

## Introduction to New Work in Ecocriticism

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**Simon C. Estok and Murali Sivaramakrishnan**  
**"Introduction to *New Work in Ecocriticism*"**  
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**Introduction to *New Work in Ecocriticism***  
**By Simon C. Estok and Murali Sivaramakrishnan**

We begin with the recognition that while ecocriticism began and has largely developed in the West, environmental concerns are very much present in the East, South, and North. Although there has been a flow of theorizing from West to East and from North to South, the importance of keeping available the voices which seem to get muffled in the one-way flow of traffic has never been greater than now. We write in recognition that the effects of our worsening environments are unevenly distributed and that the products and actions of corporate capitalism—the very engine that degrades the biosphere—has also been (and remains) distributed unevenly. We write in partial knowledge of the dangerous times in which we live and of how, in many ways, the worst is yet to come. As of 28 August 2014, there were 437 functioning nuclear reactors in the world, with 70 more under construction ("Nuclear" <<http://www.euronuclear.org/info/encyclopedia/n/nuclear-power-plant-world-wide.htm>>). Each one of these reactors requires years of maintenance for the spent fuel rods. Barring any natural disasters (such as in Fukushima) or human error (such as Chernobyl and Three Mile Island), there is always the increasing possibility of what Kevin Crowley of the Nuclear and Radiation Studies Board terms "successful terrorist attacks on spent fuel pools" (<<http://www.cfr.org/weapons-of-mass-destruction/nuclear-spent-fuel-pools-secure/p8967>>). We know about the mega-villains of pollution and climate change. We know of the 36 billion tons of carbon dioxide (seven billion tons alone spewed annually into the atmosphere by cars) produced each year by human activities. We know a bit about the chemicals in our foods and a bit about the effects of eating genetically modified organisms (GMOs). We know we are stupid (and if we do not, then we should watch *The Age of Stupid*). What we are perhaps less aware of are the many storage facilities waiting to breach (and it is just a matter of time)—trains carrying gases (such as chlorine and fluorine) that need electricity to be cold enough for storage in liquid form; industries using toxic gases (the Union Carbide Bhopal disaster comes to mind); and hazardous waste storage sites. We are perhaps less aware too of Colony Collapse Disorder among bees (and with so many agricultural crops pollinated by European honey bees, we should endeavor to learn more—or stop complaining when we find our food prices sky-rocketing), of the causes of the alarming increase of autism, and of plastic in our oceans. We know much, but there is a lot that we do not know and we live in dangerous times.

The Call for Papers for *New Work in Ecocriticism*—a thematic issue of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*—produced many submissions, the best of which are included following the journal's standard process of double-blind peer review. Unfortunately, many submissions—although in principle interesting work—were of poor quality both in terms of form and content. As guest editors, we struggled with having to reject so many articles, with the implications of silence that these rejections produce, and with the matters of cronyism and corrupt networks which have become so much a part of the scramble to publish in so many parts of the world. We struggled with superstars bowing out and questions crowding in. We struggled with ecocriticism itself and with how far the umbrella can reach. We have wanted to say something new, to give voice to the silent, and to have an effect without compromising scholarship or ethics. We wanted to make a difference: "But," to cite the inimitable Moxy Früvous, "the trying was very revealing" (<<http://www.metrolyrics.com/gulf-war-song-lyrics-moxy-fruvous.html>>).

