Editors’ introduction

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The overall aim of this collection is to explore the ways in which literary scholarship might engage with and contribute to the sustainability debate. ‘Sustainability’ per se has been slow to acquire interest as a concept for literary scrutiny, despite its ubiquity in the cultural and socio-political present, and despite the ambitious range of work emerging in the relatively new field of ecocriticism. Even so, it has not been altogether absent from literary scholarship, as indicated, for example, by references in this book to several essays in the theories and methodologies section, entitled ‘Sustainability’, of the May 2012 issue of *PMLA* (Publications of the Modern Languages Association of America), and by the more recent January 2015 special issue – ‘Literature and Sustainability’ – of the journal *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism*.1 ‘Sustainability’ of course has its problems, being a fraught, paradoxical and contested term with a spectrum of definitions, applications and uses. Nonetheless, our purpose in bringing together this collection is not to seek to overcome sustainability’s difficulties. Nor is it to redefine it or to view it from any particular stance. Rather, it is to demonstrate, through the essays presented, the various ways in which literary scholarship might reflectively engage with and comment upon sustainability and, in doing so, to illustrate what an engagement with sustainability might offer to literary and ecocritical scholarship. In this introductory section we offer some thoughts on sustainability and its difficulties, discuss its employment as a critical concept and consider it as a question for literary scholarship. We also provide an overview of the book, to include an outline of its two main sections and summaries of each of the essays.

Difficulties arising in sustainability discourse

A key premise for this book is that it is not just despite but because of its difficulties that a literary engagement with sustainability can prove variously productive. Some of these difficulties revolve around its adoption as a mainstream response to environmental concerns. While sustainability might be variously historicised (see the first two essays in this collection – by
Jayne Elisabeth Archer, Howard Thomas and Richard Marggraf Turley, and
by John Parham), it is of course strongly influenced in current parlance
by its most prolific definition, as derived from the Brundtland Report.
This report places emphasis on humanity’s long-term survival through
a notion of ‘sustainable development’, which it describes as development
‘that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability
of future generations to meet their own needs’ (World Commission
1987: 43). Such a definition, in setting a concrete goal applicable across
domains, has given rise not just to sustainability’s widespread implementa-
tion but also to the extensive body of work that continues to redefine
sustainability today.

Since ecocritics have often been most interested in approaches that
strive, in literary and philosophical terms, to reach beyond a reduct-
tive human-centrism, sustainability’s emphasis on the human sphere
has led to concerns that it fails to consider the nonhuman world
sufficiently, its agencies and our kinship with it (Alaimo 2012; O’Grady
2003). Its instrumentalist demeanour can bring it into conflict with the
deeper green standing of many ecocritics (Bergthaller 2010; O’Grady
2003). A further difficulty is that, due in part to sustainability’s slipperi-
ness as a term, it is vulnerable to co-option (Alaimo 2012; Bloomfield
2015; LeMenager and Foote 2012; Nardizzi 2013; Squire and Jarvis
2015), whereby it is appropriated to legitimise corporate or political
endeavour – to include, as Stephanie LeMenager and Stephanie Foote
put it, that which ‘got us into trouble in the first place’ (2012: 572; see
also Nardizzi 2013). Such problems, as Lynn Keller observes, may come
down to a question of ‘sustainability of what and for whom?’ (2012: 579).

Sustainability also raises a number of conceptual difficulties. One worry
is that it erroneously strives for some kind of stasis whereby the ecological
present or past is extended into the ecological future (Bloomfield 2015;
O’Grady 2003; Mentz 2012). John P. O’Grady, for example, sees an ‘obvious
flaw in reasoning’ in sustainability’s ‘privileging of duration or permanence
as a value’, which ‘runs counter to’ the ‘fundamental principle’ that nature
‘is in flux’ (2003: 3, emphasis in original). Mandy Bloomfield similarly
views sustainability as a ‘comforting narrative’ in need of ‘unsettling’,
and points out that the sciences of ecology ‘have generally moved away
from equilibrium-seeking ecosystems towards disequilibrium models’
(2015: 4–5). On this note, Gillen D’Arcy Wood emphasises the need for
ecocritics to recognise the ‘emergent biocomplexity paradigm driving
sustainability science’ (2012: 8), observing that sustainability studies ‘begins
from the principle that all systems, human and natural, are characterised
by complexity and nonlinear change’ (6).

