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Reimagining Human–Nature Relationships: An Ecocritical Study of Selected Contemporary American Poems

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine the representation of nature and human-nature relations in certain poems written by contemporary American poets through ecocriticism. With increasing global warming and environmental degradation, the importance of literary analysis for understanding human perception of the environment and its behavior has grown significantly. Literature has received little attention within ecocriticism research and is predominantly found in novels, postcolonial literature, and environmental stories. In this study, a comparative ecocriticism approach is applied on five contemporary American poems. Data are gathered from the following five poems: EAT by Joy Harjo, Remembering a Honeymoon Hike near Drakes Bay, California, while I cook our dinner at the feet of Colorado's Front Range by Camille T. Dungy, If Fire by Jake Skeets, To a Blossoming Saguaro by Eduardo C. Corral, and Heliophilia by Aimee Nezhukumatathil. Through the use of a qualitative research methodology and comparative textual analysis, the study employs the ecocritical theory of Cheryll Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell, Rob Nixon, and Kate Soper to explore the way in which these poems reject anthropocentrism and form an ecocentric idea of existence. The results show that nature is not depicted as merely a backdrop against which human stories are told, but as an entity that actively influences identity, memory, justice, and belonging. Anthropocentric hierarchies are destabilized as nature is endowed with agency, environmental oppression is highlighted, and the poems bring to light the ecofeminist aspects of care and vulnerability to domination. Moreover, the poems illustrate the fact that the ecological crisis has much more to do with history, colonization, and displacement than previously

acknowledged. Through this research, current ecocriticism theory is advanced, as the poems serve as a site of resistance in response to the ecological crisis, and contemporary American poetry provides an insightful literary answer to the ecological crisis.

Keywords: *Ecocriticism, Contemporary Poetry, Environmental Justice, Ecofeminism, Non-human Agency, Human–Nature Relationship, Contemporary American Poetry.*

Introduction

The link between literature and nature has gained more significance in contemporary literary analysis due to several global issues including climatic changes, environmental degradation, loss of species, and ecological imbalances among others. In addition to being reflections of human perspectives on the nature, literature influences how people understand and act responsibly towards their environment. Ecocriticism has been identified as one of the most relevant theories which analyzes the interactions between literature and the natural environment. This theory was first articulated by William Rueckert and further defined by other authors including Cheryll Glotfelty and Lawrence Buell. Ecocriticism challenges anthropocentrism in favor of ecocentrism where the human existence is understood as part of a broader ecological framework (Rabi, Ullah, & Rabi, 2024). Poetry is vital for the ecocritical study as it presents the environment experiences metaphorically, symbolically, and emotionally. Contemporary poetry has become a useful medium for discussing the ecological crisis, environmental justice, and the mutual existence of humans and non-humans. The selected poems by Joy Harjo, Camille T. Dungy, Jake Skeets, Eduardo C. Corral, and Aimee Nezhukumatathil present valuable opportunities for analyzing poetry in the context of ecology (Abdulwahab et al., 2026).

While ecocriticism has received considerable academic recognition in the field of literature, most of the research done till now has been centered around novels and other forms of prose writing, whereas poetry of the modern era has been neglected to a great extent. While poetry can be seen as a distinct means of representing ecology through the use of concise language, symbolism, and sensual experiences, its contribution to creating an ecological awareness has been neglected by many researchers. The research work done on the chosen poets is mostly concerned with identity, race, immigration, and indigeneity, but there is very little comparative work done in the area of ecocriticism.

Earlier studies carried out by researchers including Cheryll Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell, Rob Nixon, and Kate Soper have provided a sound theoretical base for ecocriticism in literature. Research conducted on the poets selected for this work is concerned with identity politics, indigeneity, migration, and issues relating to culture. Comparative ecocritical analyses considering nature as a primary factor and other concepts like human-nature relationship, environmental justice, ecofeminism, place and space, and nonhuman perspective, however, are few. Previous studies tend to consider these themes independently or individually based on different poets, rather than examining the ecological implications of all five poets altogether. The present study attempts to bridge this knowledge gap by conducting comparative ecocritical analyses of certain American poems written in the contemporary period and how they transcend anthropocentrism towards ecologism.

The study is based on four important research questions, which include: (1) What does nature mean as a powerful organizing force in the chosen contemporary American poetry; (2) How does the concept of nature in these poems question anthropocentrism and construct human-nature relations; (3) What are the elements of environmental justice and eco-feminism that can be found in the chosen poems; and (4) What role do place, space, and non-human entities play in forming the ecological significance of these poems. The research questions aim to explore the ecological aspects of the chosen poetry.

Some of the key goals for this paper include evaluating the way that nature is portrayed in these poems as an important and active agent in nature, analyzing the portrayal of human-nature relationships in these poems using ecocritical analysis, assessing the presence of environmental justice issues and ecofeminism within these poems, and exploring the role of place, space, and nonhuman agents in developing the meaning of ecology in these poems.

The significance of the study lies in its contribution to literary ecocriticism since it centers on modern American poetry that is still underexplored in environmental literary studies compared to prose. Through an ecocritical analysis of five selected poems, the study provides a greater insight into the ways in which poetry responds to the environmental crisis, resisting anthropocentrism. The study applies the concepts of environmental justice, ecofeminism, space/place, and nonhuman agency in analyzing poetry, which makes its approach much more multidisciplinary and broad compared to previous studies on ecological literature.

This research work considers only five contemporary American poems chosen: "EAT" by Joy Harjo, "Remembering a Honeymoon Hike near Drakes Bay, California, while I cook our dinner at the feet of Colorado's Front Range" by Camille T. Dungy, "If Fire" by Jake Skeets, "To a Blossoming Saguaro" by Eduardo C. Corral, and "Heliophilia" by Aimee Nezhukumatathil. This work analyzes the poems from an ecocritical perspective with special regard for anthropocentrism, ecocentrism, environmental justice, ecofeminism, place and space, and non-human agency. This work does not seek to provide a thorough biographical and historical account of the poets but focuses exclusively on the poems chosen and their ecological aspects.