Acutely aware of environmental crises and the politics of globalization, therefore, we present the studies in response both to a discomfort at the notion of perpetuating colonialist dynamics through scholarship and globalization and to our perceptions of the need for actions on urgent environmental issues. In the articles of *New Work in Ecocriticism*, there are perspectives and aspects of many issues in recognition of the fact that environmental problems are both global and local and the matters authors engage in is in a resolutely postcolonial understanding of the world:

postcolonial theory and ecocriticism were slow to meet. What lies behind the "ten-year lag," as Ursula Heise describes the meeting of ecocriticism and postcolonial literary theory (638), is important because these responses to global environmental and social injustices are as much a part of the future as of the past. It is not an easy future for postcolonial ecocriticism but rather one in which "both modes of inquiry find themselves facing challenges based on the decidedly political and potentially activist nature of their foci" (Wright 3). It is a future ... that is situated on ground overwrought and overrun with various irreversible invasions (cultural, species), shifting and unstable soils in which profound power struggles continue to play out. If two ongoing trends stand out more than any others ... they are the legacy of irreversibility and the continuing power struggles that characterize the postcolonial environment. Understanding the past—and ... specifically the delayed meeting of postcolonial and ecocritical collaborations—is central to ensuring a future ... Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin ... [note] that despite the abundance of definitions for postcolonialism and ecocriticism, "the two fields are most alike in suffering from a seemingly congenital inability to account for themselves" and that for both, definitions seem an "insuperable problem" (8). Both postcolonial literary studies and ecocriticism have traditionally resisted definition—at least in the sense of the artificially static ones that critics seem to desire. In the plainest of terms, postcolonial literary studies and ecocriticism are kinetic, not static: Heise reminds us "that both postcolonialism and ecocriticism have undergone various phases of theorization, critique, and counter-critique that in some cases have modified initial theoretical stances substantially" (254). When [Rob] Nixon muses on "the mutually constitutive silences that have developed between environmental and postcolonial literary studies" (235), it is with an eye to moving beyond silences produced by resistance to static definition. (Estok, "Postcolonial" 221-22)

Following above, we tried to give voice to the silent and to present in-depth scholarship in order to identify problems. We feel to have to note that there is a lot of argumentation about ecocriticism we do not agree with. For example, Karen Laura Thornber's concept of "ecoambiguity" articulated most fully in her 2012 *Ecoambiguity: East Asian Literatures and Environmental Crises* is untenable in our opinion unless we are going to use the notion of ambiguity to apply to gender studies, race studies, postcolonial studies, class studies, and so on (see Estok, "Reading"). For us, "ecoambiguity" is as questionable as "gynoambiguity" or "homoambiguity" (on ambiguity in literature and culture see, e.g., Bartoloni and Stephens <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol12/iss4/>>). We question Thornber's insistence who asserts in her 2014 article "Chinese Literature and Environmental Crises: Plundering Borderlands North and South" that "ecoambiguity refers to the inconsistent, frequently contradictory interactions between people and the natural world and captures better these diverse relationships than the more familiar ecocritical concepts of ecocentrism, ecophilia, and ecophobia" (2) and see, rather, biophilia and ecophobia as different points on what is clearly a spectrum. Seeing this spectrum condition is surely more productive than arguing for radical ambiguity (appealing as it may seem) that Thornber proposes.

*New Work in Ecocriticism* includes the following articles:

In "Indigenous Taiwan as Location of Native American and Indigenous Studies" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss4/2>> Hsinya Huang uses Taiwan as a specific intellectual crossroads to examine, both pedagogically and theoretically, transnational/trans-Pacific flows, as well

as transnational indigenous formations that take shape across national/international/local "American Studies" in this key moment of heightened U.S./Taiwan interaction in the Asia-Pacific security zone. Huang argues that Taiwanese scholarship has helped reorient understandings of environment and ecocriticism and that it has provided significant impulses, especially in the fields of Native American and comparative indigenous studies. Moreover, Taiwan has richly contributed, both in its own positioning and in its academic outreach, to the recent methodological turns away from US-American continental exceptionalism, decentering the U.S. in global/transnational US-American studies. Huang explores comparative indigeneity as experienced through the lens of Taiwan's Aboriginal people and offers a comparative perspective on the teaching of Native American literatures in Taiwan. In so doing, Huang's article reflects and refracts the diverse dimensions of empire and resistance surrounding Taiwan as a site of methodological and pedagogical shifts.