Other conceptual difficulties include its various internal conflicts. Adeline Johns-Putra, in this collection, remarks for example on the way
sustainability appears as an exhortation to both preserve and transform. That is, the project of safeguarding our own future by sustaining planetary wellbeing is reliant upon our capacity and willingness to enact effective change. Yet, as she remarks elsewhere, while ‘our construction of “sustainability” is driven by a notion of care’ for the nonhuman world, care is itself a variously contingent concept that lacks ‘ontological scrutiny’ (2013: 125). In engaging with futural notions of our own and other species, sustainability infuses the present with that which is yet to emerge, and the subject of the present with that which necessarily exceeds it. Effects of this difficulty include the way objectives such as sustaining species diversity take on a managerial approach to that which managerialism also undermines; sustainability’s vulnerability to co-option is perhaps another outcome. Yet, as essays in this collection also indicate, such conceptual challenges are themselves some of the grounds upon which sustainability might be explored from a literary and ecocritical perspective.

Towards a critical sustainability

If ecocritics have reason to resist sustainability’s nebulous and at times contentious constructed vision(s), some contra-points might also be made which begin to move us towards the goals of this book. Sustainability’s difficulties might be said to open up a productive opportunity for interrogation and exploration of the kind that literary scholars are ideally placed to carry out. Indeed, critics such as Hildegard Kurt or LeMenager and Foote have referred to a ‘cultural deficit’ within the sustainability concept, recognising that ‘academic humanists and artists have not been central to discussions of what sustainability is and might be’; consequently they call for a sustainable humanities (LeMenager and Foote 2012: 572). After all, if practices of sustainability have infiltrated the socio-cultural, political and correspondingly the literary present, a question for environmental literary scholarship has clearly emerged.

So why critical sustainability, and what do we mean by it? There is a politically critical tradition of sustainability which, in the work of Fischer et al. (2007: 622), reshapes the so-called three pillars of sustainability – the economic, social and biophysical – into a more hierarchical paradigm, one where ecological sustainability envelops social sustainability. Indeed, Kate Rigby’s essay, in this collection, reflects on Fischer et al.’s work by considering literature’s potential contribution to ‘this cultural work of “deep sustainability”’. Here, however, we mean a range of responses to sustainability from within the field of environmental literary criticism that might contribute to sustainability’s broader debates. That is,
the phrase describes a literary response to sustainability variously explored, as demonstrated in the differing approaches taken in this collection.

Within ecocriticism today a question appears as to whether, and how far, ecocritics should engage in political polemic through literary practice. More activism or less activism? Much, although certainly not all, of the discomfort with sustainability referred to above could be described as broadly political in character, since it represents a more radical resistance, not necessarily to sustainability *per se* but certainly to some of its mainstream applications. One of the premises upon which this book rests is that sustainability’s adoption in a political mainstream need not render it obsolete to ecocritical inquiry. This is specifically because we see the role of contributing to the sustainability debate as a critical (that is, a literary critical) role.

Indeed, the more activist ecocritic might choose to get involved in (re) conceptions of the term based on literary innovation, with a view to considering how sustainability might be redeemed as a concept for literary inquiry. For example, a critical sustainability could reposition the term towards a reflection on who we are in relation to others (i.e. the insight offered by posthumanism) – and our vulnerability in that condition – rather than asking us to care in ways that are abstract and hard to convince. Or it might be premised upon a negotiation between two recognitions – that, at some deep level, human existence remains answerable to the realities of biophysical support systems, but also that ecosystems exist in a state of flux and discordance within which humans have considerable (though not absolute) latitude to co-construct the nature in which we live; thus it would engender moral, ethical, social choices as to what type of ‘sustainable society’ we might construct. Accordingly, rather than aspiring towards a utopian ‘stationary state’, sustainability might be seen as something the human species has continually to strive towards, while knowing it will never reach it.

The aim of this book, however, is not to redeem sustainability as a normative concept but to view it, less prescriptively, as a concept open to exploration and debate, and as potentially opening up a space for new innovations in environmental literary scholarship, and correspondingly, recognising where and how literature probes the thorny question of what it might mean to live sustainably. Certainly, these seem to be opportunities that sustainability itself provides, being fraught not just with conflict but with paradox. Hannes Berghaller, in this collection, argues that it is precisely because of the dialectic of sustainability’s competing priorities, which require constant renegotiation, that sustainability constitutes ‘genuinely political matter’. On this view, approaching sustainability from an environmental literary perspective retains a political dimension, but one that is explorative and reflective. Arguably, such reflective exploration
might be considered a deeper political praxis than attempting to prise sustainability into any particular shape or form.