Literature Review

Ecocriticism can be considered among the most notable trends in modern literary criticism regarding the connection between literary works and the natural environment. The *Ecocriticism Reader* edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm introduces the term as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment," which is understood to be one of the major answers to environmental crises and the broadening scope of literary criticism to non-human issues (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996). In *The Environmental Imagination*, Lawrence Buell explains that an environmentally-oriented literary work should consider the non-human natural environment as an active subject and not the mere background of literary works, indicating that ecocentric perspective is essential to environmental representation (Buell, 1995). Moreover, Buell argues that "with the environmental crisis comes a crisis of the imagination." According to the above sources, literature is not independent of the environmental discourse but plays an important role in its construction (Rabi & Rabi, 2025).

Later, the scope of the ecocritical scholarship was also widened by Rob Nixon, whose idea of "slow violence" concerns with the gradual process of environmental degradation, which takes place imperceptibly and involves the disproportionate impact on marginalized groups of people. According to Nixon, who elaborates his ideas in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), the problem of environmental damage is usually characterized by delay and difficulty of depiction, because it is spread out over time and space and becomes thus politically invisible. In turn, such an approach to the problem of ecocriticism widens the boundaries of traditional environmentalism towards environmental justice and focuses on links between ecological damage, poverty, colonialism, and social injustices (Rabi, Zahir, Aziz, Mukhtiar, & Bibi, 2025). Furthermore, Kate Soper (1995) in her discussion about the ecological crisis and the relationship of it to consumer culture points out the importance of excessive consumerism under the capitalist regime for the environment.

In addition to providing an interdisciplinary foundation for ecocriticism, ecofeminism draws attention to the similarities in oppression of women and nature within patriarchal cultures. Val

Plumwood (1993) questions the dualism of humans versus nature, men versus women, and culture versus environment in patriarchal philosophies that promote domination and oppression. Similarly, Vandana Shiva (1988) draws parallels between destruction of the environment and colonial as well as patriarchal systems, paying particular attention to the impact on women in the developing world. Echoing this idea, Greta Gaard (1993) calls for intersectionality in ecofeminism, which entails analyzing environmental destruction alongside issues of race and class inequality. While Plumwood emphasizes the structural elements of patriarchal domination and Shiva focuses more on political struggle and oppression of the poor, both philosophers agree that ecological criticism should go beyond nature description and tackle the systems of oppression (Ahmad, Rabi, Sardar, Khan, & Begum, 2025). The diversity of ecofeminist theories makes the movement stronger as a literary perspective but also demonstrates the necessity to conduct more comparative analyses of poetic works.

The development of an environmental justice critique has similarly revolutionized the field of ecocriticism by highlighting the relationship between environmental issues and institutional inequities as well as historical violence. For example, Nixon (2011) articulates his theory of slow violence, which reveals that environmental degradation is typically invisible to society due to its impact on those who have the least amount of political influence. James Rice (2016) extends Nixon's work by illustrating that environmental destruction leads to "social, political, and scientific nonvisibility" in that the victims of ecological damage are marginalized peoples who go unnoticed and unaided by both the public and institutions. This theoretical insight is especially significant for literary studies in that it prompts scholars to consider the representation of environmental issues within literature not only as the depiction of landscapes but also as a rhetoric of social justice, discrimination, and accountability (Hussain, Danish, Rabi, & Rabi, n.d.). Unfortunately, most of the scholarship in this area centers on novelistic texts, postcolonial fiction, and environmental movements rather than on poetry.

Research into the poets selected—Joy Harjo, Camille T. Dungy, Jake Skeets, Eduardo C. Corral, and Aimee Nezhukumatathil—is largely centered on issues of identity, race, indigeneity, migration, and memory, as opposed to ecocriticism. While Harjo is often analyzed for her connection to indigenous spirituality and land memory, Dungy is often considered in terms of race, motherhood, and the Black experience with the environment (Latif et al., 2026). On the other hand, Skeets' poetry is mostly understood through the lens of Indigenous futurity, environmental precarity, and the trauma of the southwestern United States, and Corral is primarily seen as exploring his immigrant status and experiences of crossing borders. Lastly, the ecological perspective of Nezhukumatathil's poetry is often approached through her intimacy, sense of belonging, and multispecies connections. According to Hussain, Rabi, and Aziz (2026) such an approach can be valuable, given that it preserves cultural specificity and historical context; yet, ecology is often seen only as a background to identity politics, leaving its importance understated in the ecocritical analysis of the selected poets.

The analysis of previous research indicates both convergence and limitation. The majority of ecocritics share the notion that literature ought to oppose anthropocentrism and highlight the agency of nature, whereas ecofeminists and environmental justice scholars further emphasize the linkage between the ecological crisis and the systems of oppression based on gender, race, and colonization (Khan et al., 2026). However, there is some divergence regarding which aspects of ecology need more attention: whether it be the philosophy of ecocentrism, the fight for ecological rights and freedom, or identity and its representation in cultural discourse (Rabi, Hussain, Ahmad, & Rabi, 2026). In addition, previous studies about the selected poets are

fragmented, as they analyze such ecological themes as place, movement, vulnerability, and environment separately.

Therefore, the significant research gap is that there is no comparative ecocritical study of these poets and their works that would allow one to view these poets within the same analytical context. Scholars do not investigate how nature is presented in the poems, how the anthropocentric approach can be questioned, and how the concepts of environmental justice and ecofeminism, space, and nonhuman agency are intertwined in these poems. Researchers only discuss the works of individual poets separately and ignore some other important thematic elements that could be examined in an ecological perspective.