In "Wu's *The Man with the Compound Eyes* and the Worlding of Environmental Literature"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss4/3>> Shihhuah Serena Chou discusses Mingyi Wu's novel its readership within the context of ecocriticism's transcultural turn. Chou presents an overview of the cultural milieu in which Wu rises onto the world literary scene and proceeds by examining the problematics and potentials of ecocritical studies' transnationalization. Chou argues that while Wu's desire to understand the local through the vocabulary of the global, Western readership reveals a sense of ecocosmopolitanism. However, the international recognition of *The Man with the Compound Eyes* suggests that it may be overly romantic to read a novel that adopts Western imagery and ideas without sufficient critical reflection as a work of world literature.

In "Rediscovering Local Environmentalism in Taiwan"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss4/4>> Peter I-min Huang challenges the domination of "the global" and the marginalization of "the local." Huang argues that by the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century globalism seemed to have toppled localism in ecocriticism debates. Ecocritics embraced enthusiastically such terms as Ursula K. Heise's "eco-cosmopolitanism" and the arguments associated with this term that spoke for global forms of environmental thinking and practice. Yet, arguments for "the local" persist, in part because of Heise's constructive criticisms of it. Focusing on local environmental movements in Taiwan, Huang identifies and discusses scholarly work showing that "the local" is a durable concept and practice and not likely to disappear despite the denunciation of it. Moreover, referring to other recent studies, Huang argues that the global environmental imagination is indebted to local environmental movements.

In "Situating a Badiouian Anthropocene in Hagiwara's Postnatural Poetry"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss4/5>> dimension of the poetry of one of the founding voices in modern Japanese poetry, Sakutarō Hagiwara (1886-1942). Brink argues that Hagiwara developed a poetics characterized by engagements with nonhuman organisms and actants to situate the materiality of these actants in ways that diffuse the binary of "language" and "nature" and present a postnatural relationality that Bruno Latour describes. Drawing on the recent work of Alain Badiou, Brink explores materialist alternatives to representationalism—including the Lacanian triangle of the imaginary real and symbolic—by emphasizing human-nonhuman relations and Badiouian models of change in reading poetry in the Anthropocene.

In "Japanese Poetry and Nature in Borson's *Short Journey Upriver Toward Ōishida*"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss4/6>> Shoshannah Ganz shows how the limited focus of research on Roo Borson oversimplifies the poetry and ignores the tradition that Borson is aligning her work with both in form and content: classical Chinese and Japanese poetry and their perspectives on nature. Further, Ganz explores the ways in which Borson's poetry overcomes intuitively the binaries of East/West, human/non-human, and the further binaries within the human/non-human created through representational language. Ganz contextualizes Borson's work within the master/disciple lineage of Chinese and Japanese tradition and explores how Borson incorporates the resonances of Japanese place names and talismanic uses of nature and seasonal words into an Anglophone North American context to show similarly Japanese perspectives on impermanence and the place of humans as product and producer of nature.

In "The Systemic Approach, Biosemiotic Theory, and Ecocide in Australia"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss4/7>> Iris Ralph summarizes an argument in defense of disciplinarity ("openness from closure") that Cary Wolfe makes in *What is Posthumanism?* She also

comments on an implicit argument that Wendy Wheeler makes in *The Whole Creature: Complexity, biosemiotics and the evolution of culture*. As Ralph argues, Wheeler's implicit claim is that biosemiotic language, which humans share with other biological beings, connects human animals and nonhuman animals on moral and affective grounds. Ralph summarizes Wolfe's defense of disciplinarity that literary and cultural studies scholars who engage with "the question of the animal" generate claims that critically complement scientific interrogations of the moral and affective distinctions between human animals and nonhuman animals. Ralph uses Wolfe's and Wheeler's arguments to read ecocritically Nugi Garimara's *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, Robyn Davidson's *Tracks*, and Xavier Herbert's *Capri-cornia*.