Ultimately, sustainability encompasses too much to reduce it to singular statements. So, for all its difficulties, sustainability also shifts debates in ways that might actually enhance and add to established ecocritical discourse. As Simon Dresner notes, sustainability is ‘much more powerful rhetorically’ than the term ‘environmentally friendly’; since ‘publicly saying that you don’t care that what you are doing is unsustainable sounds tantamount to admitting that you are intellectually incoherent’ (2002: 1). For Dresner, sustainability may be a ‘contestable concept’ (2002: 7), but – like other such slippery terms as liberty and justice – it is useful as a discursive starting point. He also reminds us that the sustainability agenda introduced by the Brundtland Commission represents the first time the question of equity within generations had been balanced with the question of equity between generations. Moreover, its acceptability by the mainstream opens up possibilities of exploring the mainstream imagination. Whatever its weaknesses, then, discourses of sustainability run in tandem with some very pressing – and very present – socio-political and philosophical conundrums: literary scholarship that engages with sustainability is therefore engaging with such key questions. ‘Critical sustainability’, as we frame it in this volume, thus points simply towards a critically reflective approach to the problem of sustainability – an approach that we argue is not just timely but urgent. Such a role is, as much as anything, a literary role, whereby sustainability’s difficulties and possibilities might be teased out and explored.

**Literature and sustainability**

In discussing sustainability from a literary perspective, we draw forward two approaches that broadly correspond to those demonstrated by the essays in this volume. One, as indicated in the previous section, is that of a critical sustainability. Certainly, other literary scholars have suggested that the very discourse and praxis of sustainability bears scrutiny of a literary kind. Karen Pinkus has argued that sustainability functions in the same way as narrative; it ‘implies or writes a narrative coherence’ (2011: 74), and rethinking sustainability requires that we rethink narrative itself. Indeed, a narrative of *jouissance* rather than of futurity might release us from the trap of ‘business-as-usual’ thinking that accompanies so much sustainability discourse. The other approach may be considered a literary response (broadly speaking) to such discourses of sustainability, including an emphasis on the possibilities that arise in a fluid engagement with literature *per se*. LeMenager and Foote argue that ‘the most complex and wide-ranging intersection between literary studies and sustainability lies
at the intersection of literary forms and social affiliation; that is, ‘in how literary forms prompt us to imagine, as communities, a world otherwise’ (2012: 575). Similarly, we see literature, literary form and literary scholarship as contributing a way of engaging with sustainability in an imaginative sense. Lynn Keller views literature as helping us to imagine the risks current behaviour is running, as potentially evoking an ‘almost unimaginable’ large-scale, long-term perspective on sustainability, or as engaging us, whether through narrative or poetic language, in ‘serious imaginative exploration of what constitutes a desirable future’ (2012: 581–2). Keller regards this as a ‘literature not of but pointing toward sustainability’ (2012: 582). The imaginative dimension that Keller proposes suggests a way of exploring literature and sustainability that avoids being overly prescriptive; for, in its fit with the discursive nature of the sustainable, literature poses complex conceptual questions and models of how we live with the other forms of nature on which we depend, or imagines what types of societies might be sustainable. Literature might equally, we would argue, provide a space in which to explore the complexity of sustainability as an ongoing, never fulfilled aspiration, or the difficulties of attaining a sustainable world, or the nuances and dimensions of the unsustainable. Indeed, Claire Colebrook, in this collection, illustrates how the ‘logic of literary sustainability’ might lead us to question the value of the future of ‘what has inscribed itself as humanity’. In practice, to consider what insights literature might offer sustainability debates also requires a close consideration – a close reading, in many cases – of literary strategies, genres and theory, as well as literary history.