This study bridges the existing gap through an ecocritical comparison of five selected contemporary American poems using an integrated approach involving ecocriticism, ecofeminism, and environmental justice. Instead of viewing the images of nature as subsidiary aspects, nature is considered as a major element and its role in constructing ecological interdependencies, vulnerabilities, and resistance through poetic language is analyzed. Through an emphasis on nature as a focus, human-nature interactions, environmental justice, place/space, non-human voices, and ecofeminist issues, this study makes a contribution to contemporary poetry studies and ecocriticism. It reveals that these poems not only depict nature but also criticize anthropocentric assumptions about the world and present a new vision of ecology.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical base of this research paper is ecocriticism since this theory allows for analyzing the connections between literary texts and the natural environment from a holistic perspective. As an emerging discipline of literary criticism in the twentieth century, ecocriticism came into being due to rising concerns on such global issues as environmental pollution, climate change, imbalance between different species in the natural world, and the adverse consequences of anthropocentrism in humans' perceptions of the world around them. Ecocriticism contrasts other theories of literary analysis in that it focuses on the depiction of the natural world and its impact on humans rather than human experience. According to Cheryll Glotfelty, ecocriticism "considers literature as a record of human interaction with the world" (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, p. xviii). Thus, a literary work should not only be interpreted from a cultural but also ecological perspective, which implies that the interconnection between nature and culture in humans' lives cannot be overlooked when discussing ecological issues of any society.

Cheryll Glotfelty represents one of the key scholars of the emerging ecocriticism as she creates the basis for the literary field. According to her ideas presented in *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), literary criticism has to concern with environmental issues similarly to the ways in which it addresses race, class, and gender and ecology has to become a component of textual analysis. At the same time, Larry Buell develops the notion of ecocriticism by emphasizing the necessity of representing non-human environment actively rather than passively. In particular, in *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), he asserts that environmentally important literature should demonstrate moral responsibility toward nature and raise doubts regarding the idea of man's superiority. Another contribution to the development of ecocriticism is connected with Rob Nixon who focuses on slow violence as an environmental destruction process that is invisible, gradual, and mainly takes place in poor and marginalized territories (Nixon, 2011). The scholar combines ecology with social justice and postcolonial theories in order to reveal the connection between them. Finally, Kate Soper pays attention to consumerism by criticizing its impact on ecology and arguing that environmental destruction is both material and ideological and determined by cultural needs and social values.

One of the key notions that underlie ecocriticism is anthropocentrism, which is defined as the idea that people occupy the highest position in the hierarchy of existence and that the natural world was created specifically for humans to use it. In anthropocentric thinking, nature is supposed to be dominated by man because he is believed to be better than other living things. This philosophy has been widely condemned by ecocritics who have found various faults in the theory, including the disconnection of man from nature and ignoring ecological dependencies. The main alternative to anthropocentrism is ecocentrism, which implies a view on humanity as an inseparable component of the complex ecological system, rather than the system itself. Ecocentrists assume that all organisms possess intrinsic value, while nature should be perceived as valuable regardless of its importance to humans.

Another critical idea within this paradigm is that of environmental justice since it connects the damage to the environment to social oppression, colonized violence, and institutions. According to this idea, the negative impact of the environmental degradation does not impact different people equally but instead hits the poorest and most disenfranchised the hardest. This idea becomes especially important within the context of Nixon's slow violence paradigm, which posits that environmental degradation can go unnoticed since it occurs slowly through time and impacts the disenfranchised populations. Thus, environmental justice extends ecocriticism beyond its focus on nature representation into questions of ethical responsibility. Within literary studies, the critic can explore how the suffering in the environment relates to histories of displacement and migration.

Ecofeminism further emphasizes this theoretical framework by exploring the linkages between domination in nature and oppression of women and other minority groups. As described by scholars including Val Plumwood (1993) and Vandana Shiva (1988), the patriarchy divides the world into categories like man/woman, culture/nature, and reason/emotion, in which the first of each pairing is ranked higher than the second. The hierarchies not only enable ecological exploitation but also serve as the foundation for social discrimination. Ecofeminism rejects these hierarchical notions and advocates for caring ethics, interconnectedness, compassion, and co-existence. Environmental criticism should consider not only issues of ecology but also gender, race, class, and colonialism. Ecofeminist approaches allow literary critics to understand how vulnerability, nurturing, displacement, and affection for nature contribute to ecological critique. The notion of non-human agency is equally important for the development of ecocriticism because this theory aims to transcend human-centered criticism and acknowledge the existence of the agency of animals, plants, landscapes, and other natural phenomena. In general, the notion of non-human agency implies that nature is not silent and passive, but rather dynamic and able to exert its influence on humans. In other words, a storm, a river, a cactus, and any other element of nature can be treated as agents, not as background elements in literature. This notion implies the departure from the belief that meanings can exist only within human consciousness. Instead, ecocriticism acknowledges that ecological systems also play an active role in meaning creation. Connected with this issue is the notion of place and space, implying the analysis of the cultural, historical, political, and other construction of places. In particular, place can be seen as memory, identity, belonging, migration, and power in relation to the landscape under consideration.

These concepts can be applied directly to the poems chosen for discussion in this study as all of them redefine the interactions of people and nature that exceed the boundaries of the anthropocentric view of the world. For instance, in her poem EAT, Joy Harjo views nature as an ecosystem where everyone, including nonhuman actors, plays an equal part – a clear representation of ecocentrism and agency of nonhumans. Camille T. Dungy's *Remembering a*

Honeymoon Hike... is a great example of how place is intertwined with memory and ecological continuity. In his poem, *If Fire*, Jake Skeets reveals the issues of environmental justice in terms of the problems of drought and scarcity that characterize the fragile ecosystems of our planet. In this poem, Nixon's idea of "slow violence" is evident too. In his *To a Blossoming Saguaro*, Eduardo C. Corral brings together the issues of environmental justice and ecofeminism through connections with nature, institutional discrimination, migration and belonging. The poem *Heliophilia* by Aimee Nezhukumatathil presents human desire and ecological existence as one and the same thing.

