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An Introduction: Disability Studies and Ecocriticism

TODD A. COMER AND CHRISTINE JUNKER

The problem confronting us, whether we study ecology or disability, is the same: The Subject.

Philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy writes, “But the individual is merely the residue of the experience of the dissolution of community. By its nature—as its name indicates, it is the atom, the indivisible—the individual reveals that it is the abstract result of a decomposition. It is another, and symmetrical figure of immanence: the absolutely detached for-itself, taken as origin and certainty” (1991, 3). Nancy argues, as others have before him, that the Subject—here the individual—begins in community, or ontological relation. And he argues that its essence is a denial of its birth in the (ecological) world, in relation. The Subject, understood philosophically, is an impossibility: a pinprick self, fragile (though thinking itself able), ensconced behind ‘impermeable’ boundaries. As such, this divided and divisive self sees the world through self-colored glasses, incapable of seeing the world as it is—incapable of giving the world and itself (ontological) space.

Ecologically, this has a profound effect on humans and the more-than-human world, to use David Abram’s language (1996). In his well-known critique of Christianity, ecocritic Lynn White, Jr., writes, “Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen . . . when God shaped Adam he was foreshadowing the image of the incarnate Christ, the Second Adam. Man shares, in great measure, God’s transcendence of nature. Christianity . . . not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends” (10). The god-man, for this self is both male and, somehow, also spirit, is the essence of anthropocentrism. As with Nancy, though in different terms, what we see here is an image of Man removed from reality, specifically, nature, transcendent, and as a result alienated from the world that gives birth to Him. Too often when we humans do conceptualize our relationship with nature in what seem to be ethical terms that conceptualization indirectly smuggles in other complications: consider the traditional importance that nature has served for “white Christian men.” As Sean Parson points out in
his critique of Edward Abbey, historically, nature has been seen as an ethical site for spiritual communion but also as a wilderness site to be conquered—that is, as a self-serving tool for masculinity (2017, xv). Seeing nature as such alienates nature and, simultaneously, alienates all those other bodies who might be incapable of such proof.

This alienation, direct or indirect, is the ground upon which human plundering of the world has commenced. As a pinprick self, the Subject cannot see beyond itself and its actions in the world as a result never quite register for it. What happens is that the ableist Subject grimly parodies God, that disembodied, ahistorical, un-natural being that exists, somehow, untouched by everything else, moving the world, but never quite moved. Our actions as Human Subjects occur out there, separate, while we remain insulated, oblivious to the effects of our actions in the natural world. What follows are the ‘sins’ of the Subject:

- To deny relation, or dependency, on the natural world, is ableist.
- To deny others, and live in an oppressive, marginalizing manner is ableist.
- To deny, as part of the god-trick, the mortality of our bodies is ableist.

In part the difficulty we have in recognizing this involvement in the world is due to the lengthy intellectual history that Tobin Siebers glosses in his “Disability and the Theory of Complex Embodiment” (2010). He describes how the Enlightenment constructed, for example, a Subject who was “rationally autonomous” and who would not be weighed down by bodies and “dependence on others” because the latter impeded the objective work of rationality (319). To lack the ability to reason well about the world must necessarily be the result, or so the argument goes, of an “inbuilt [bodily] inferiority.” What we have here in other words is a two-pronged attacked on reality: bodies are suspect and to be transcended, and, due in part to Freud, dependence on others is pathologized.

The Forgotten Birth of the Subject

All of this is difficult for most of us to see. The individual/Subject, the nation state, Protestantism, capitalism and the middle class, as well as norms, statistics, and eugenics were all contingent, constructed events. But from the (ideological) standpoint of the 21st century they seem fated, inevitable, natural, and all-too-obvious. Lennard J. Davis has written extensively on the rise of statistics, eugenics, and norms (2010). He writes that “[o]ne of our tasks for a developing consciousness of disability issues
is the attempt . . . to reverse the hegemony of the normal and to institute alternative ways of thinking about the abnormal” (17). From the standpoint of ideology, a concept that has been naturalized—say that of the Subject in western political philosophy—has been divorced from its history. This erasure of history—which for our purposes is simply another word for ecology—is a process of simplification, of purification. As with everything else the god-like Subject had its beginning in impurity, a hybrid, ecological matrix. What has happened ideologically is that this history and birth has been erased. What Davis does in his work is reveal the impure, constructed history of such concepts. For us, in this double journal issue, our desire is parallel to his: how can we take the ableist, anthropocentric subject and open it up to the world, to impurity, to relation, to nature?

