, their influence.<sup>39</sup> While both Sedgwick and Latour turn clearly against the hermeneutics of suspicion (or critical practice committed to exposure of hidden truths, following Nietzsche, Marx and Freud), they do so in terms of their primary disciplinary and political commitments and, as such, research questions and methods of scholarly inquiry. In other words, the major difference between Latour and Sedgwick is methodological.

Sedgwick is a literary historian and key figure in the development of queer theory, and her widely cited essay 'Paranoid Reading, Reparative Reading: You're so paranoid you probably think this essay is about you' described new reading methods to allow queer theory to develop as a field. She does so by theorising how readers are differently positioned in relation to the texts they are interpreting. Drawing on the idea of 'positions' developed by Melanie Klein, Sedgwick asks if a critic trying to deconstruct or demolish what they perceive as a hostile story world (paranoid reading) or rebuild alternative imaginaries from a transformative encounter with a text (reparative reading), or both? While Latour's construction of 'matters of concern' generates a new mode of sociological storytelling to gather material objects in new constellations, Sedgwick's distinction between the paranoid and the reparative are different ways of reading.

The main contribution of Sedgwick's essay is usually understood as the development of 'reparative reading' and its privileging *over* the paranoid, but the argument is actually for the diversification of critical reading methods. 'How are we to understand paranoia in such a way as to situate it as one kind of epistemological practice among other, alternative ones?'<sup>40</sup> The alternative, reparation, is neither simply opposition to paranoia, nor synonym for hopeful or positive acritical idealism. Rather, a reparative position is

additive and accretive. Its fear, a realistic one, is that the culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture; it wants to assemble and confer plentitude on an object that will then have resources to offer an inchoate self.<sup>41</sup>

There is much more that could be said about paranoia, reparation, Latour, Sedgwick, poststructuralism and postcritique in the context of environmental storytelling, but in relation to the narrow task of this essay the basic disciplinary differences between a sociologist describing the world and a literary analyst reading and interpreting a text are relevant. The point is that word and world are always related, but the relationship between the two is enduringly complicated. Sedgwick's pluralist approach to reading encourages readers to expand their tool kit for describing, analysing and debating how meaning is made in story and to what end.

### ***Post-representationalism, more-than-human storytellers, and the rise of creative writing***

The dilemma outlined above is paralleled in the anti-representationalist movement, coming from fields such as cultural geography and cultural studies, that gained traction in the 1990s. Conflating representation with social constructivism – the idea that ‘everything is a text’ – anti- or more-than-representationalism was driven by an interest in what a story did, rather than what it meant, and privileged performance over interpretation. While these discussions were mostly going on alongside literary studies’ continued investment in high theory, they intersected with a cultural mood in which literary studies was characterised as myopically concerned with endless linguistic play, excised from the material real. This was famously parodied in AS Byatt’s 1990 Booker Prize winning novel *Possession*, where the literary scholars Roland and Maud reassure each other that: ‘I’ve never been much interested in places – or things – with [literary] associations’; ‘Nor I. I’m a textual scholar’.<sup>42</sup> This novel’s depiction of literary studies’ obsession with Barthes’ ‘death of the author’ aligned the hermeneutic with the anachronistic, flagging the ensuing rise of embodied epistemology and the rejection of social constructivism in humanities scholarship through the 1990s and beyond. By 2005, cultural geographer Hayden Lorimer described the problem of textual representation as the reduction of ‘all that ought to be most lively’ to something that can be ‘read’.<sup>43</sup>