Methodology

The methodology used in this study is qualitative in nature due to the fact that the main objective of the study is to analyze the meanings, themes, and representations within the literary pieces under consideration. Qualitative research is well-suited to the study of literature since it enables the researcher to explore the linguistic elements, symbolic representation, imagery, and thematic structures thoroughly. As the current research explores the representation of nature, environmental justice, ecofeminism, and nonhuman agency in contemporary poems, a qualitative design would be more appropriate for such an exploratory research problem.

The most important method of research used in this paper is the textual analysis which involves the close reading of chosen poems. The importance of the textual analysis in the literary research consists in its ability to allow the researcher to investigate the use of literary language to create meanings by means of such literary devices as diction, imagery, metaphor, symbolism, tone, and structure. It is vital that in order to go beyond the mere reading of the meaning created in the text it is vital to perform textual analysis that can help detect ideological, cultural, and ecological implications of the literary text.

The sampling approach adopted for the research entails purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is justified as texts selected are selected purposefully according to their relevance to the research questions as opposed to random samples. The selected texts include five poems from America; the texts under consideration are *EAT* by Joy Harjo, *Remembering a Honeymoon Hike near Drakes Bay, California, while I cook our dinner at the feet of Colorado's Front Range* by Camille T. Dungy, *If Fire* by Jake Skeets, *To a Blossoming Saguaro* by Eduardo C. Corral, and *Heliophilia* by Aimee Nezhukumatathil. The choice of texts is informed by the texts' themes which are reflective of ecological issues including human-nature interactions, environmental justice, space and place, ecofeminism, and non-human agency.

Sources of data will include both primary and secondary sources. Primary data refer to the poems that have been selected for analysis in this study. The poems themselves form the primary literary data on which ecological analysis is performed. Secondary data sources will be books, articles from journals, scholarly essays, and other critical writings on ecocriticism, ecofeminism, environmental justice, and the poets who have been chosen. Some fundamental theoretical books written by authors like Cheryll Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell, Rob Nixon, Kate Soper, Val Plumwood, and Vandana Shiva will help create the theoretical base for the current research.

The method used for analyzing the selected poems is through close reading from an ecocritical perspective. In the first step, the poems are closely read in order to uncover repeated ecological ideas, images, metaphors, symbols, and motifs. In the second step, evidence from the text is chosen for each poem and classified into major themes in ecocriticism such as nature as a focal point; human-nature interactions; environmental justice; place and space; non-human perspective; and ecofeminism. The third step involves interpreting the text elements through theories from ecocriticism including anthropocentrism, ecocentrism, environmental justice,

ecofeminism, and non-human agency. Finally, the analysis of the five poems will be compared to see how an overall ecological vision emerges.

This methodology is applicable to the research since ecocritical literary studies involve the interpretation of literary works, rather than quantification. The qualitative study coupled with textual analysis will enable the researcher to understand the underlying poetic nuances that would have been impossible to determine quantitatively. Purposeful sampling is useful in ensuring that only texts related to the subject of analysis are included. The method of close reading will facilitate analysis of the ecological consciousness portrayed in poems. Since the study will be concerned with issues of representation, meaning, and ideology, the use of the above method will guarantee reliability and validity.

Analysis:

Ecocriticism: Theoretical Background

The term Ecocriticism was used for the first time in 1978 by William Rickert in "Literature and Ecology". It became a necessity as a reaction to the environmental crisis that was becoming increasingly evident in the latter part of the twentieth century. As explained by Cheryl Glotfelty, "Ecocriticism is 'the study of the relationship between literature and nature,' focusing on what literary works write about nature but also—and more importantly—on how they write it." This was further expounded upon by Lawrence Buell, who stated that "any environmentally oriented text should put the non-human environment center stage." Rob Nixon says environmental damage is gradual, invisible, and long-term. Kate Soper says that the environmental crisis is linked to consumption patterns and how we can consume nature.

At its core, ecocriticism challenges anthropocentrism, the belief that humans are the central or most important beings, and instead promotes an ecocentric worldview, where humans are understood as part of a larger ecological network. It also intersects with other critical frameworks, particularly environmental justice and ecofeminism, recognizing that environmental degradation is often linked to systems of power, inequality, and marginalization. Within this framework, the selected five poems. *EAT* by Joy Harjo; *Remembering a honeymoon hike near Drakes Bay, California, while I cook our dinner at the feet of Colorado's Front Range (Remembering a honeymoon hike...)* by Camille T. Dungy; *If Fire* by Jake Skeets; *To a Blossoming Saguaro* by Eduardo C. Corral. *Heliophilia* (love for sunlight or strong attraction to sunlight) by Aimee Nezhukumatathil collectively offers a rich site for examining how modern poetry reimagines the relationship between humans and the natural world, and the impact of the natural world on human beings, and the same as human beings on nature.

1. Nature as a Central Focus

In all five selected poems, nature is not merely descriptive but structural and generative of meaning. In *EAT*, Harjo presents nature as a self-regulating system of consumption, where "*Grasshoppers devoured the sunflowers,*" and the metaphor "*The night is swallowing / Daylight*" depicts a world governed by continuous transformation. Where time and existence are governed by natural patterns rather than human control. The absence of a human-centered description reinforces the idea that nature operates independently of human perception or control. Similarly, in the poem *Remembering a honeymoon hike...* transforms nature into an emotional and existential center, where the recurring image of "*sunflowers keep coming back, year after year after year*" reflects temporal continuity, renewal, and show us that nature provides a framework through which human relationships gain meaning and stability, it shows how a shared moment from the past has grown to something lasting and live like love and memories that return and survive with time. In contrast, Skeets' *If Fire* highlights nature through uncertainty and danger, where "*a sleeper fire... flame crawl*" evokes the hidden destructive force embedded

within the landscape. Nature is no longer a nurturing entity, but an unpredictable and fluctuating one. As in *“To a Blossoming Saguaro,”* the cactus is made into a central object with its history and ecology highlighted in the line *“You have kin in Mexico.”* On the other hand, *Heliophilia* by Nezhukumatathil raises the sun as the source of life for all living things, where the need to be *“under the sun all day”* indicates the basic ecological requirement common among species. Thus, nature does not just exist in these poems; it becomes the central actor that structures reality through displacing humanity from the center.