Through our study of ideology and white privilege we have learned that the norm—here a nondisabled, white man—cannot easily recognize the environmental and societal structures that privilege him and preserve his illusion of independence. The norm, after so many years, has difficulty seeing its normality because it is so omnipresent and so life sustaining, while those on the margins who are shunted aside, denied life, by privilege’s structures are keenly aware that the game is rigged because they feel, keenly, the pain of not quite fitting into the norm’s social structures (Siebers 2010, 322). This can however only be a partial answer to how and why the ableist, anthropocentric Subject is so deeply fixed in the Western psyche.

Lyotard writes convincingly of a totalitarian politics that strives to be “unitary and total” as it attempts to eliminate what he refers to as the “unmanageable thing.” But then, after eliminating all of those others (disabled, Jew, who stand in for this “thing”), this self-same politics finds itself unraveling from the inside (1991, 43-44): the enemy it seeks cannot be managed, cannot be erased, even from within the ‘unitary’ community. Lyotard’s argument is attuned to how Western politics constructs, endlessly, the illusion of a static subject, who undergirds the politics and parties on the right and the left. He writes that “Polemos is not the father of all things, he is the child of this relation of the mind to a [unmanageable] thing that has no relation to the mind. And polemos is a way for the mind to forget it, to forget the coitus impossibilis that engendered it . . .” (original’s emphasis; 44). Opposition does not create the new; opposition, for example, that of Democrats and Republicans here in the US, allows something, an impossible birth, to be forgotten. Such an
opposition is really an opposition of the same, while creating the illusion of difference and choice.

Lyotard explains how even as a revolution tries to create an opening for this “thing,” the thing is slowly assimilated by mature politics. For Marx this thing was “creative power,” which was “sacrificed” when the working class was “exploited” (45). To keep creative power untouched it must be kept outside the assimilative operation of contracts and the marketplace, he argues. We scholars of disability and ecology can appropriate Lyotard’s argument in the following way: Our politics is controlled by the logic of the Subject. So that any movement toward addressing that “thing,” here, our more-than-human-world, which exists outside of representation is quickly assimilated by a subjectival politics. This same politics of the Subject grounds the opposition between nature and culture. Nature and culture appear to be useful, distinct categories. But they are a polemical opposition, a subjectival opposition that allows for a forgetting. What unmanageable thing is being forgotten? The very fact that we are not separate from ‘nature,’ that we are nature, and that our identities are bound up, born, in the world.

Lyotard argues that it is in “birth, one’s absolutely and singular dependency” (44), which denies unity, purity, and so on, that one locates the unmanageable. This birth is outside representation because of course the ecological relationship is endless, sublime, in its complexity. For a Subject who is constructed via representation (representation is always an erasure, a simplification, a mounting of conceptual boundaries), this is anxiety inducing—the stuff of horror films. Tell the average person that they have microscopic mites (Demodex folliculorum) living on their face and they will shudder in disgust. Tell the average person that they have 100 trillion microbes in their body and that their health depends on this microbiome and they might just shudder as well. This horror follows logically from our hygienic conception of the Human Subject. We are horrified because our conceptual identity is antithetical to the reality of our being. Our horrifying relational and material being undermines our purifying representation of ourselves and reminds us of our plural birth, our being in nature.

Lyotard says that all politics is a “politics of forgetting” (42). How can we remember this ecological relation? How can we leave behind the pinprick self and open ourselves up to the larger world that has always been with us?
Subjects in/and Space

“Space is the place,” Sun Ra informs us. Space, or “place,” also happens to be the answer to the problem of the Subject and, as Matthew J.C. Cella, first pointed out a “useful foundation upon which to establish a dialogue between” ecocriticism and disability studies (2017, 170, 174).

In disability studies, the social model distinguishes between impairment and disability (Shakespeare 2010, 268). Society disables someone with an impairment by structuring itself in such a way that certain bodies are not provided with access. If society were to be attuned to all bodily difference, theoretically, no one would be disabled, or at least so goes the argument. The social model demands that society think about each ‘individual’ in a spatial, ontological manner: No man or woman is an island in the social model. There is a profound recognition of how material bodies are imbedded, inevitably, in material ways in, yes, a material world. And that is what we mean by space: the social model demonstrates that each of us is dependent, outside of ourselves, on the world, on nature.

If disabled people are disabled by society, the social model also, logically, informs us that the ableist, anthropocentric Subject is equally enabled by society. Indeed, what the study of privilege and the social model does is that it demonstrates to us that the able body is only able because the social and natural world has been designed for the limited range of mental and physical characteristics which define the nondisabled subject. In other words, the pinprick Subject, which is in its being a denial of space, is an illusion supported by a spatial environment constructed to benefit said subject.