Counterposed with this, was the promise of scholarship oriented towards more-than-human, ‘multi-sensual worlds’<sup>44</sup> which flourished during the following decade. While Cronon was unapologetically human-centred in his work, much environmental humanities scholarship that followed him, informed by Latourian ideas of gathering concerns, dispersed across more-than-human materialities and energies, increasingly advanced the idea that a ‘multitude’ of ‘message-bearers’<sup>45</sup> assemble to tell stories about the world. As O’Gorman and Houston outline, moves against human exceptionalism are at its basis, particularly through the work of feminist scholars such as Val Plumwood in the early 1990s, and informed the flourishing of an interdisciplinary multispecies studies – and its central place within an ‘ontological turn’ – that understands human and other life forms as ‘always co-becoming in dynamic interconnection’.<sup>46</sup> More-than-human methodologies, such as ‘lively ethnography’<sup>47</sup> have centred storytelling as a practice of witnessing that rejects ‘a simple division between the real and the narrated’, and is at once ‘expository’ and ‘performative’, enabling a multiply storied world to make itself known.<sup>48</sup> Pivotal, here, are moves toward decentring human observers as the solitary focalisers of the stories they tell and to enable the world to speak in more-than-textual, multisensual ways. In comparison, the worlds of texts are positioned as anthropocentric and – worse –

theoretical, ill-equipped for the involutions and multiplicities that stories access and create.

A final, related moment that we think is relevant to storyism's ascent is the neoliberalisation of the higher education sector, which – among many other aspects – privileged *use* value in the hierarchisation of disciplines, and in the narrative of educational value itself. An exemplar of this is the rapid growth in tertiary creative writing programmes, students and graduates over the 1990s and into the noughties. In Australia, where we write from, these programmes were almost universally established within literary studies/English departments, and, as Stephen Muecke tells it (who was closely involved in the growth of creative writing in Australia), inaugurated a 'paradigm shift: from *reflection* on literary works to their *production*',<sup>49</sup> from what a text means to what it does in the world. In the neoliberal context, production/doing/making is associated with utility, and reflection with an unproductive and increasingly out-dated critical distance. Declining public funding of research, especially in the humanities and creative arts fields, has driven a shift to applied and industry-aligned research, which creative writing – as a practice with a related commercial sector – can align to more readily than its interpretative bedfellow.

The emphasis on utility that became dominant in the 1990s Australian university system coincides with the consistent decline of public funding to the sector which has not been replaced with the kind of philanthropic and other private forms of funding that sustain the North American system. The result has been the spotlighting of a vague agglomeration known as 'industry' – extending from private to other government sectors – to fill the shortfall. Teaching and research, therefore, need to be 'job ready' and of value to industry 'stakeholders'. That creative writing should fit this paradigm more comfortably than literary studies is not necessarily a given, but with the primacy of the information economy in the neoliberal system – which, as McGurl explains, 'isolates the importance of data and communications in the economic life of our times',<sup>50</sup> it is not surprising that the writing of stories rather than their reading (that is, the production of more and more primary data) is more widely incorporated in the acceptable face of the modern academy. The ascendance of creative writing within literary studies departments has thus positioned storytelling and its *techne* as the preeminent higher educational space of literary activity.

This pre-eminence can be observed in an environmental context, where the *writing* of environmental stories, more so than the *reading* of them, has been invested with a capacity to effect real world change. This is exemplified by climate fiction which has proliferated in the last decade (and notably since Ghosh's accusation of a 'deranged' literary silence around climate crisis in western fiction), and in Australia is a popular genre for creative writing higher degrees. Scholarly and public discussions of climate

fiction<sup>51</sup> routinely turn to questions of use value (understandably, given the pressing climate crisis) that can be seen more widely in discourses of storytelling in climate-related research which frequently take a utilitarian approach: ‘storytelling is a meaningful way of building climate knowledge’, writes Dylan Harris, evidencing this tendency<sup>52</sup>: ‘it falls within a larger cultural political trend of using storytelling to navigate crisis more broadly’, or at least of investing in the *idea of* storytelling as a means to do so.<sup>53</sup> This perspective has resonance with the environmental justice movement and related areas of concern with real world action, where storytelling has been embraced as a means of grassroots knowledge sharing, resistance and activism. Giving voice to this ethos, Emilie Cameron asserts that ‘[it] is precisely in small, local storytelling that political transformation becomes possible’.<sup>54</sup>