Part I of the collection – ‘Discourses of sustainability’ – presents six essays that approach sustainability in a variety of ways. It begins with studies of literary texts in their historical contexts. In their investigation of literary mills, Jayne Elisabeth Archer et al. show how these are not mere aesthetic representations but indicators of sustainable practice in their own times. John Parham’s chapter then demonstrates how nineteenth-century novelists William Morris and Emile Zola were attuned to – and keen to express in their work – ideas in Britain and France respectively that we would now identify as anticipating sustainability. As other essays in Part I amply demonstrate, one can regard both literature itself and literary scholarship as acts offering insights on, working with, and indeed re-working the discourses of sustainability that shape how effectively (or not) our individual and societal practices facilitate the continuation of ourselves and the other species with whom we co-exist. Kate Rigby discusses a model of sustainability that she labels ‘deep sustainability’; reading retrospectively, she finds expressions of this model in the poetry of John Clare and practice of the contemporary writer David Morley. Lucy Bell and Joshua Schuster then proceed in a spirit of discursive inquiry. Bell subjects the much-vaunted ‘three pillars’ of sustainability to critique via
an example not from literary text but from literary production. She discusses the operations of the Latin American editorial cartoneras publishing houses, where books are handmade from recycled cardboard and often individually produced and sold, as a material exemplar of sustainable literary intervention. Schuster, meanwhile, interrogates a very different kind of sustainability practice – the conservation of small populations of nearly extinct species. He shows how such projects as the rewilding of bison in North America might be invested in naive notions of sustainability as return but, when examined closely, serve to challenge such assumptions. In the final essay in Part I, Claire Colebrook offers a theoretical perspective on the question of literary sustainability, arguing for the use of a deconstructive or material sublime in reading the Anthropocene at a time when thoughts of sustaining ourselves arise.

What then follows in Part II – ‘Reading sustainability’ – is a number of chapters that employ close readings as a lens through which to critique contemporary sustainability discourse. Dana Phillips demonstrates how a sensitivity to genre – in this instance, the historical novel – shows the flaws in sustainable thinking. While humans might strive for sustainability, the threat of collapse and the associated development of characteristics of resilience are what dominate the cycles of nonhuman nature; for Phillips, it pays to read Margaret Atwood’s MaddAddam trilogy, which traces just such a cycle, as a historical novel of environmental behaviour and, simultaneously, as a critique of our commitment to sustainability. Chris Pak’s exploration of science fiction’s historical engagement with environmental issues next suggests ways in which literature might provide signposts to more effective modes of sustainability, showing how the genre has long attempted to provide sustainable solutions – an effort recently exemplified by Kim Stanley Robinson’s Science in the Capital trilogy. Adeline Johns-Putra and Hannes Bergthaller then read the legacy of Brundtland through two contemporary novels. Johns-Putra’s essay on Jeanette Winterson’s 2007 novel, The Stone Gods, critiques the failure of deep green versions of sustainability to account for Brundtland’s preservative – and one might say conservative – tendencies, and shows how Winterson’s work constitutes a perhaps unwitting exposé of this failure. Bergthaller’s analysis of Michel Houellebecq’s The Possibility of an Island (2005) demonstrates how the sustainability agenda is premised on the mistaken assumption that ecological sustainability and emancipatory politics go hand in hand: this assumption is deconstructed to devastating effect in Houellebecq’s dystopia. Matthew Griffiths reads sustainability as embedded within the very form of Jorie Graham’s Sea Change – the effort to sustain one’s breathing in reading Graham’s poems aloud echoes the pains, both psychological and physical, that we take to live sustainable lives. Finally, Louise Squire’s speculative realist account of Yann Martel’s Life of Pi (2001) pays heed to the seemingly irresolvable tension between sustaining the human and
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preserving the nonhuman that lies at the crux of sustainability discourse: Martel’s Pi, like all human subjects, must go beyond a merely correlationist or phenomenological engagement with the nonhuman world if he (and we) are to resolve this tension. Such literary readings show how close analyses of novels can productively trace the faultlines and fissures of sustainability discourse.

Ultimately, we argue, the fraught, paradoxical, contentious, yet ubiquitous nature of sustainability, as a concept in need of interrogation in our time, seems actively to call for the reflectivity of critique that literary scholarship is well placed to carry out even if, ultimately, all literature can do is offer signals and pointers. Indeed, a recent ‘provocation’ in Volume 5 of Environmental Humanities, the authors of which include several of the contributors to this collection, specifically calls for ‘a greater reflexivity’ within the environmental humanities, and one that might at times ‘be at odds with’ those discourses of environmentalism that otherwise resist such critique (Bergthaller et al 2014: 268). Sustainability, we suggest – and as we hope the essays in this collection amply illustrate – both invites and demands this kind of literary critical attention.

Notes

1 Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism is the journal of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, UK and Ireland (ASLE-UKI).

References