Tom Shakespeare points out (2010, 269) that while the social model has worked well in many respects, it fails in overemphasizing the re-structuring of the environment. The social model, he argues, seems to suggest that all environments can be made into “barrier-free utopia[s]” (271), accessible to anyone with any impairment, when in fact, there are limits to social reconstruction. Sometimes “different impairments” may require “different solutions” to access issues that may in fact conflict with one another. He points out also that the natural world will often remain inaccessible (e.g., wheel chairs on beaches). “Barrier free enclaves are possible,” he writes, “but not a barrier free world.” Secondly, Shakespeare argues that the social model—much like Enlightenment rationality—tends to marginalize the reality of the impaired body. On the one hand, the social model recognizes that bodies are inevitably dependent on the environment around them, and this is surely a helpful revision of the
Enlightenment’s obsession with autonomy. On the other hand, the social model’s idealism obscures reality: some physical impairments simply cannot be socially re-constructed away; some real-world environments cannot be reconstructed to provide access to all.

Shakespeare’s critique is a useful antidote to overly idealistic thinking. But it lacks the ecological aspect. He recognizes the importance of bodies in/and environments; he recognizes that there is a social environment as well as a “natural world” (270); and he recognizes that the utopian vision of the social model is problematic and impractical for reasons of expense. But not for ecological reasons: the world out there, ‘constructed’ or not, is still a tool for humans. From an ecological standpoint, remaking an environment to privilege humans, impaired or not, is deeply problematic, lacking input from the nonhuman world. But, possibly, matters could be worse: Tobin Siebers writes in a different context of how “Social constructionism makes it possible to see disability as an effect of an environment hostile to some bodies and not others . . .” (173). In other words, it is not clear that society as environment, for progressive DS activists, is rethought in a fundamental manner. In both modes, conservative and progressive, society is at best a tool for humans; at worst, the environment is depicted as “hostile.” In short, humans remain alienated from the environment.

An eco-crip social model would ontologically decenter the subject so that more-than-human-nature would have *space* to exist. What is needed is an onto-eco spacing that denies any simple centering of the human and replaces humans in the complex web of relations in the world that in fact the human ‘subject’ has never left. Donna Haraway writes that “Ecofeminists have perhaps been most insistent on some version of the world as active agent, not as a resource to be mapped and appropriated in bourgeois, Marxist, or masculine projects” (1991, 199). How can ‘we’ give space to the world “as an active agent” while also attending to ‘our’ own fragile bodies?

**One Answer: The Limits of Subjectival Rationalization in a World Gone ‘Awry’**

So how to open up the Subject to the world?

On a certain level, to our dismay, this problem is solving itself. Every day that some new ecological disaster overwhelms our newsfeed, or every day a new heat record is broadcast on the *Weather Channel*, the rationalizing ability of the Subject takes a hit. The Subject *is* privileged by
its environment. But the repressed effects of our actions do rebound and pierce those not-so-impermeable subjectival boundaries. As the environment spins out of control, like a boy dribbling a ball which he accidentally kicks too far, it creates a crack in the coherent union of the nondisabled body with the world. And if that crack widens, which it seems to do on a daily basis, and if we humans are not able to catch up fast enough to the big blue ball which is our world, that crack will widen and no amount of cognitive sprinting will be enough to save the Subject’s conception of Himself and the world.

To switch metaphors: As Heidegger’s famous analysis of the broken tool suggests (1996, 73–73; German page numbers), it is only when something goes wrong, when the equipment we need for a project fails, that we confront our relationality. Picture a carpenter obliviously hammering away when, suddenly, she hears a crack. The carpenter stops and looks around. She thinks, for once, of the tool in her hand. She examines it. The handle is cracked, broken, and then she begins to think of the context around her: there is no backup tool. How can she continue? How can we continue when the world-tool, as defined by Humans, breaks?

Once broken, the tool’s relation (Heidegger: “reference”) to its wielder and the world around it is made evident. The state of brokenness forces us to recognize our relation and dependence on the world around us, which is to say, that we are in the world and not pinprick subjects. The world, in other words, stops being a tool for the oblivious Subject the moment it announces that it is not simply out there as a tool or resource to be plundered. At such a point, the Subject becomes subject to the world and is made to consider its own dependent being. This spatial awareness undermines subjectivity and allows for an onto-eco spacing in which the subject finds its being outside of itself (here we are indebted to the language of Jean-Luc Nancy), and the world finds itself granted the ontological breathing room (space) that has been too long denied it.