While there is an abundance of climate change-related literary criticism, scholarly engagements with storytelling and its contributions to environmental knowledge, awareness and advocacy<sup>55</sup> often exclude literary studies from their disciplinary maps and excise practices of reading and interpretation from the scope of storytelling. As some practitioners of environmental storyism do acknowledge, however, some stories *are* better than others, just as not all information is innately equal in value: ‘how extinction stories might, or should, be told requires constant rethinking’.<sup>56</sup> How is this rethinking done without the work of reading, interpretation and critical reflection? Ecocriticism would seem to have a role here, but as we go on to consider this is not always the case and ecocritical storyism remains pervasive in the field.

### The ends of ecocriticism

If environmental storyisms are exuberantly engaged in the generation of more stories, their regard for the contingencies of critical reception tends to be comparatively unclear. The three authors of this paper all identify, at least in part, as ecocritics, because we are literary studies scholars with environmental focus. A somewhat more critical regard for environmental stories would seem a particularly urgent concern for *ecocriticism*, a wide constellation of humanistic methods originating in literary studies. This section asks how ecocritical literary scholars situate the critical aspects of their practice within their theories – explicitly or implicitly expressed – of scholarly utility. Put more simply, we ask how ecocritics overtly or covertly articulate the usefulness of their scholarship – and we ask, more specifically, what parts criticality plays (or does not play) in that usefulness. We observe that for influential habits of ecocritical literary thought, criticism occupies a crucial place that is ultimately subordinated to the production of newer, ‘better’ narratives. At ecocriticism’s horizons, so to speak, there frequently appears a kind of storyism, as well as something like the end of criticism. We contend that this prospective irony signals a crisis for ecocritical practice

while giving us some insight into wider disciplinary and methodological vexations.

Of the numerous logics that have structured ecocriticism over the past decade or so, an influential variety inexorably culminates in prescriptions for new stories, forms, and genres. Thus for instance Rob Nixon, whose indispensable work at the intersections of the postcolonial and the ecocritical culminates in a call to convert ‘the long emergencies of slow violence into stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political intervention’.<sup>57</sup> Thus too Ghosh, for whom the failures of ‘the “realist” novel’ necessitate the ‘task’ of ‘finding other ways in which to imagine the unthinkable beings and events of this era’.<sup>58</sup> And likewise Jennifer Wenzel’s more recent, galvanising claim that the ‘assumptions’ subtending ‘the conventions of literary realism and poetic propriety’ are becoming ‘overwhelmed by new and newly recognised facts on the ground’, facts that require ‘new narrative templates and modes of imagining’.<sup>59</sup>

If these logics treat stories as destinations, the hermeneutic orientations of ‘material ecocriticism’ are more constitutively storyteller. Under this dispensation, the planet’s ‘material phenomena’ are apprehended as ‘knots in a vast network of agencies’ offering themselves for reading as ‘narratives, stories’.<sup>60</sup> In a world where ‘matter’ not only appears ‘*in* texts’ but functions ‘*as* a text’,<sup>61</sup> ecocriticism has extraordinary exegetical powers: ‘what lies behind the nodes of the ecological crisis’, write Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, are ‘tangles of natures and cultures that can be unravelled *only* by interpreting them as narratives about the way humans and their agentic partners intersect in the making of the world’.<sup>62</sup> ‘Narrative’, ‘narrativity’, ‘text’, ‘textualities’, ‘tales’, ‘stories’: for Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, the material-ecocritical project establishes a terminological landscape so thrillingly (and dizzily) various as to render precarious any attempt at finding conceptual purchase thereupon.<sup>63</sup>