NATURE AS A CENTRAL FOCUS

In these five poems, nature is not merely descriptive—it is structural, generative, and the primary agent that organizes experience, time, and meaning.

<p>1</p> <p>EAT by Joy Harjo</p>  <p><i>“Grasshoppers devoured the sunflowers.” “The night is swallowing Daylight.”</i></p> <p>Nature is a self-regulating system of consumption and transformation. Time and existence follow natural cycles, not human control. Nature operates independently of human perception or control.</p>  <p>NATURE AS A SELF-REGULATING SYSTEM Cyclical, continuous, and self-governing.</p>	<p>2</p> <p>REMEMBERING A HONEYMOON HIKE... by Jimmy Santiago Baca</p>  <p><i>“sunflowers keep coming back, year after year after year.”</i></p> <p>Nature becomes an emotional and existential center. The returning sunflowers reflect temporal continuity, renewal, and how love and memories grow and survive with time.</p>  <p>NATURE AS AN EMOTIONAL & EXISTENTIAL ANCHOR Continuity, renewal, and enduring relationships.</p>	<p>3</p> <p>IF FIRE by Lee Maracle (Skeets)</p>  <p><i>“a sleeper fire... flame crawl.”</i></p> <p>Nature is marked by uncertainty and danger. Hidden destructive forces exist within the landscape. Nature is not always nurturing; it is unstable and changeable.</p>  <p>NATURE AS UNCERTAIN & DANGEROUS Unpredictable, hidden, and powerful.</p>	<p>4</p> <p>TO A BLOSSOMING SAGUARO by Ofelia Zepeda</p>  <p><i>“You have kin in Mexico.”</i></p> <p>The saguaro is a central subject with historical and ecological depth. It connects plant life to stories of migration, belonging, kinship, and place. Nature holds memory and identity.</p>  <p>NATURE AS HISTORICAL & ECOLOGICAL BEING Rooted in ancestry, place, and collective history.</p>	<p>5</p> <p>HELIOPHILIA by Ada Limón</p>  <p><i>“under the sun all day.”</i></p> <p>The sun is a universal life force. The desire to remain under the sun reflects a primary ecological dependence shared across species. Nature sustains all life.</p>  <p>NATURE AS UNIVERSAL LIFE FORCE Sustaining, life-giving, and universally dependable.</p>
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THE CENTRAL TRUTH

Across these poems, nature is not simply present; it is the primary agent that organizes experience, time, and meaning—beyond human control.

HOW NATURE SHAPES MEANING IN THESE POEMS

 <p>Structures time and transformation through natural cycles.</p>	 <p>Gives emotion, memory, and relationships depth and meaning.</p>	 <p>Holds both life-giving and destructive forces.</p>	 <p>Connects us to history, ancestors, kinship, and place.</p>	 <p>Unites all living beings in shared dependence.</p>
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NATURE IS THE AGENT. HUMANITY IS PART OF THE WHOLE.
These poems remind us that we do not stand above nature—we live within it, shaped by it, and sustained by it.



Human–Nature Relationship

Overall, the poems do not accept the dichotomy of separating humans from nature; instead, a range of relationships are presented starting from harmonious co-existence up to dominion over nature.

For example, in *EAT*, *“We sit down to eat,”* which refers to earlier instances of animal consumption. Thus, it shows that humans are involved in the same biological cycle of life, thus removing the division between species. After everything that has happened to nature in the form of devastation caused by animals (mice, insects, frogs), the act of sitting down to eat represents

something natural. Humans take part in ecological phenomena, instead of watching nature passively. In *Remembering a honeymoon hike...*, it even goes one step further, when the author says "I am inside such a cloud", meaning that human identity disappears in nature. However, in *If Fire*, the relationship is rather vague and unclear. The idea conveyed through the imagery of "all tinder is white space" is that there is a constant insecurity of the land and life itself because people depend on unstable natural surroundings for their survival. In the poem entitled "To a Blossoming Saguaro," which describes violence, one gets to know that "Shooting you is called 'cactus plugging'", signifying the attitude towards ruling over and exploiting nature. Such a theme gets intensified even more in another poem about ecology entitled "Wasteland: on the California Wildfires" written by Forrest Gander. The distinction between man and nature vanishes as the wildfire takes up the speaking part: "So I came for you, churning, turning / the present into purgatory." Man does not seem to be a separate entity anymore; he has become entangled in the vicious cycle along with nature. Instead, *Heliophilia* transforms this relationship into one that is about shared instincts and wants because "I burn for the sun," equating human longing with nature's operations. The many representations of the relationship between humans and nature presented throughout the film serve to dispel the fallacy of the superiority of humankind.

The Spectrum of Connection: Humans and the Natural World



Environmental Justice

Ecocriticism in these poems not only involves environmental depiction but also encompasses matters of power dynamics, social inequality, and historical accountability.

In *EAT*, the concept of ecological imbalance is presented in terms of intrusion of animals into human territory: "Field mice... into the house." Ecological disturbance brings about erosion of boundary barriers between different creatures, leading to consequences being shared among all concerned beings. There is no place left untouched in the context of ecological imbalance.

In *Remembering a honeymoon hike...*, a historical point at which intrusion takes place is depicted in terms of "until thinned fog let ships in." Here, ecological balance is destroyed when human beings break down natural barriers and commence exploitation of ecological spaces.

In *If Fire*, the statement "very little water" represents the climate crisis as well as environmental shortages brought about by the mismanagement of ecological resources.