In "Ecological Knowledge in Community Theater"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss4/8>> Paul Brown presents a practitioner's perspective on plays which celebrate and enhance community resilience while addressing complex environmental problems. Community plays can highlight environmental injustices and assist communities to find a voice. The article explores these functions by examining how nature moves center-stage in community plays, and the role of community arts, alongside scientific research, in developing and communicating shared understanding of environmental problems and their solutions. In his study Brown compares knowledge-making processes for science and community theater and explores the values expressed in eco-theater and the processes of producing and recording valuable ecological knowledge through community-based creative arts.

In "A Survey of the Phases of Indian Ecocriticism"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss4/9>> Rayson K. Alex places Indian ecocriticism in its historical context distinguishing it from the Western ecocritical canon by identifying and contextualizing three phases of ecocriticism in India. Looking at the present Indian ecocritical scenario, Alex compares and contrasts it with Western ecocritical studies. He offers a brief analysis of the themes of papers presented in conferences on ecocriticism in India and of the syllabi and teaching strategies adopted in various institutions of higher learning which have introduced ecocriticism as optional/mandatory courses to show the growth of ecocriticism in India. Alex finds that present ecocritical scholarship in India is largely influenced by Western ecocriticism, although it originally began with the use of Indian theories and texts. Alex calls for a commitment to a regional approach in Indian ecocriticism and points to social issues that ecocriticism in India needs to address in the near future: land, ethnicity, sustainability, poverty, terrorism, religious plurality, caste, water policies, and education.

In "Ecocriticism and Persian and Greek Myths about the Origin of Fire"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss4/10>> Massih Zekavat argues that some contemporary ecological biases are rooted in ancient thought. Further, Zekavat argues that the study of mythology is relevant to the understanding of culture and ecology thus assisting ecocriticism. The investigation of man/woman, culture/nature, and human/nature binary oppositions conveys that Greek and Persian myths are mostly anthropocentric and androcentric. ~~Moreover, they and~~ associate fire with the development of culture. ~~Finally, it is Zekavat~~ postulated that one way to revise contemporary ecological conceptions is to study myths to shed light on the mind and context of their creators and believers, their representation of natural phenomena, and their continuous impact on future generations through their adaptive and appropriative resonances in cultural production.

In "Ecocriticism and National Image in 舌尖上的中国 (A Bite of China)"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss4/11>> Mingwen Xiao examines the multi-faceted contents of the popular 2012 television series. Instead of exhibiting delicacies made by professional chefs in luxury restaurants, A Bite of China displays local food and dishes made by ordinary people. By focusing on every-day food preparation, the show constructs a performance where class, ethnicity, gender, age, and other social markers are blurred and the geographically and ethnically diverse ways of food preparation and consumption appear as a cohesive Chinese culinary identity. Xiao argues that A Bite of China plays a role in restoring Chinese citizens' confidence in domestic cuisine and thus aspects of the television show can be understood as an ecocritical perspective of current China.

In "The Urgency of Ecocriticism and European Scholarship"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss4/12>> Simon C. Estok argues that there continues to be unduly disproportionate attention within ecocriticism on US-based scholarship and proportionally less on ecocriticism from other parts of the world. Estok focuses on European ecocritical work written in



English and published by Rodopi in recent years and argues that this work attests both to the urgency and resolve of European ecocritics. Estok looks at some of the primary contributions of twelve books published within the past ten years by Rodopi in order to show the importance of bending our ecocritical ears, to stop fetishizing US-American scholarship, and to listen to what is coming out of Europe and other parts of the world.

*New Work in Ecocriticism* includes a book review article by Keitaro Morita, "Ecocriticism and Gender/Sexuality Studies: A Book Review Article on New Work by Azzarello and Gaard, Estok, and Oppermann" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss4/13>> and a bibliography on the topic of the thematic issue compiled by Zümre Gizem Yilmaz, "A Bibliography of Work in Ecocriticism 2004-2014" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss4/14>>.

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