Among Iovino and Oppermann’s key source materials is Karen Barad’s theory of diffractive ‘intra-action’, which conceives phenomena as the configurations of a world perpetually remaking itself through relational ‘becoming’.<sup>64</sup> Another is Haraway’s sense for ‘naturecultures’, a term which refuses the sort of anthropocentric separation that constructs the environment as an object for human intellection.<sup>65</sup> A material ecocritic, explain Iovino and Oppermann, examines how worldly materials ‘intra-act with each other and with the human dimension’ and how they generate ‘meanings and discourses that we can interpret as stories’.<sup>66</sup> On this view, what issue from the flux of naturalcultural intra-action are ‘signs’, ‘discursive formulations’, ‘stories’ and ‘narratives’ – a tumble of ‘signifying forces’ that are not so much representations of the world as they are worldly articulations.<sup>67</sup>

There is a much longer genealogy discernible in their conceptualisation of an agential world alive with stories in which the human one of many forces.

From the vast, global and largely non-Anthropocentric Indigenous storytelling traditions to champions of ‘biospherical egalitarianism’<sup>68</sup> that movements such as deep ecology championed in the 1970s, material ecocriticism’s configuration of tangled nature-cultures that give voice to the world’s becoming suggests a legacy from earlier ecocritical celebrations of ‘language [as] wild’.<sup>69</sup> For Gary Snyder in 1990, for instance, creative writings are co-creations between ecological elements: poems come ‘directly out of envisioning something that actually happened and expanding it upward into the light of the night sky’.<sup>70</sup>

The specific political stakes of new materialism are somewhat lost in its application in material ecocriticism as well. In the late nineties into the naughties, feminists were processing the linguistic turn and asking anti-essentialist questions about the body: if we now largely agree that gender is a historical emergence and social construct, for example, how can we reconnect this knowledge with the materiality of the body itself? Is it possible to think critiques of language and politics in relation to our flesh in ways that do not reinscribe oppressive forms of biological essentialism? That body of feminist theory – with names familiar to environmental humanities such as Barad, Haraway, Alaimo and others – has roots in theories of languages instability and ideas of the social construction of gender. The work relied on deconstructions of historically oppressive stories about the body to make sense. Barad was using theories of gender performativity to understand matter’s own dynamic entanglement with culture in order to construct an anti-essentialist theory of matter for queer feminist futures:

If performativity is linked not only to the formation of the subject but also to the production of the matter of bodies, as Butler’s account of “materialization” and Haraway’s notion of “materialized refiguration” suggest, then it is all the more important that we understand the nature of this production.<sup>71</sup>

The literary scholar and material ecocritic Stacy Alaimo brought these debates into ecocriticism<sup>72</sup>, but beyond scholars who have a specific investment in the feminist stakes of this genealogy these critical details are often lost. The point of this work was thus not simply to show that meaning is entangled with matter or that nature is storied, but to ask *how* it is specifically and *how* it could be otherwise. This could involve two (or more) different tasks. There is a call implicit here not only for the creation of new and better stories that represent or practice entanglement, but also for rigorous and critical interpretations of extant ones.

To return to the distinction between *representations* of the world and worldly *articulations*, this – in a manner that might remind us of *The Nutmeg’s Curse* – is material ecocriticism’s fundamental gesture: the dislocation of narrativity from human subjects toward ‘networks of agency’. The ecocritic’s function, by consequence, is to ‘shed light on’ the ways ‘bodily natures and discursive forces *express* their interaction’, through



'representations' or 'concrete reality'.<sup>73</sup> On these terms, criticism does not interpret stories but detects and discloses them, and the ecocritic discovers existing narratives before delivering them to their interlocutors. An ecocritical storyism, then, is exuberantly engaged in the recognition of more stories while registering a comparatively ambivalent regard for the contingencies of reception. Beyond the events of their recording, stories appear to somehow function independently of human (or other) mediation.