“You have more rights than the undocumented” is an excellent criticism of institutional discrimination because environmental laws that protect plants from exploitation stand in direct opposition to the disenfranchisement of humans. Thus, the poem becomes a perfect illustration of environmental justice, even though *Heliophila* does not seem to be overtly political. Yet, it does touch upon the topic of environmental justice in a much more subtle way. “Look / at flowers, butterflies, seals lounging on a rock” brings into focus the common ecological space of many different living creatures who rely on the same natural sources and are exposed to the same environmental factors, such as sunshine. On the other hand, one’s ability to look is a luxury of privilege enjoyed by human beings who do not need to struggle for their survival like other animals that share the same environment.

Moreover, “just before the first fall of snow” is indicative of a transitional and vulnerable period, thereby demonstrating the fragile and ephemeral nature of these experiences within ecology. The temporality aspect of this discussion hints at the environmental justice issue because such climatic changes pose serious problems for species.

Environmental justice in the context of these poems shows that the topic of ecology cannot be discussed in isolation from colonialism, power politics, and social inequalities.



Place and Space

In these poems, place and space are depicted as fluid and changeable rather than fixed or strictly human-centric. In *EAT* by Joy Harjo, the idea of domestic space is disrupted by “*Field mice chewed their way/Into the house*” thus bringing natural space into the domestic one, turning human spaces into places where natural elements are not subordinated but rather change them.

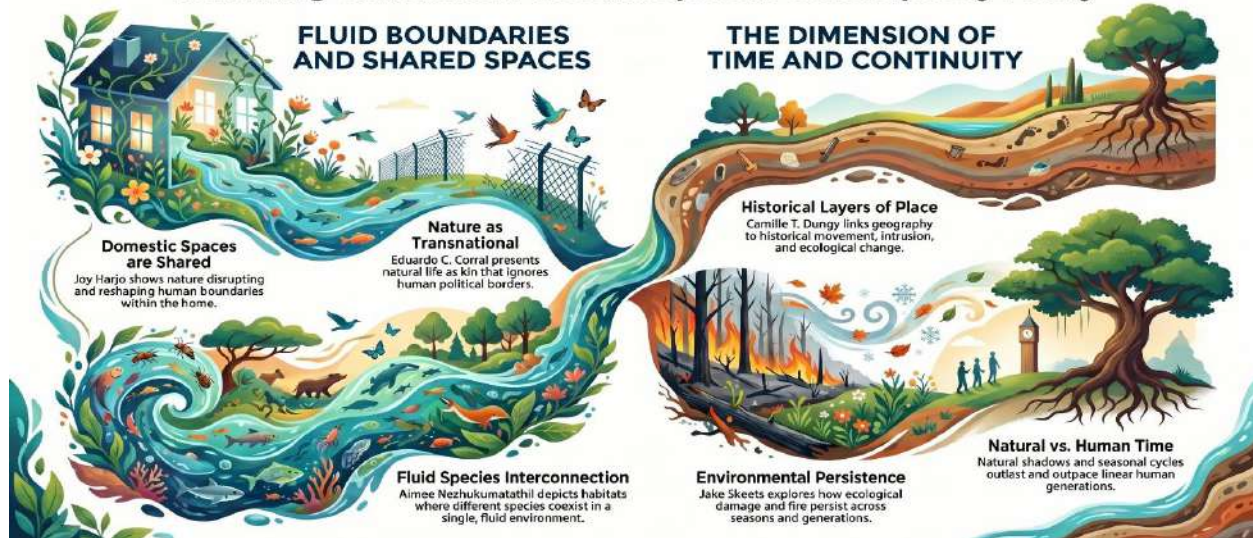
The poem by Camille T. Dungy represents the notion of place in its geographical sense and also the experience of it, going from “*that stretch of coast*” to *Colorado’s Front Range*”, where landscape is imbued with personal feelings and memories. “*Ship after ship/after European ship sailed past*” provides the reader with historical context of place formation through movement and invasion.

Environmental vulnerability is highlighted in *If Fire* by Jake Skeets through the description of “*very little water*” and the “*Rio Grande*.” This shows that the environmental degradation is not limited to only a single moment but persists across a longer period, indicated by the phrase “*sleeper fire holdover from last season’s wilds*.”

The transnational aspect of the environment is shown in Eduardo C. Corral’s *To a Blossoming Saguaro* through the statement “*You have kin in Mexico*,” breaking down political boundaries

and demonstrating the universality of nature. Time can be seen in its endurance aspect in *"Your shadow will outlive my father,"* where nature lives on after people pass away. Aimee Nezhukumatathil's *Heliophilia* features a fluid sense of space in terms of movement from *"dark gardens"* to *"copse of trees"* and interconnection between species in their environment. The cyclic pattern of time can be seen in *"just before the first fall of snow,"* showing the regularity and repetition of natural events.

Redefining Boundaries: Place and Space in Contemporary Poetry



Non-human Perspectives

Ecocriticism seeks to transcend anthropocentric interpretations to realize that nonhuman forms have their own presence, voice, and meaning. In all these five poems, animals, plants, and nature elements do not appear merely as passive entities but as active beings.

In the poem *EAT* by Joy Harjo, non-human existence is highlighted through phrases like *"We found a snake hidden on the porch"* and *"there were rumors in the yard / Of fat mice frolicking here."* The latter indicates that the non-human animals have their own way of existing within space without being seen. Through the term *"rumors,"* there is a suggestion that humans do not have comprehensive knowledge of nature, but other forms of life continue to operate irrespective of what humans know.

