

Wastelands, Shrubs and Parks: Ecocriticism and the Challenge of the Urban

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ABSTRACT Despite its development in recent years, ecocriticism has yet to meet the challenge of urban nature. This article presents an interdisciplinary ecocriticism that draws on urban studies to enable the study of urban nature in Jon McGregor's *Even the Dogs* (2010) and *Edgeland*s (2011) by Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts. Significantly, it foregrounds the negative aesthetics of nature that, although an important part of contemporary nature experiences, have remained unexplored in both ecocriticism and urban studies. As such, the approach not only allows for a fuller exploration of twenty-first-century human-nature relations, but also exposes the privileged perspective of much ecocriticism.

I never wanted to live in Cincinnati, Ohio. What wilderness lover would ever dream of settling deep in the Rust Belt astride polluted rivers? One might long for places like Bozeman or Spokane, hard by Yellowstone or the Bitterroots, but certainly not Cincinnati, a town known less for forests or lakes than for jet engines, floating soap, and indigestible chili.

– John Tallmadge. *The Cincinnati Arch.* 3.

Most scholars in the field will agree that ecocriticism has long broadened beyond its original concern with wilderness and non-fiction nature writing to incorporate a wider variety of environments and texts. This second-wave ecocriticism, as Lawrence Buell holds, has also “taken the movement in a more sociocentric direction” (*Future* 138). Indeed, the past decade and a half has seen a diversifying of ecocritical subject matter, from environmental justice to postcolonial environments, from ecophobia to, most recently, garbage and waste.¹ Yet despite this diversification, ecocritics—with a few

1. See Simon Estok's discussion of ecophobia in “Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness”; the summer 2013 issue of *ISLE* includes a special cluster on waste and garbage.

exceptions—have yet to productively engage with urbanized environments. This article will explore ecocriticism’s problems with the city and tease apart the numerous issues underlying it, before suggesting that an interdisciplinary engagement with urban studies can enable the field to meet the challenge of the urban. Particularly, I will focus on ways in which this approach foregrounds not only the positive but also the negative experiences of nature that tend to be avoided in ecocriticism and urban studies. In the final section, I will illustrate this extended ecocriticism through a short reading of two recent texts concerned with non-traditional landscapes: Jon McGregor’s novel *Even the Dogs* (2010) and *Edgelands* (2011), a non-fictional account of England’s ‘true wildernesses’ by Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts.

Urban Ecocriticism?

The “social ecocriticism” proposed by Michael Bennett is one of the most notable exceptions to ecocriticism’s general neglect of cities. Social ecocriticism, Bennett suggests, “makes room for the urban, suburban, small-town, rural, and wild spaces that fill the physical and cultural landscape of the United States, West and East, and its literature” (41). It does so by drawing on social ecology to incorporate a focus on social, political and economic developments in the study of landscapes and natural environments. Consequently, it might enable the ecocritical analysis of urban environments, and emphasize how nature in these spaces is shaped by, and shapes, socio-political and economic issues.²

However, Bennett’s call for social ecocriticism has not received much following among ecocritics. In fact, it seems to have been wholly absorbed by the environmental justice movement, which forms a significant part of second-wave ecocriticism.³ The majority of ecocritical explorations of the city tend to take this environmental justice perspective, usually in relation to pollution and environmental and human health, but also to foreground the connections between race and environment—particularly environmental racism—whether urban or rural. An example of the latter is the work of June Dwyer, who has identified how “[t]he presence of ethnic outsiders in urban and suburban landscapes helps both to recuperate ecological strata

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2. See also the collection *The Nature of Cities* edited by Bennett and David W. Teague (1999).

3. In fact, Bennett draws the connection between social ecocriticism and environmental justice himself, as the latter movement is similarly concerned with the relationship between socio-political and economic issues and environmental issues, “to include the homes of inner-city people of color and their inhabitants whose lives are threatened by the result of ‘environmental racism’” (38).

from the past that have been appropriated or ignored, and it also serves to broaden possibilities for future change” (166). Instead of emphasizing the ways in which (ethnic) minorities are negatively affected by environmental issues, she highlights the positive role that ethnicity plays in “gentrifying the ghetto and spicing up the suburbs,” which leads to social, economic, spiritual as well as environmental benefits. For instance, she explores how “cultural assertion on the part of ethnic homeowners brings both innovation and vitality to their adopted neighborhoods” (166), from which both the homeowners themselves and the community at large benefit.