Intercessions of consequence are thus taken to antedate a reader's encounter with storied scholarship. Interpretation, in other words, is narrowly understood as an expert faculty exercised by a scholar on behalf of their research subjects and readers. By the time a story reaches its audience, its meaning has been stabilised as a sort of fact to be understood, and not a narrative to be variously construed. In some respects, this refiguring of the scholar as adjunct to storytelling nature does the appealing work of placing the critical in the service of the more-than-human 'world'. In others, as Timothy Clark observes, the imputation of discursive formulations to 'rivers, fields', and so on may have the ironic effect of projecting a 'humanities discipline and its terms' upon entities that should be understood to possess characters and relations properly their own.<sup>74</sup> What most concerns us in this connection is what the critical has come to mean for an ecocriticism committed above all to the revelation of more narratives.

Gregg Crane has recently questioned a tendency among certain criticisms to read literature as primarily a congeries of poetic facts. So construed, literary artefacts are valuable insofar as they represent the legible, mobilisable testimony of circumstances external to themselves. Crane sees this as a self-defeating travesty of interpretation, one that confuses 'literature' with 'life' and that commits an ethical as well as epistemic error when it claims 'all the pleasures, privilege, and supposed power of talking about literature as reality but none of the responsibilities'.<sup>75</sup> Literature-as-life is a concept worth contemplating in relation to ecocritical calls to story. After all, Nixon's, Ghosh's, and Wenzel's topically and methodologically diverse diagnoses share the premisory sense that the literary has been compromised by its increasing, or increasingly glaring, incommensurability with the actual. Moreover, their prescriptions all rely on the strong if somewhat nebulous idea that if literature could more adequately and innovatively approximate the real (but not necessarily 'realist'), then having *more* 'new' literature would constitute an objective good – might even constitute a materially efficacious contribution to resisting socio-ecological disaster.

The vector of this article points toward another hypothesis, namely that the storyisms of – and well past – the environmental humanities and social sciences *are* the more, the new, the other ways and modes that certain ecocriticisms have been seeking. Thus, perhaps, a kind of Pyrrhic victory for eco-literary studies, whereby even the *soi-disant* ecocritics are

primarily storytellers. This pertains, in turn, to the conceptual (and indeed citational) tension this essay has been attempting to characterise. Ecocritical claims to the exceptional importance of genre, aesthetics, and narrative structure do not often figure among those proponents of environmental humanities storyism whose disciplinary orientations have been shaped, primarily, by geography, anthropology, cultural studies, or philosophy. Despite this intellectual distance, environmental humanities (and other) practitioners frequently invoke story and storytelling in ways that closely resemble material-ecocritical accounts of literary agency. What appears to be taking place, therefore, are multiple ideas of environmental narrative and narrative action that come together, whatever their respective genealogies, at and through calls to make more, new stories. It might be impertinent to imply that the geographers and anthropologists should be involving the literary-critical in their environmental humanities scholarship. But it is reasonable, we contend, to ask what responsibility ecocriticisms may have to carry forth the criticisms that partly constitute their ontologies.

### **Conclusion: storyism and the futures of ecocriticism**

Toward what ends are our ecocriticisms heading? One path points us toward a revived sensitivity for the affordances of literary-critical tools and concepts, as in Elizabeth DeLoughrey's allegorical readings of 'Anthropocene origin stor[ies]' and Ada Smailbegović's attentiveness to the 'textures' of eco-poems that invite readerly encounter while always remaining partly recalcitrant thereto.<sup>76</sup> Another might linger with recent intervals in long-standing efforts to recuperate the literary critic from their historical construal as a fundamentally conservative type. Thus for instance Joseph North, for whom criticism is literary studies' strongest claim to 'materialist practice' and constitutes, therefore, its clearest path toward political – even ecological – efficacy. If this is right, and criticism can contribute to an 'aesthetic education' that is a worthy end in itself, then environmental literary studies might be partially understood as a practice of ongoing interpretation of storyist making, a practice that would perforce entail not only *describing* stories and storyisms but *evaluating* them on the basis of their contributions to what North calls 'sensibility', 'subjectivity' and 'experience'.<sup>77</sup> This would appear to require the affirmation (or reimposition) of critical distance, an understandably unappetising protocol for colleagues intent upon *reducing* perceived gaps between literature and what Ghosh calls 'the real'.<sup>78</sup> This, as we have been endeavouring to show, returns us to a central problematic for this work and for our communities of research, teaching, storytelling, and on: can we be critics and storyists at once? Ought we be?