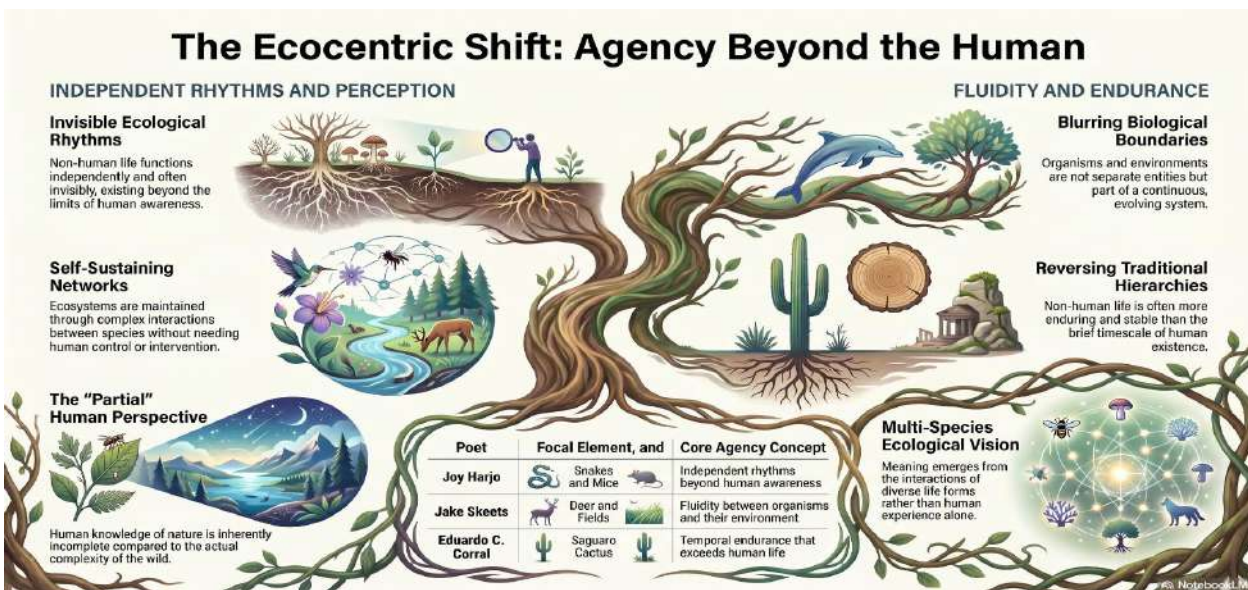
Moreover, in *"Remembering a Honeymoon Hike..."* non-human point of view is achieved via an abundance of vegetation and insects, such as *"coast buckwheat, and the fiery skipper / and gossamer-winged butterflies."* The creatures are shown as belonging to an ecosystemic community and not just decorative images. This brings into consideration the complexity of ecosystems as being created via complex interactions between non-humans, regardless of human interference.

Likewise, in Jake Skeets' poem, *If Fire*, the concept of the non-human perspective shifts into something much more dynamic and transformative. Phrases like *"deer soften / into field field field"* and *"rodent nests / overgrown undergrowth"* dissolve the line that separates the living being from its environment. The implication here is that the natural world does not consist of individual units at all, but is rather an ongoing and dynamic whole.

In the poem *"To a Blossoming Saguaro,"* written by Eduardo C. Corral, the existence of non-human entities is imbued with temporality and existential significance. The line, *"Your shadow will outlive my father,"* suggests that the entity has a lifespan longer than that of humans, thus shifting the locus of permanency from the human to the non-human realm. This implies that the non-human entities have a longer span of existence, making them witnesses to history.

In the poem *"Heliophilia"* by Aimee Nezhukumatathil, the perspective of a non-human entity is conveyed through the delicate observations of ecology, especially as seen in *"bees bestow on fallen leaves... just before / they crawl into a honey-hungry sleep."* This particular verse underscores the silent yet cyclical nature of non-human life and conveys how even the tiniest organisms are involved in whole ecological systems.

These poems form a multi-species ecological narrative where meaning does not arise solely from human experience, but rather through the dynamic interactions between different species of life and their environment. Through their depiction of non-human beings as dynamic, persistent, and interconnected, the poems subvert the anthropocentric worldview and inspire a paradigmatic transition to an ecocentric way of being, in which humans are simply one component of a dynamic ecological system.



Ecofeminism

The field of ecofeminism investigates how the exploitation of nature is related to the oppression of vulnerable individuals and highlights the importance of principles like caring, interdependence, and opposition to domination. In these five poems, ecofeminism is seen indirectly, especially when looking at the vulnerability, care, self, and relation in them.

In EAT, one can notice the cycle and consumption in nature. *"Squash blossoms of small suns blessed/ By dew drops flared beauty in the morning"* describes an example of something beautiful that has passed its prime. It is immediately followed by the destruction of nature in other parts of the poem. This shows the belief of ecofeminism that nature is sustained by delicate and interdependent systems that may fail at any moment.

Ecofeminism in *Remembering a Honeymoon Hike...* manifests itself in the form of intimacy and caring. The phrase *"That, dear heart, is it. It is the softness I need"* brings attention to softness as an important concept, while questioning the ideology that associates strength with power and domination. In such way, the concepts of love and nature in the poem are considered in relation to caring and dependency, which are integral to ecofeminism.

The concerns about ecofeminism become obvious in *If Fire* via images of vulnerability and exposure: *"all tinder is white space"*. Such image creates the picture of a vulnerable environment easily to be consumed. Thus, the concept of *tinder* as a part of the world demonstrates how ecofeminists understand exploitation of both natural resources and oppressed people, who can be seen in this context as the same objects of manipulation.

Ecofeminism gains its political and intersectional nature in the poem *“To a Blossoming Saguaro.”* The statement, *“My mother is my favorite immigrant,”* associates a woman’s role as a mother with being an immigrant. Previously, there were references about the cactus, which is a representation of nature. Nature is subjected to the same regulations and rules as the immigrants. Ecofeminist theory deals with the issue of domination of nature.

Ecofeminist philosophy is communicated within the poem *Heliophilia* by means of restoring the feeling and sensuality of relationship with nature. The phrase *“Don’t call it an affliction— / call it affection”* opposes the notion that desire and affection are somehow aberrant and instead encourages their natural occurrence. This is due to the fact that ecofeminist theory is a critique of hierarchy that divides reason from emotion, culture from nature, and so forth.