In addition to social ecocriticism’s intersection with and absorption into the environmental justice movement, several other reasons can be distinguished why so few ecocritics have explored urban environments. A significant aspect is ecocritics’ own geographies: as Bennett notes, in the United States, where the field originated, most ecocritics tend to be based in the West and/or rural areas. The biggest scholarly centres of ecocriticism are at the University of Idaho, the University of Nevada, Reno, and the University of Oregon. Similarly, journals that publish ecocritical work are also situated in the West or rural areas, including ASLE’s flagship journal *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* (University of Nevada, Reno; now University of Idaho). Although more densely populated than the US, ecocritics in Europe similarly tend to work away from metropolitan centres; in the United Kingdom, for instance, the largest group of ecocritics is based on the rural campus of Bath Spa University. Hence, as Bennett suggests, “[t]he cultural geography of ecocritics is not unrelated to the terrain that they study” (38).

Many ecocritical works also express a bias towards urban nature: implicitly, by avoiding the possibilities of urban nature completely, or explicitly by questioning the existence of urban nature. John Tallmadge’s assertion that the city represents “absence” (111) is an apt example of the latter. Similarly, while discussing urban landscapes, Buell expresses prevalent ecocritical views when he notes that “we are starting to see the beginning of incorporation of urban *and other severely altered, damaged landscapes*—‘brownfields’ as well as greenfields—into ecocriticism’s accounts of placeness and place-attachment” (88, emphasis added). Rather than suggesting that these spaces might lead to human-nature connection and reconnection, he prevents productive engagement by presenting urban nature as a damaged form of ‘real’ nature. Buell furthermore notes that the supposed fragmentation of urban nature prevents or foreshortens ecocritical engagement. Urban nature writing, he argues, tends to focus on the small bits and pieces of nature found in the city: “short takes and small

grains at micro-level [...] ventured against the background of enclosure: a particular social or spatial vantage point considerably more foreshortened than the ‘whole city’” (88). Although Buell does not explicitly dismiss this type of writing as not worth ecocritical attention, he nonetheless implies that urban nature represents a ‘lesser’ kind of nature that cannot match the expansiveness and sublime experiences of wilderness, instead of acknowledging the unique merits of urban nature. In fact, peculiarly, rather than describing the natural spaces in cities, Buell seeks a sense of holism and interconnectedness by focusing on the ways in which cities provide interconnection of people and spaces. By doing so, he patches up the supposed fragmentation of urban nature, yet at the same time takes the focus from nature (*Writing* 84–128). Not only this ecocritical ambiguity requires the field to come to terms more productively with the urban environment: as over 50% of the global population lives in urban environments, and more than 165,000 people move to cities every day, there is a growing need for an ecocriticism more attuned to contemporary natural landscapes, particularly if it wants to keep its relevance.

Urban studies has over the past decades developed discourses to analyze urban spaces, including urban nature. As such, it offers suggestions for a reconceptualization of ecocriticism’s relationship with the city. The interdisciplinary approach that results from extending ecocriticism through urban studies consequently enables a more productive and open engagement with urban spaces that is particularly pertinent in light of contemporary environmental challenges.

Urban Studies and the Possibilities of Urban Natures

Urban studies is an interdisciplinary field that draws on sociology, psychology and history, as well as urban and green planning and urban ecology, to study the formation and development of cities. In its emphasis on the social and political processes influencing nature, urban studies has some similarities to environmental justice, although scholars such as Erik Swyngedouw insist that the latter is not radical enough, and often fails to grasp how social, political and economic power relations “are integral to the functioning of a capitalist political-economic system” (Heynen, Kaika and Swyngedouw 9). Furthermore, whereas environmental justice scholarship tends to focus on the negative effects of urbanization, such as pollution, urban studies research particularly emphasizes—perhaps too much, as I will suggest below—the positive dimensions of urban life. Most importantly in the context of this article, that perspective breaks down the traditionally antithetical relationship between nature and cities. Cities,