In this scenario, it is the tool, the environment, that ‘breaks’ and as a result denaturalizes the seemingly seamless connection between the anthropocentric subject and the privileging environment, as well as any narrative and ideology implicit in that context. But this awakening can occur in the reverse fashion as well when an impaired body enters into an environment which is not accessible. On the first day of my (Todd’s) ecocriticism class here at Defiance College, when an approximately 300 pound young man attempted to sit in one of the armed chairs at our seminar table, I was acutely aware of the way in which our room and its
furnishings materialized ideological norms. The chair did not fit. Or, perhaps, the young man did not fit the chair. It’s important to not emphasize one or the other because our goal is not to center the human subject and his or her needs—that would after all make the environment a self-serving tool once again.

The language of ‘brokenness’ is suspect. The always perceptive Tobin Siebers writes of a recent tendency to “describe the disabled body as either power laden or as a weapon of resistance useful only to pierce the false armor of reality erected by modern ideologies” (2006, 180). It is not the ‘broken’ world or the ‘broken’ body that we wish to center here. It is the disjunction between bodies and the world that matters. In this case, an ‘able’ body could, entering a particular environment, trigger the relational awareness that we describe above. In truth, however, is the world ‘broken’ like Heidegger’s tool? If so, it is only so in relation to a Subject which has treated it like a static tool and sees it as ‘broken’ when it does not submit and serve Man. Similarly, it would be inappropriate to describe a disabled person as ‘broken’ in this context as that treats people as tools, only valuable because of utility. What is “broken” is the fantasy that seamlessly links body to world, allowing many of us to ignore the constructed and contingent relationship of bodies in/and nature, seeing the world and others merely as resources to be plundered. Rethinking the “Human” in the world should lead to an understanding of all bodies as impaired and limited—‘broken,’ but only insofar as that word is meaningfully transformed. It should return to each of us a profound awareness of our own fragility because even so-called ‘ability’ is now understood as dependent on a context that privileges it. What is ‘broken,’ or brought into sharp relief, is the seamless—and now not so seamless—relationship between body and environment. But should, as we rethink the relationship of the ‘subject’ in the world, there be a seamless relationship between body and environment? Or perhaps we humans should become comfortable yet again with discomfort, with a world that has its own plans as an active agent?

**Home after “Home”**

Ursula Le Guin’s story “She Unnames Them” describes a woman, probably Eve, post creation. She is dissatisfied with the names that Adam has given her and the animals. The brief story describes how Adam’s unilateral naming creates a particular ontological disconnection between humans and nature. And, then, once the names are removed, how a
different ontological relation arises. She writes, “None were left now to unname, and they seemed far closer to me than when their names had stood between us: so close that my fear of them and their fear of me became one. And the attraction that many of us felt was one with the fear. The hunter could not be told from the hunted.” And the story ends. ‘Eve’ remains unnamed. The unnamed animals remain unnamed. There is, for the purposes of the rest of this section, no return to narrative (as materialized in naming). However, there is proximity; there is relation. But there is also fear, intermingled. Her story suggests that whatever world arises after the Subject (and after the names and narratives tied to the Subject), it will not be an easy one, certainly not the “seamless” world of the Subject. Her story suggests that whatever ‘home’ follows in the wake of the Adamic Subject, it will not be quite the safe place that the word “home” signifies to us today, at least in certain parts of the West.

Cella’s (2017) essay on the “ecosomatic paradigm” is crucial reading for those interested in this subject. His ecosomatic paradigm “assumes contiguity between the mind-body and its social and natural environments; thus . . . the work of negotiating a ‘habitable body’ and a ‘habitable world’ go hand in hand” (168-169). Cella (whose work is also included in this volume) describes a “dialectical” relationship between body and environment (170-171). Quoting Edward Casey, Cella describes how the body has to be brought into “conformity” with the environment. If conformity does not arise, the result is “displacement and desolation” or “place pathology.” The body (“in-motion”) orients each person and allows for a non-pathological placement. Cella is partially critical of this notion, which, he argues, assumes an able body. What he asks happens with a disabled body when it attempts to orient itself in the self-same environment? Are disabled bodies doomed to experience place pathology? In his analysis of the journey of a facially scarred woman in Linda Hogan’s Solar Storms, the answer is decidedly negative as the protagonist finds a healthy emplacement of body in space via her own Native American world view (188). But it is not clear to us that others with different impairments would necessarily find healing and emplacement. And it is equally not clear to us what happens to secular Westerners in the absence of a spiritual tradition that would help them make sense of the interdependent relationship between bodies and environments.

