

Empirical Ecocriticism: A Workshop at the Rachel Carson Center

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There is a growing understanding across disciplines that narratives are of central importance to our relationships with other humans and nonhumans as well as the broader environment. However, there is a need for more interdisciplinary cooperation and transdisciplinary convergence in order to explore further, in both the theoretical and the empirical realm, how environmental narratives across various mediums contribute to our understanding of the world around us and our place in it. Towards this goal, we are hosting a workshop at the Rachel Carson Center to help develop *empirical ecocriticism*, a new interdisciplinary field that combines research methodologies from the humanities and social sciences.

One of the central aims of the interdisciplinary field we seek to establish is to gain a better understanding of the role of environmental narratives in influencing people's awareness, attitudes, and behavior in a time of rapid social and ecological transformation. Combining approaches from the humanities and the social sciences, empirical ecocriticism explores the ways in which people from various cultural backgrounds engage with environmental narratives and the larger repercussions of such engagement. In our current working definition, it is the empirically grounded study of environmental narrative—in literature, film, television, etc.—and its influence on various audiences. Though the precise boundaries of empirical ecocriticism are still under construction, we have a few ways we're defining it in relation to other fields of study, such as traditional ecocriticism and environmental communication, at this point in time. As we define it, empirical ecocriticism is 1) empirically grounded; 2) more open to qualitative methodologies than the social sciences tend to be; 3) focused on the effects of narrative strategies and techniques, with the kind of depth and nuance that ecocritics are known for; 4) features writing that is more engaging than the typical social science paper, since we hope to reach humanists as well as social scientists; and 5) open to critical engagement with competing definitions of "empirical" data.

Such interdisciplinary investigations will have to wrestle with the inevitable methodological problems involved in all such endeavors. This is why a workshop that brings together contributors from different disciplinary backgrounds will help us map the potential opportunities and challenges. The two-day workshop will include presentations of ongoing research and publications while leaving ample time for discussion and planning for future collaborations. Given the wide range of disciplinary backgrounds among the fellows and staff of the Rachel Carson Center, we plan engage the RCC community in our workshop—to this end, we are hosting a roundtable discussion session to receive critical feedback and locate potential collaborators. This workshop will lead to a special issue of the journal *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Environment* as well as an edited book, *Empirical Ecocriticism: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Environmental Narrative*.

The scholars and researchers we are bringing together in Munich have either already published empirical studies on environmental literature and film (e.g., Brereton and Chao-Ping 2013; Howell 2010, 2013; Malecki 2016) or have recently embarked on such projects. Among the latter are Carson alumna Salma Monani and doctoral student at the RCC Eline Tabak. A list of workshop participants with areas of specialization and affiliations can be found on our website, empiricalecocriticism.com. Since funding is crucial for the kinds of interdisciplinary collaborations our workshop hopes to promote and engender, we are also planning to engage these participants in a brainstorming-and-planning session regarding grant schemes within the EU and beyond that we could apply for either individually or as a group/network of researchers. We expect that our workshop will result in new collaborative research projects that will contribute to the fields of ecocriticism, environmental communication, and the environmental humanities more broadly.