Anne Spirn suggests, do not obliterate nature but “transform it, producing a characteristically urban natural environment” (42). Or, as Nik Heynen, Maria Kaika and Erik Swyngedouw argue, “[t]he production of the city through socio-environmental changes results in the continuous *production of new urban ‘natures’*, of new urban, social and physical environmental processes” (4, emphasis added). Extending ecocriticism through urban studies hence results in a reparative perspective, which, instead of focusing on the incongruity of the city and nature, embraces conflict and is open to the possibilities that non-traditional natural environments offer human-nature connection and reconnection.⁴

Urban studies also offers insights that provide a corrective to ecocriticism’s bias towards non-traditional nature. In a foundational study on the social significance of urban green spaces, Jacquelin Burgess et al. note the importance of these areas to city dwellers and suggest a number of distinct characteristics that make urban nature valuable as *urban* nature, not as an echo, or remnant, of traditional or unspoilt nature, as many ecocritics believe. Whereas Buell and Tallmadge emphasize fragmentation and absence as the primary features of urban nature, Burgess et al. reveal a more positive relationship between city and nature: “open spaces are seen and experienced holistically, as embedded in the built environment rather than isolated from it” (459). This kind of urban studies research specifically shows that so-called “unofficial green areas”—such as the greenery separating sidewalks from roads—are more valued than “official green areas,” such as parks and gardens (460).⁵ Moreover, the subjects in the Burgess et al. study are committed urbanites who have no desire to leave the city for the countryside. Instead, they treasure urban nature as spaces that bring together the best of both worlds, human and nonhuman: “[t]he *public* open spaces are valued precisely because they have the potential to enhance those positive qualities of urban life: variety of opportunities and physical settings; sociability and cultural diversity” (471, emphasis in original). To put it differently, urban green areas are valued precisely for being *urban* nature, not as signs of the absence of ‘real’ nature. The value of urban nature as a distinct, unique space different from traditional nature, is

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4. I take the term “reparative” from Ann Cvetkovich, who, inspired by the work of Lora Romero, describes the reparative perspective as “[embracing] conflict rather than separating out right from wrong, whether generational, racial, sexual, or theoretical” (11). She describes such a perspective as being more “open-ended and flexible” (19).
 5. Research such as this supports Scott Hess’ plea for an “everyday nature”; an awareness and definition of nature that includes social, cultural and economic aspects. However, he has not developed the ways in which such a perspective could be achieved.

also emphasized in more recent work in the field.⁶ A Dutch study conducted by Dmitri Karmanov and Ronald Hamel, for instance, shows that the restorative potential of environments is by no means restricted to natural environments, but that “a well-designed and attractive urban environment may have a stress-reducing and mood-enhancing power equal to that of an attractive natural environment” (122). These perspectives from urban studies may result in an interdisciplinary ecocriticism much more open and productive to contemporary environmental circumstances than has hitherto been the case.

However, both urban studies and ecocriticism have focused primarily on the positive effects of nature experience: the ways in which urban nature strengthens social ties, reduces crime and has psychological benefits.⁷ Consequently, both fields present and explore primarily privileged perspectives of nature, and the experiences of those who have the means to enjoy nature, even if only in the form of a strip of green by the side of the road. Far less—very little, in fact—attention is paid to negative associations of nature. In urban studies, these perspectives have only been discussed in relation to woodlands, which elicit both pleasure and fear, especially in women, minorities and the elderly.⁸ Ever since Dana Phillips’ call for ecocritics to adopt “a less devotional attitude” towards nature (*Truth* 240), scholars in the field have examined the less appealing aspects of nature. Phillips himself has argued for the importance of “knowing where your shit goes” and has discussed dirt as a site of human and nonhuman intermingling.⁹ Simon Estok’s concept “ecophobia” highlights the ways in which abuse of nature is part of a larger dialectic, particularly visible in our negative views of nature. Finally, Timothy Morton’s “dark ecology” likewise calls for ecocritics to examine the less appealing elements of our relationship with nature as well: “The ecological thought [...] has a dark side embodied not in a hippie aesthetic of life over death, or a sadistic-sentimental Bambification of sentient beings, but in a ‘goth’ assertion of the contingent