Despite Latour's (and to a lesser extent, Sedgwick's) centrality to the anti/post-critical movement, they never actually called for a rejection of the

critical, rather for a different mode of critical practice (distinct from the dismantlings, deadenings and paranoid suspicions of critique). Sedgwick's reparative reading points to the possibilities generated by an array of critical approaches that keep meaning open as readers are supported to new understandings and reckonings. It is a disposition that equips them with a new perspective for material work in the world. Latour brings critical practice into the space of storytelling, a creative practice of assemblage, but as he does so he points to the relational work that this entails, one that is active and also ongoing. From our perspective, reading is one of these relational practices and there are many different ways of doing it. Relatedly, literary texts are constantly produced through reading and interpretation. This is a continuing process, meaning that reading is also political – it makes worlds – generating new relations and connections. But we do not read alone, as Todd reminds us. As we encounter a text, there is a 'reciprocity of thinking [that] requires us to pay attention to who else is speaking alongside us'.<sup>79</sup> Rather than fixing meaning, this is an approach to reading that seeks connections, that wants to keep 'things alive in particular places',<sup>80</sup> and that involves thinking with times, places, and multi-species others. It is an approach that aligns with a refusal of a critical practice that is the last word, and that occurs from up high, disconnected from a field of relations (the situated critical reading – the 'narrative/epistemological entailments for the seeker, knower, or teller' – that Sedgwick's reparative reading points us to). It also refuses the idea that storying is the only creative practice. Reading and interpretation can be equally generative and creative. They are diverse modes of praxis – and, Todd contends, 'we need joyful and critical engagement through many forms of praxis'.<sup>81</sup>

In the context of imagining a pluralist form of critical reading to complement storyism, we can revisit the diverse scales at which these critical exchanges unfold. In the widely cited and frequently paraphrased maxim 'it matters which stories tell stories', Haraway reminds us of the genealogical relationship between different stories. While this process is generally well beyond the scope and control of any one author's intention, here Haraway is calling authors to attend to consider the form and the impact of their work. While we respect the call to 'love your monsters' and attend to the flow on effects of one's creations, the subtext of this claim – that stories matter – contains a range of related questions that can and do exist at a range of different scales: who is telling the story? What is the story about? What stories is it like and what common tropes does it deploy? Is it an adaptation? What is the form of the story who is/are the narrators? Who/what is centred and who/what is backgrounded? What happens and in what order? What does it all mean? What places and contexts does the story circulate? Who is/are the audience/s for the story and how is it received? Is the meaning stable across all contexts and times or

does it change? These questions that involve tracing what, how and why stories matter is, not to put too fine a point on it, the traditional disciplinary domain of literary criticism. The idea that all the ways it matters which stories tell stories could be controlled by the intention of the author is hubristic at best, naïve at worst. While antagonisms between storytellers and critics are age old, and surely some critics are often unduly misanthropic, the dialectical function between story and critical interpretation is fundamental to the ways that stories come to matter. In this context, the formally trained literary critic is both specialist scholar and synechdochic for the vital role of the general reader. As Meg Brayshaw argues of the limits of cli-fi as world-changing genre, we do not necessarily need new storytelling technologies to tell stories precisely ‘because we already have it. It’s called the novel’.<sup>82</sup> Brayshaw knows specifically how ‘stories tell stories’<sup>83</sup> because her focus, like many in literary studies, is dedicated to carefully reading and tracing precisely the kind of intertextual exchange, thematic development and formal innovation that happens across time and place on account of stories.

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