Cella argues that “intellectual traditions” (170) and “literary narratives” (186) influence our emplacement. The very distinction between the Subject and Nature, and disabled and nondisabled, is a
product of an intellectual tradition embodied in certain metanarratives. The Enlightenment tradition centers the Human and makes a home, everywhere, for Humanity. For this reason, ‘we’ are not used to not being at home, insulated as we are from the world. The state of being at home is a state of health, from within this tradition. If we were to erase the ideology inherent in this tradition, would we not all be, at least momentarily, in the state of place pathology, not quite knowing how to place ourselves in space, feeling anxious and desolate? Can we be at ‘home’ in the absence of some sort of narratival ideology suturing body to place? And, most importantly, does the state of being at home lull us into conformity, to a self-centered ease within which we lose sight of the more-than-human world?

If this is true, then that means that the relative absence of narrative—tying body to environment—which would throw us into ‘place pathology’ is exactly the state of being we should welcome; this is, we believe, counter to Cella’s argument which privileges the “conformity” of body and environment (2017, 170-171). We all, arguably, have moments of being at home. But seen from the realistic standpoint of a full, long life, most of our lives are very much framed by disability—by childhood or old age. And in between the extremes of infancy and old age, many of us will experience multiple moments or stages of relative impairment. Not being at home—place pathology—can arguably be a productive, ethical space, though decidedly not one most of us would choose. While this is not emphasized in Cella’s essay, along with “displacement and desolation” (2017, 170-171), perhaps in such a space, we might remain awake to ourselves and to the world, to humans, and others, around us. In such a state, we might remain alert to the “dialectic” between body and environment, to our dependency on the world, and crucially open to the onto-eco spacing in which the Subject finds itself outside of itself.

We would feel the intimacy of Le Guin’s world but also the fear. Perhaps we need to learn to know fear again. Perhaps not being at home—outside of the West’s subjectival tradition—needs to be recast as in fact a return to home? Perhaps human insecurity—grounded in interdependence—is the woke state that will allow our world to be sustainable as we move into a future not defined by humans, but by a deep ecological relationship in the world.

What happens in this scenario is that everything is relativized. The Subject’s relationship with the world is shown to pre-exist its supposed mature, autonomous being. As Nocella et al. put it: in this case, “one’s
autonomy to act in the world is based on one’s relationality to other individuals versus a singular, independent, autonomous subject” (2017, xxii). Additionally, “Nature” and “Culture” lose their distinct meanings, as does “individual” and “society,” and “disabled” and “nondisabled.” We begin again with a profound understanding that all identity is interwoven in an originary way with the stuff of the universe. Our origin is not purity, but impurity (as long as “impurity” does not assume any prior purity). Insofar, as each singular being is now affected, that is, as part of the world, it becomes fragile, vulnerable to the dynamic vicissitudes of ‘nature.’ Singular humans are less, in such a view, disabled or nondisabled, than they are all tinged by finitude.

Recentering the subject in the world in this way changes our words and concepts and brings humans back to the earth, where we always have been. This awareness of our inherent contingency in the world, joined with a new awareness of how the “social” (read environment) supports and limits all of us, leads to a greater awareness of each body’s singular needs and of how each environment assists or denies each body in various ways. Such a cripistemology, as David N. Pellow defines it, is a “way of knowing drawn from particular experiences and contexts of (dis)ability . . . always aware of its positionality, its limits, and possibilities” (2017, xiii).

As the Enlightenment Subject ‘leaves’ the field, as we are thrown into a state of place pathology, what we need is a new narrative, a new ‘spirituality,’ that is grounded in such a cripistemology and that will somehow remain attuned, as best as it can, to the onto-eco spacing of that human that comes after the Subject. Such a narrative will surely come, despite what we say above. Narratives soothe and ease our relation with the world and all too often that means that narratives allow us to forget our moment by moment dynamic relationship with the more-than-human-world. The question for us is how to create a narrative that does justice to this relationship and which remains alive and raw to our contingency in the world.

In such a narrative/world, such an epistemology would lead to a deeper responsibility as the boundaries dissolve between human, animals, plants, and the earth and we learn to see others in a new, more “situated” and embodied manner, to reference the work of Donna Haraway (1991, 191). Eco-ability designates a profound understanding of our human placement in the world, and that any future decisions need to be guided by a deep understanding of our interdependence with nature, and of how
nature, as context, determines and limits all abilities, ‘nondisabled’ and ‘disabled.’