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6. For other examples, see Chiesura; Kaźmierczak; MacKerron and Mourato; White et al.
7. William C. Sullivan has worked extensively on the ways in which nature reduces crime in urban environments (Kuo and Sullivan; Kuo, Bacaicoa and Sullivan; Sullivan, Kuo and Depooter; and Sullivan). See also Donovan and Prestemon’s study of the relationship between trees and crime in suburban areas in Portland, Oregon. See Kaźmierczak, Karmanov and Hamel, White et al. for the positive social and psychological effects of urban nature. The psychological benefits of nature are also a stock feature of nature writing, such as Tallmadge’s exploration of urban versus traditional nature in *The Cincinnati Arch*.
8. See Burgess et al.; Jorgensen and Anthopoulou; Macnaghten and Urry.
9. See Phillips’ “Excremental Ecocriticism,” and the special cluster of *ISLE* on material ecocriticism he edited with Heather I. Sullivan (19.3 [2012]).

and necessarily queer [that is, contradictory] idea that we want to stay with a dying world” (184–5). However, emphasizing the dark or dirty aspects of nature, or the “phobic” elements of our relationship with it, does not expose the ways in which much ecocriticism continues to hold a privileged position, represents a class of people who have the means to see nature as leisure, and stresses the inherent value of nature to these people.¹⁰ Yet such perspectives deny the full picture of contemporary human-nature relations, as they—despite their awareness of widespread environmental crisis—consistently emphasize only the beautiful parts of nature. Therefore, in the remaining pages of this article, I will focus on the negative aesthetics of nature as experienced by those whose basic needs of food and shelter are *not* met. They, as *Even the Dogs* demonstrates, hold radically different views of nature than what ecocriticism commonly presents us with.

“There, even the dogs are dead”: Exploring Edgeland Nature in Fiction and Non-fiction

Even the Dogs weaves together the stories of a group of homeless people in an unspecified British town, against the background of the autopsy of their friend Robert. The novel is particularly notable for its narrative voice: combining a first person singular and first person plural (“we”) perspective, the narrative expresses a sense of shared consciousness, as well as a sense of interchangeability, in which the individual homeless person becomes invisible, and exists only as a representative of the group. Most ecocritics, I expect, would feel that the novel contains far too little nature to be of interest. Indeed, save for the title and the cover,¹¹ there is not a lot of nature in the book. Instead, *Even the Dogs* illustrates the objections to the novel as genre that Dominic Head has voiced, suggesting that the form is too social and anthropocentric to warrant ecocritical attention.¹² However, as I will demonstrate, McGregor’s novel can also be read as a corrective to ecocriticism and urban studies in its exploration of the *other* side of (urban) nature: those spaces sought out by the homeless and drug addicts.

10. Another significant exception in this respect is of course ecocriticism’s study of apocalypse. Yet, since apocalyptic narratives generally tend to be concerned with extraordinary circumstances, and my focus in this article is on everyday nature, these are excluded here.

11. The cover of the 2010 Bloomsbury edition shows a perspective of yellow flowers from below, with a pylon in the back.

12. See Dominic Head, “Problems in Ecocriticism and the Novel.” For an extensive exploration of the possibilities for ecocritical engagement with the novel, see Astrid Bracke, “The Contemporary English Novel and Its Challenges to Ecocriticism” in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* (2013).

Even more so, although *Even the Dogs* may initially be a stretch for more traditional ecocriticism, it actually extends the field's recent concern with new nature writing, as I will show by reading it against *Edgelands*.¹³

Even the Dogs is set in an anonymous city that has the feel of a Northern English post-industrial town, sprawling and gritty. The predominant natural features are pigeons and dogs, and the natural spaces described in the novel are mainly places to pass through: a canal "slicked with oil" (42) and a "boarded-up petrol station with the weeds where the pumps used to be" (42). These are functional places, seemingly devoid of inherent value. As such, *Even the Dogs* runs counter to ecocriticism and environmental philosophies such as Deep Ecology that emphasize the inherent importance of nature, and advocate an ecocentric perspective. *Even the Dogs* questions and challenges, even outright dismisses, this value, and gives a resolutely anthropocentric perspective. Likewise, the novel exposes the extent to which representations of nature generally voice the perspective of the privileged person, the one who has the time, means and health to enjoy Nature with a capital N. The natural spaces that the characters in *Even the Dogs* experience, on the other hand, are derelict, ill and abandoned—much like they themselves are.