The concept of ecofeminism is also portrayed in a different poem titled *“Ecofeminism”* by Vandana Vikashni Nath, through the line *“They once believed that Earth and women are entwined,”* which further highlights the inseparable connection between woman and nature. Using the word *“once believed”* denotes that the connection has been disrupted in the past by certain systems of domination that separate nature from woman and vice versa.

All the poems above taken together show how ecofeminism does not necessarily rely on overtly political messages but is actually embedded within the depiction of care, vulnerability, dependence, and resistance to domination. By connecting ecological phenomena with emotions and other gendered and social aspects of life, the poems present an argument against any exploitative system that takes advantage of nature and subordinated people in society.

ECOFEMINISM

CARE • INTERDEPENDENCE • RESISTANCE

Ecofeminism explores the connection between the exploitation of nature and the marginalization of vulnerable groups, while emphasizing values such as care, interdependence, and resistance to domination. Across these five poems, ecofeminist concerns emerge not always directly, but through images of vulnerability, caring, identity, and relational existence.

				
<p>1 EAT by Joy Harjo</p>  <p><i>“Squash blossoms of small suns blessed / By dew drops flared beauty in the morning.”</i></p> <p>The moment of fading beauty, immediately surrounded by destruction, reflects the ecofeminist idea that life is sustained through fragile, interconnected processes that are constantly at risk. The emphasis on vulnerability and renewal critiques systems that interrupt natural balance.</p> <p>KEY THEME: Vulnerability, renewal, fragile cycles, and the threat of disruption.</p>	<p>2 REMEMBERING A HONEYMOON HIKE... by Jimmy Santiago Baca</p>  <p><i>“That, dear heart, is it. It is the softness I need.”</i></p> <p>Softness is foregrounded as a value, challenging ideologies that equate strength with control and domination. Love and nature are framed through nurturing, acceptance, and mutual dependence—core principles of ecofeminist thought.</p> <p>KEY THEME: Care, softness, love, nurturing, and mutual dependence.</p>	<p>3 IF FIRE by Lee Maracle (Skeets)</p>  <p><i>“all tinder is white space.”</i></p> <p>A landscape easily consumed and unprotected. The world reduced to “tinder” critiques how both land and marginalized bodies are treated as resources to be used and destroyed. Highlighting shared vulnerability under systems of exploitation.</p> <p>KEY THEME: Vulnerability, exposure, exploitation, and destructive systems.</p>	<p>4 TO A BLOSSOMING SAGUARO by Ofelia Zepeda</p>  <p><i>“My mother is my favorite immigrant.”</i></p> <p>Maternal identity is linked to displacement and belonging. Nature (the cactus) is situated within systems of regulation and control, showing how both land and marginalized people are subject to structures that determine value, access, and survival.</p> <p>KEY THEME: Identity, migration, intersectionality, and systems of control.</p>	<p>5 HELIOPHILIA by Ada Limón</p>  <p><i>“Don’t call it an affliction— call it affection.”</i></p> <p>Resists labeling connection and desire as abnormal. Affirms emotional and bodily connection to nature as natural and valid, challenging hierarchies that separate reason from emotion and culture from nature.</p> <p>KEY THEME: Connection, healing, affection, and holistic relationality.</p>

BEYOND THESE POEMS:

“ECOFEMINISM”
by Vandana Vikashni Nath

“They once believed that Earth and women are entwined.”



The phrase “once believed” suggests that this intrinsic connection has been historically disrupted.


Points to systems of domination that separate and devalue both Earth and women.

Calls for a restoration of balance, mutual care, and respect.

ECOFEMINISM IS:

- ☑ The connection between the exploitation of nature and the marginalization of vulnerable groups.
- ☑ A commitment to care, interdependence, and resistance to domination.
- ☑ A vision of the world grounded in connection, empathy, and coexistence.

TAKEN TOGETHER, THESE POEMS REVEAL THAT ECOFEMINISM IS EMBEDDED IN:

 CARE Nurturing, softness, acceptance, and love as forms of strength.	 VULNERABILITY Recognizing fragility in nature and in marginalized lives.	 INTERDEPENDENCE All life is connected—people, land, and other species.	 RESISTANCE Challenging systems that exploit, control, and dominate.	 RELATIONAL EXISTENCE Living in connection with the Earth and each other.
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By linking ecological processes with emotional, social, and gendered experiences, these poems collectively challenge systems that exploit both nature and marginalized identities and instead promote a vision of the world grounded in connection, empathy, and coexistence.

Conclusion

From the selected poems, nature comes out as a dynamic agent and force within which humans experience themselves within its various layers including ecological, historical, and even emotional ones. The poem *EAT*, by Joy Harjo, captures nature as an ever-repeating process where both human and non-human forms experience their existence in terms of their continuous struggle for survival and transformation, thus exposing the dynamism of the existing boundaries between species and space. Dungy's poem captures the interaction between place, memory, and history by interconnecting the personal experiences to landscapes affected by motion, coloniality, and ecological dynamics. Jake Skeets' *If Fire* depicts nature as fragile and unpredictable with elements of scarcity, fire, and instability, depicting the current ecological crisis that humans face in their continuous fight against ecological damages. *To a Blossoming Saguaro* by Eduardo C. Corral captures the interaction between humans, nature, and ecological justice beyond national borders and generations. Human migration, identity, ecological justice, power, and sustainability have been captured to depict long-term ecological stability beyond human existence. From Aimee Nezhukumatathil's *Heliophilia*, a dynamic experience of nature has been depicted by capturing human longing, seasonality, and ecological synchronization. In all of the five poems, the interconnectedness of human and non-human life is portrayed as part of the same ecosystem rather than being separate entities hierarchically separated from each other. The non-human figures portrayed are invariably characterized as agents of action, continuity, and significance as part of these ecosystems, with the motifs of care, vulnerability, and mutual interdependence reflecting the eco-feminist concerns. On the whole, the poems create an overall impression of going beyond anthropocentric perceptions to achieve a multifaceted depiction of nature as an interconnected entity.

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