**Recent Work at the Intersection of Disability and Ecology**

What we have written is intended to be one viewpoint among others on the problem(s) confronting scholars of ecology and disability. There have after all been a number of exciting and insightful texts in the last decade focused on this ethically crucial work. Major publications include, 2012’s *Earth, Animal, and Disability Liberation: The Rise of the Eco-Ability Movement* (eds., Anthony J. Nocella II, Judy K.C. Bentley, Janet M. Duncan), 2016’s *Disability and the Environment in American Literature: Toward an Ecosomatic Paradigm* (ed., Matthew J.C. Cella), 2017’s *The Intersectionality of Critical Animal, Disability, and Environmental Studies: Toward Eco-ability, Justice, and Liberation* (eds., Anthony J. Nocella II, Amber E. George, and J.L. Schatz), and 2017’s *Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities: Toward an Eco-Crip Theory* (eds., Sarah Jaquette Ray, Jay Sibara). In 2013 ISLE (Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment) published an entire issue dedicated to ecology and disability as well.

This double journal issue of *Studies in the Humanities* is merely the most recent attempt to further the academic conversation occurring at the intersection of disability and ecology. In our call for papers we asked for essays focused on the following questions: What can be gained by investigating ecological issues through the lens of disability studies? What can be gained by investigating disability through the lens of ecocriticism? How can these two viewpoints be joined?

The issue opens with Traci Brynne Voyles, Elizabeth Chamberlain, and Lakshmi Chithra Dilipkumar and Swarnalatha Rangarajan tackling the rhetorics of “toxicity” as they relate to (dis)ability and the ways ideologies of “pure” bodies intersect with issues of race, class, sex, nation, and ability. Voyles and Chamberlain’s essays, “Green Lovin’ Mamas Don’t Vax! The Pseudo-Environmentalism of Anti-Vaccination Discourse” and “Green Our Vaccines: Jenny McCarthy’s Environmentalist, Ableist Rhetoric,” respectively, both examine the anti-vaccine movement through the lenses of environmental and disability studies. Voyles points to the ways that anti-vaccine arguments are imbricated with pseudo-environmentalism through their claims that vaccines “pollute” the body by exposing it to toxins. This, in turn, positions autism as an “environmental problem” and a manifestation of pollution, “problems” to be fixed by
environmental purification. Voyles insightfully critiques the way these arguments appropriate overly simplistic, deeply problematic versions of “environmentalism” to ableist ends. Chamberlain examines a narrower set of rhetorical moves, specifically Jenny McCarthy’s anti-vaccine movement.

Like Voyles, Chamberlain argues that the anti-vaccine movement combines the claims of both environmental and disability studies movements, and like Voyles, she agrees that the results are troubling. McCarthy is one of the most well-known and influential members of the anti-vaccine movement, and she skillfully, albeit unknowingly, deploys environmentalist and disability studies rhetorics, in a way that Chamberlain rightly calls “as dangerous as it is persuasive.” Issues of environmental justice undergird both Voyles’ and Chamberlain’s work; this issue comes to the foreground in Lakshmi Chithra Dilipkumar’s and Swarnalatha Rangarajan’s essay “Eco-Ability and the Corporeal Grotesque: Environmental Toxicity in Cherrie Moraga’s *Heroes and Saints* and Ambikasutan Mangad’s *Swarga,*” which examines the representations of “toxicity” and “toxic” bodies in literature. Dilipkumar and Rangarajan argue that, read together, these texts present a “new paradigm of embedded ecological thinking” in response to environments that have been affected by the damage inflicted by agriculture. They use eco-crip theory to understand the way Moraga’s play, *Heroes and Saints,* represents the potentialities of reconceiving the body with physical impairments without resorting to either the medical model of disability or the super-crip model. Mangad’s novel, *Swarga,* also seeks to understand the impacts of agricultural pollution and its effects on communities. Dilipkumar and Rangarajan juxtapose these two texts to “demonstrate how the communities in the Global South transform their disability into ecoability.”

In the second section of this special issue, (Post) Human Environments: Othering and Ethics, our authors look toward what science fiction, comics, experimental, and fantasy novels offer us in terms of imagining new visions of embodiment, agency, subjectivity, and relationships. In all of these texts, bodies become something fluid and unstable, and boundaries that separate self from other, human from environment, and normative and non-normative soften and become permeable. These imaginings allow us to imagine new ontologies and new ethics. Kassi Burnett’s analysis of the classic novella in German ecocriticism, Max Frisch’s *Man in the Holocene,* opens this section. In this
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insightful essay, Burnett takes on the issue of the “human,” using theoretical concepts from both disability studies and ecocriticism, to analyze how this novella decenters the traditional human subject and offers an alternative vision that moves beyond the binary categories of nature/man, abled/disabled. Burnett eloquently argues that while *Man in the Holocene* shows the intense suffering of the central character as he comes to realize that the notion of an agentic, autonomous subject is a myth, it also opens space for a more “response-able” future.