The characters' exclusion from Nature is particularly reflected in two of the lengthier passages on urban nature in the novel, set in a woodland and a wasteground filled with flowers respectively. Both spaces are examples of "edgelands," a term used by Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts to denote "a no-man's-land between the two sides [city and countryside], a touchstone of the constantly shifting border" (169). These are the spaces that they explored as children roaming the industrial cities of the north: the abandoned edges at the borders of towns, the shrubland next to the train tracks, the wastegrounds awaiting further development. By writing about these places, Farley and Symmons Roberts aim to counter wilderness writing:

Rather than escaping to the forests of the Highlands, park your car at Matalan and have a walk around the edgelands woods. This has the added advantage that you won't die of exposure if you take a wrong turn. And if we must visit mountains, let's make sure there's always a cafe near the summit, so we can have a drink and enjoy the company of our fellow travellers. (166)

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13. The term new nature writing is used to denote the resurgence of (British) nature writing since 2000, and works by authors such as Robert Macfarlane, Kathleen Jamie and Farley and Symmons Roberts. It is characterized by its exploration of traditional as well as non-traditional natural spaces, and consequent redefinition of the term 'nature.' For a short introduction see Macfarlane 2003. *Green Letters* 17.1 is wholly devoted to ecocritical explorations of new nature writing.

Although tongue-in-cheek, the edgelands described in *Edgelands* are not merely the lazy hiker's wilderness; for many British and Western Europeans alike they are the only immediate nature they have. Recognizing and describing edgelands accordingly serves the important function of reframing what we understand by Nature, and by increasing environmental literacy it may aid the reconceptualization of our relationship to our nonhuman natural environment.

In their chapter on woodlands, Farley and Symmons Roberts emphasize the mythical connotations of woods as places of lawlessness and freedom. Indeed, woodlands, even in a country as deforested as England, carry a cultural significance unlike that of any other landscape.¹⁴ Citing W.H. Auden's "a culture is no better than its woods," Farley and Symmons Roberts suggest that "every culture gets the woods it deserves" (162), which in the case of England seem to be either feral edgeland woods, or the postmodern woodlands of plantations and community forests (163). Particularly in contemporary society, Phil Macnaghten and John Urry suggest, the longevity, potency and self-generating energy of trees is "contrasted to all that appears false and superficial and instantaneous in consumer-oriented society" (167-8).¹⁵ Yet, like many contemporary natural landscapes, woodlands are also highly ambiguous spaces: as Macnaghten and Urry's sociological research shows, experiences and perceptions of woodlands vary considerably among different social groups, and are explicitly tied to cultural memory and nationalism. In England, forests stand not only for wildness and freedom celebrated by outdoor enthusiasts, but also connote a distinct Englishness, which is why, Macnaghten and Urry argue, inner-city Asian youth do not share the positive views of woods expressed by the other interviewees (174). This perspective is one that is rarely, if at all, expressed in ecocriticism, which often over-emphasizes white, male and economically privileged views of nature.¹⁶

The danger that woodlands pose to certain groups is, as I mentioned earlier, one of the few ways in which urban studies has paid attention to

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14. A foundational text in this respect is Simon Schama's *Landscape and Memory* (1995), which includes a lengthy discussion on woods. For a more recent example of the connection between forests and culture, see Sara Maitland's *Gossip from the Forest* (2012), in which she interweaves an exploration of Britain's forests with the development of fairy tales.

15. Macnaghten and Urry specifically refer here to the collection *The Social Life of Trees: Anthropological Perspectives on Tree Symbolism* (1998), edited by Laura Rival.

16. In addition to environmental justice, which tends to focus on environmental degradation and ethnic minorities, a growing body of ecocritical scholarship has begun to explore African-American experiences of nature over the past decade. A recent example is Salma Monani and Matthew Beehr, "John Sayles's *Honeydripper*: African Americans and the Environment" (2011).

negative experiences of nature. At the same time, danger and fear have always played a role in nature discourse: nature and wilderness enthusiasts emphasize a sublime sense of nature that embraces fear and awe of nature, but rarely leads to actual bodily harm. However, not until people's basic needs of food, shelter and safety are met, can they enjoy nature as a place of leisure. When this is not the case, as in *Even the Dogs*, natural spaces take on very different meanings. While looking for drugs, Danny recalls the different places where a homeless person might hide, such as the woods: "Wouldn't catch Danny going out in the woods in the daytime let alone at night. Never know what's going off in the woods, it's all shadows and hiding places and furry fucking creatures running around after dark. Anything can happen. But some cunts have got no one and they've got to find somewhere to hide" (31). For Danny, the woods are a last resort, only for those who really have nowhere else to turn. From an ecocritical perspective, Danny's description stands out, since the woods are not only unpleasant to him because of the possibility of violence caused by humans, but also because of the animals that live in it; mainly rabbits, squirrels, hedgehogs and deer. Strikingly, in describing woodland animals, he uses a positive word—"furry"—not to emphasize, but to negate the positive qualities ecocritics and environmentalists generally attribute to them. These are not just "furry animals," they are "furry *fucking* animals": a nuisance.

Whereas Danny's experience of the woods echoes those of the subjects in Macnaghten and Urry's research, the wastelands in the novel explore a side of nature rarely remarked on in urban studies, ecocriticism, and *Edgelands*; namely the less idyllic kind. In their "Wasteland" chapter, Farley and Symmons Roberts draw on the language typically reserved for mountains and unexpected vistas to describe their discovery of a wasteground: "The city, suddenly, has a new scale, an underness and overness, and the eye, having scarcely a moment to readjust from the enclosing streets and buildings, is overwhelmed" (137). Like in writings on more traditional nature, Farley and Symmons Roberts suggest that discovering an urban wasteland changes the scale of the city, leaving the spectator "overwhelmed" as when faced with a sublime piece of nature. This piece of urban wilderness hence has the exact opposite effect to that often attributed to urban nature; unlike the fragmentation and enclosure that Buell suggests are characteristic of urban nature, the wastelands in *Edgelands* appear to dwarf the city that they are part of.

In fact, in *Edgelands*, the wastelands are presented as no less idyllic or significant than the countryside or wilderness:

On a summer evening, stepping through a gap in the rusty corrugated iron and entering a well-established patch of wasteland is to enter an arbour of scents. As soon as wasteland has begun to collect pioneering plants, the insects follow, and where there are insects there are birds. As the order of succession and establishment continues, a site can become incredibly biodiverse and locally rich in species that find an ecological niche, an opportunity. (145)¹⁷

The sensual experience so appreciated by visitors of natural spaces recurs in this passage, and the urban wasteland reveals itself as an ecosystem more diverse than many a field in the countryside. This chapter is also a plea for the preservation of edgelands and an argument against extensive urban planning: “Pressure groups and think tanks deplore the state of unused land and brownfield sites [...] the goal here, the overwhelming urge, is to tidy up, to make everywhere look like a kind of pleasing-on-the-eye parkscape” (145).¹⁸

The wasteland in *Even the Dogs* is a typical example of why urban planners, and often urbanites, are so eager to clean up empty spaces. Initially, though, it seems much like that celebrated in *Edgelands*—albeit described with the same wry and cynical tone towards nature as the earlier passage on woods: “This huge stretch of wasteground covered in weeds and flowers and trees and piles of rubble. Like a bloody nature reserve or something, birds and butterflies and all that and when you’re in the middle of it you can’t hardly hear the traffic” (110). Again, like in the passage discussed earlier, this description confronts us—ecocritics, environmentalists and many Westerners—with the idea that nature is not necessarily positive or valuable, but rather that it simply *is*, and that the way in which we perceive and describe it depends on our perspective. The wasteground in *Even the Dogs* is not a place to enjoy a summer’s evening among pioneer species and butterflies rarely seen in the city, but a place to go drinking, take a piss, pass out and be robbed. Consequently, not only does this passage provide a cynical echo to the celebration of wastelands in *Edgelands*, it also uncovers the privileged perspective of contemporary new nature writing.

Ant, an ex-soldier who lost part of his leg and needs crutches to get around, spends the night drinking in the wasteground. He passes out, and

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17. Passages such as these particularly show the influence of Richard Mabey’s *The Unofficial Countryside* (1973), which served as inspiration for *Edgelands*, and in many ways is its precursor.