K.M. Ferebee also tackles the issue of what it means to be human through her compelling analysis of Peter Milligan and Mike Allred’s *X-Statix* books. Ferebee argues that the characters Guy Smith and Venus Dee Milo demonstrate the intersection between ecocriticism and disability studies by presenting bodies that disrupt the boundaries between human and environment and by representing the challenges of non-normative embodiment, while also illuminating the shortfalls of trying to assert a stable sense of what “correct” boundaries might be. Katsiaryna Nahornava’s “On (Dis-)Ability and Nature in *A Song of Fire and Ice*” turns our attention to the popular *Game of Thrones* series by George R. R. Martin, and specifically the character of Bran and his place in the novel as a more-than-human character who transcends the conventional boundaries that have defined Western subjectivity. Nahornava convincingly argues that Martin’s novels offer a powerful critique of ableism, while also arguing for a co-constructive and mutually constitutive relationship between humans and more-than-human nature. Ontology is one of the primary concerns of Elif Sendur’s “Undoing Bodies: Tentacular Spaces and *Sympoiesis* in *Lilith’s Brood*.” Sendur employs New Materialist understandings of matter and agency to analyze Octavia Butler’s *Xenogenesis/Lilith’s Brood* trilogy, arguing that this series of novels presents a way of considering the body “as multiplicity.” Like Burnett, Ferebee, and Nahornava, Sendur is deeply interested in exploring bodies whose boundaries between human/more-than-human have dissolved in compelling and interesting ways.

The final section explores the ways that Western notions of the frontier rely on compulsory able-bodiedness, and how these ethics are damaging to human and more-than-human nature alike. Holtmeier and Park-Primiano turn to a fictional space frontier, that of Pandora in the film *Avatar*, to explore the intersection of environmental ethics and “living-in-place” with compulsory able-bodiedness, arguing that while the film offers a bioregional approach to inhabiting space, it does so by privileging able-
bodiedness and erasing disability. In fact, they argue that the film suggests that a bioregional inhabiting of space can only be done by “transcend[ing] disability entirely.” The body must be negated in order to successfully “live-in-place.”

Matthew Cella’s essay on Willa Cather and Annie Proulx’s frontier narratives explores the damaging myth at the center of the frontier mythology that renders both disabled bodies and more-than-human nature subject to violence and explores how the frontier mythology is itself disabling. Cella identifies how, within Cather’s My Antonia and Proulx’s “People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water” (in Close Range: Wyoming Stories), disability is deployed to document the effects of the “personal, cultural, and environmental impacts of the frontier myth.” Junker argues that Wallace Stegner’s The Angle of Repose is fraught with problems insofar as the only way to successfully find habitability is through the negation of all bodily difference and vulnerability, thus also calling into question the purported environmental ethics of the novel.

Together, these essays question the subject and suggest radical ways to reconsider the human place in the world as embedded, entangled, and decentered.

Works Cited


Contributors’ Biographies

**Kassi Burnett** is a PhD candidate at the Ohio State University, having received her MA in German literature and intellectual history in 2014. Her research focuses on ecocriticism – specifically the branches of ecofeminism, postcolonial ecocriticism and posthumanism. Recently, because of her interest in ethics, agency, and justice, her work has grown new roots into disability studies.

**Matthew J. C. Cella** is an associate professor of English at Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania, where he also teaches courses in the Disability Studies program. He is the author of *Bad Land Pastoralism in Great Plains Fiction* (University of Iowa 2010) and editor of *Disability and the Environment in American Literature: Toward an Ecosomatic Paradigm* (Lexington, 2016). His research has been published in a range of journals, including *ISLE, Journal of Rural Studies, Great Plains Quarterly,* and *Western American Literature.*

**Elizabeth F. Chamberlain** is an Assistant Professor of English, rhetoric, and composition at Arkansas State University, Jonesboro, where she teaches classes including digital and technical writing. Her research interests lie at the intersection of technology and culture. Her other ecocritical work includes a 2015 webtext for *Harlot of the Arts,* “Buy-It-Yourself: How DIY Got Consumerized,” about the greenwashing of the do-it-yourself movement.

**Todd A. Comer**, a professor of English at Defiance College, has co-edited three collections, on the (comics) writer Alan Moore, on “terror and the cinematic sublime,” and on the regional politics of Occupy Wall Street. He has published essays on Joel and Ethan Coen, Samuel R. Delany, Flann O’Brien, and on the BBC television series *Doctor Who.* He is currently writing a book on the ecological politics of director Peter Weir (under contract with Bloomsbury Publishing).

**Lakshmi Chithra Dilipkumar** is a graduate student in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at IIT Madras. Her areas of interest include ecocriticism, ecofeminism and borderland environments. She has contributed an essay titled, "Existentialism" for the undergraduate textbook, *Lovely Woods,* published by Orient Blackswan. Her essay titled “Resistance through Resilience: Ecofeminist Traits in Select Short stories of Rita Nath Keshari” was published by Partridge Publishing in the collection of essays titled *Horizon Above and Beyond: Anthology of*
Research Papers. She is an aspiring poet and her poetry has been published by the online magazine, Madras Courier.

K.M. Ferebee is a doctoral candidate in the Department of English at The Ohio State University. Her focus is interdisciplinary and located in the Environmental Humanities, with a theoretical basis in posthumanism/new materialisms. In her dissertation, she examines narratives of contamination and mutation in twentieth and twenty-first literatures, from X-Men to Animal’s People. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Prose Studies, Resilience, and ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment.

Mathew Holtmeier is Assistant Professor of Film Studies in the department of Literature and Language and co-director of the Film Studies program at East Tennessee State University. His research interests include the production of political subjectivity and bioregional media, focusing on regions such as Cascadia, Appalachia, and Patagonia. He has published on environmental media in journals including Screen and the Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture.

Christine Junker teaches literature, composition, and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Wright State University – Lake Campus, where she is an Associate Professor of English. Her primary research areas include place in nineteenth and twentieth century women’s literature, literature and the environment, and gender and contemporary popular literature and culture. Her work appears in journals such as ISLE, Legacy, College Teaching, as well as in edited collections.

Katsiaryna Nahornava (Belarus). I am a Ph.D. candidate in Literature in English language at the University of Granada, Spain. After having written and successfully defended my MA thesis “‘The Land is One’: An Analysis of the Biocentric and Anthropocentric Worldviews in A Song of Ice and Fire” in 2016, I am currently broadening my research as part of my Doctoral thesis entitled “An Ecocritical Reading of George R.R. Martin’s A Song of Ice and Fire.” My dissertation focuses on the analysis of the well-known Martin’s saga as a narrative of climate change and environmental crisis. Thus, my research interests include all the different aspects of human-nonhuman interaction: from environmental ethics and ecophobia to disability and feminism studies interwoven with ecocritical theory.

Sueyoung Park-Primiano is Assistant Professor of English and Film Studies in the Department of English, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, at Kennesaw State University. She is a contributing
author to *Cinema's Military Industrial Complex, American Militarism on the Small Screen*, and *Popular Culture in Asia*.

**Swarnalatha Rangarajan** is Professor of English at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Madras. She was a Fulbright Pre-doctoral fellow at Harvard University in 1999-2000 and was awarded her PhD from the University of Madras in 2002. She is the founding editor of the *Indian Journal of Ecocriticism* (IJJE) and has served as Guest Editor for two special issues on Indian ecosophy for *The Trumpeter* and is on the editorial board of ISLE (Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment). She was awarded the Charles Wallace Fellowship at CRASSH (Cambridge University) in 2013 to pursue a book project on ecocriticism. She has edited two books titled *Ecoambiguity, Community, and Development* (2014) and *Ecocriticism of the Global South* (2015) with Scott Slovic and Vidya Sarveswaran published by Lexington books. Her book titled *Ecocriticism: Big Ideas and Practical Strategies* was published by Orient Blackswan in 2018. She is currently working on the *Routledge Book of Environmental Communication* with Scott Slovic and Vidya Sarveswaran. Swarnalatha Rangarajan also dabbles in creative writing and her short fiction and poetry has appeared in anthologies of publishing houses like Penguin, Zubaan, Westland, Yoda Press to name a few. Her first novel, *Final Instructions*, which was published by Authorspress in 2015, has a prominent ecosophical theme.

**Elif Sendur** is a Ph.D candidate at Binghamton University’s department of Comparative Literature. Her work is at the intersection of cinema, media and body studies. She is particularly interested in those bodies that work as markers of difference in their materiality. Her recent work is on femme presenting queer/monstrous bodies in SF and their disruptive power over normalizing discourses.