18. See also the research of Hofmann et al., who have compared the perceptions of parks and urban wastelands by landscape planners and residents to conclude that landscape planners have a higher preference for more natural green spaces than residents, who accept wastelands only if a minimum level of maintenance and accessibility is provided.

when he wakes up his crutches have been stolen. Since he cannot get up, he stays in the wasteland that night. What follows is a passage that would not be amiss in new nature writings such as Robert Macfarlane's:

Watched the stars going out above him, the sky going purple as the night drained away out of it, the sun breaking into the morning from somewhere in the corner of his eye. Weeds and flowers coming into focus, dew forming on petals and leaves. A spider stringing up a web between two thistle stems. Moths and bees spilling out into the day.
(112)

Indeed, in *The Wild Places* (2007), Macfarlane describes many such scenes. For instance, he sleeps outdoors on Ynys Enlli (Bardsey Island), off the coast of Wales:

I lay in the quiet dark, watching the light beams turning silently above me, until I slipped back into sleep. I woke to a still dawn. The sea, breathing quietly to my south, was pearly, with a light low mist upon it. The sky was pale with breaks of blue like a stone lobbed into the water nearby. I sat up, and saw that dozens of tiny dun-coloured birds were littering the rocks around me, making a high playground cheeping. Pipits. They gusted off when I moved. I clambered down the shallowest side of the gulch, to the sharp angled rocks at the sea's edge, and washed my face in the idle water. (34)¹⁹

Of course, Macfarlane's celebration of wildness, and the championing of edgelands such as wastelands in *Edgelands*, is wholly irrelevant to Ant. Macfarlane is privileged, has a home to return to, chooses to sleep outside as part of an adventure, and has the financial freedom to take extended trips to 'wildness.' Ant, on the other hand, does not have the privilege or leisure to enjoy Nature, and is instead stuck in nature—without the capital N—by accident. He has no choice but sleep there and wait until he is discovered. Unlike the sunset on Ynys Enlli described by Macfarlane, Ant wakes up to something far more prosaic: Steve stumbles over him on his way to take

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19. Incidentally, Macfarlane also obliquely makes a plea for the kind of spaces that Farley and Symmons Roberts describe in *Edgelands*: "That margins should be a redoubt of wildness, I knew, was proof of the devastation of the land: the extent to which nature had been squeezed to the territory's edges, repressed almost to extinction. But it seemed like proof, as well, of the resilience of the wild—of its instinct for resurgence, its irrepressibility. And a recognition that wildness weaved with the human world, rather than existing only in cleaved-off areas" (227).

a piss, helps him up and together they continue their search for drug, drink and shelter.

Moving Forward: Ecocriticism and Contemporary Natural Landscapes

Even the Dogs, then, exposes the ways in which ecocriticism and urban studies have tended to present a one-sided, biased and frankly privileged perspective of nature by focusing largely on positive experiences of our nonhuman natural environment. McGregor's novel confronts both fields with a negative aesthetics of nature that presents a shift for contemporary discourses of nature. Rather than emphasizing the goodness of nature—in which tsunamis, floods and tornadoes are increasingly attributed as resulting from human-caused climate crisis—a more productive ecocriticism acknowledges that nature simply is. Such a development is particularly pertinent, as it can be suggested that avoiding the negative aesthetics of nature while focusing primarily on the beautiful perpetuates the crisis in human-nature relations by implying that only 'beautiful' nature is valuable.

At the same time, my reading of *Even the Dogs* against *Edgelands* also shows that this approach is not as alien to contemporary ecocriticism as it might appear at first sight. In fact, the interdisciplinary ecocriticism discussed in this article extends current concerns in the field, such as the attention paid to new nature writing²⁰ and material and feminist ecocriticism's move away from the traditional ecocritical focus on 'unspoiled' or wild nature.²¹ Yet unlike existing approaches, extending ecocriticism through urban studies enables productive engagement with contemporary landscapes. It subsequently opens the door to (re)connection and an awareness of human-nature relations both in traditional and non-traditional landscapes, wild or humanized, rural or urban, and ultimately emphasizes that nature is not just out there, but also very much in here, in our suburbs and towns, in our gardens and wastelands, both beautiful and downright ugly.

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20. It should be noted here that although new nature writing is characterized by scholars, including ecocritics, as 'redefining' traditional conceptions of nature, the effects this has on contemporary ecocriticism are not explored, also not in the special issue of *Green Letters* on new nature writing.

21. See, for example, Alaimo; Iovino; Oppermann.

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