

SIMON C. ESTOK

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## An Introduction to “Ecocritical Approaches to Food and Literature in East Asia”: The Special Cluster

As the 2011 ASLE meeting in Bloomington testifies, food is an increasingly important site for ecocriticism, one that often brings together discussions about race, class, and species. The environmental humanities is increasingly understanding the growing global dependence on unsustainable food practices as being inextricable from the systemic abrogation of rights (human and nonhuman) that so often defines the unbridled pursuit of profit characterizing late capitalism. Theorizing food's under-theorization in ecocriticism increasingly means looking at practice, at meat and vegetables, and at what their production represents both for natural and for human environments. As I write this, one in seven people on the planet is hungry, according to the 2011 World Hunger and Poverty Facts and Statistics,<sup>1</sup> even though “all the world's farms,” Professor of Environmental Studies Steven L. Hopp explains, “currently produce enough food to make every person on the globe fat” (Kingsolver 18). “It's all about money,” drawled the man beside me on my flight to Bloomington. But it's not only that; it's also about class and race and ethics and taste. It's about gender and species and knowledge and ignorance. It is about consciousness and sexuality and work. It's all about many things. There are no simple answers.

We seek simple answers. Harold Fromm offers some very simple answers, arguing that the motivation behind veganism is a “hopeless longing for innocence” (“Vegans”). Yet, this comment itself seems,

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shall we say, innocent, and things are a bit more complicated than Fromm's comment suggests. Our food choices grow out of a great variety of concerns, including but not limited to concerns about health, religion, ethics, money, convenience, and so on. Because these concerns are so various and personal, we are pretty sensitive about it all. Even a simple question can be construed as preaching and posturing—at least that's what eco-conference-goers tell me every time I ask the audience "Any vegetarians here today?" Eating is just about one of the most personal things we do, and the more we feel that people are preaching, sermonizing, or moralizing to us about it, the more touchy we are likely to be about it. Diet seems in some ways within the same circle as religion, and much of the language we use to fend off perceived attacks on our sacred dietary rituals and tastes seems to confirm this ("preach," "sermonize," and "moralize" from the previous sentence perhaps exemplifying this).

Diet is a bit of a flashpoint, even for people in the environmental humanities, and as Fromm's recent article suggests, the intensity of our convictions sometimes seems to cloud the light of reason. It is neither a productive insight about humanity nor a scientifically viable position, for instance, to argue as Fromm does that because "we must have been eating our mother during gestation," we must, therefore, be carnivorous outside of the womb ("Vegans"). It is, rather, a false and unscientific<sup>2</sup> understanding of what goes on inside the womb. The point here is not to lambast the logic in Fromm's article but rather to note that there is a startling diversity of responses both to food and to what constitutes reasonable discourse about food. The answers are not nearly as simple as we might prefer them to be.

It would be easier and certainly more convenient if we could say simply that all non-meat alternatives are better for the environment than meat, but this would be to ignore a lot of specificities. While these alternatives may certainly cause less suffering than a factory farm, their production, Su Hsin Huang argues below, far from being carbon neutral, often can seem to produce an equally large carbon footprint as meat.<sup>3</sup> Nothing is uncomplicated. The simple assertion that bioregional eating is a good thing—logically and persuasively articulated by people such as Gary Paul Nabhan, Barbara Kingsolver, and Michael Pollan (among many others)—is not quite so simple. It involves many things, not the least of which is race.

Rachel Slocum has recently suggested that "While the ideals of healthy food, people and land are not intrinsically white, the objectives, tendencies, strategies, the emphases and absences and the things overlooked in community food make them so" (Slocum 7). As

Susie O'Brien summarizes it, the argument here is "that alternative food practices occupy sites of race and class privilege, [and] that the lines defining these sites are often invisible to participants," and she goes on to argue "that the local-food movement expresses, among other things, white Americans' attempt to come to terms with their place in the ongoing violence of colonialism" (O'Brien 232).

If the local food movement is raced and classed, no less is it gendered. When Kingsolver remarks off the cuff in a very nuclear-family affirmative book that "it has taken [her] decades to get" to the point where she can take being called "a real housewife ... as a compliment" (156), it is tempting to wonder about Kingsolver's feminist commitments and how they play or don't play in her various positions on food. One is tempted to make pronouncements, but nothing is uncomplicated.

In response to a comment I made in an article a couple of years ago that it is "difficult to take seriously ... the ecocritic who theorizes brilliantly on a stomach full of roast beef on rye" (Estok 217), Greta Gaard writes that "in the near future, ecofeminism and feminist ecocriticisms will need to articulate an interspecies focus within ecocriticism, bringing forward the vegetarian and vegan feminist threads that have been a developing part of feminist and ecological feminist theories since the nineteenth century" (Gaard "New Directions" 651). It is hard to imagine anyone taking issue with this argument on any level; disquietingly, however, one critic—albeit, in a non-peer-reviewed, self-styled assessment—calls "the ... claims of vegan feminist Carol J. Adams" *tendentious* (and one has to wonder here about this kind of labeling and about what the critic has against scholarship that seeks to promote a viewpoint—see Garrard). One thing is certain: we all need to be heard. Our many voices and claims cannot and will not be ignored.

This "Special Cluster" grows out of a desire to provide a forum in a Western constituency for East Asian voices about food. It has its roots in a graduate seminar entitled "Food and Ecocriticism" that Peter I-Min Huang invited me to design and teach at Tamkang University in the summer of 2010. The course was roughly divided into discussions in the first half about meat and in the second about vegetables. Put slightly differently, the first half was all about what's wrong with meat, and the second half was all about what's wrong with vegetables. One of the goals of the course was to look at the ethics implied by and distributed through transnational American eating habits and at how these ethics correspond with the current state of praxis within ecocritical theory. By the end of the course, one of the students asked "So, what *can* we eat?" The answer, of course,

is simple: we can eat virtually anything—that's why we are called omnivores. Perhaps a more pertinent question is about how knowing the implications of what we eat might motivate us to change our eating habits. At any rate, it seems less a matter of a dilemma about choosing what to eat (which is Michael Pollan's understanding) than it is a matter of knowing the implications of those choices. One of the understandings we are increasingly digesting (or, alternatively, having rammed down our throats, depending on how we want to look at it) is about the food-miles of nonlocal foods.

While Chad Lavin sees what he calls a “disenchantment with organics” caused by the 2006 *E. coli* 0157 outbreak in organic spinach at Walmart as the reason for the drift toward mainstream emphases on local food, perhaps it is a little bit more complicated than that. There are all sorts of questions involved, one of which seems, on the surface, to have little to do with food miles: identity. Lavin only touches on how “the debate over local food is inseparable from concerns about global geopolitics” (“The Year of Eating Politically”).

In the first of the essays following, Hong Chen gets deep into the guts of the matter. Her “Local Foods, Public Markets: Cultural and Ecological Implications in and around the Works of Chi Li” digs into the enormous complexities in the relationships “between local foods and aspects of globalization.” Focusing on the work of Wuhanese author Chi Li, Chen competently shows that resisting globalization (or, at least, resisting absorption and disintegration of the local into global) sometimes paradoxically means fighting fire with fire and participating fully in a “kill or be killed” process that is both hugely objectionable and evidently inescapable. Chen shows that while contributing to the food-miles problem of nonlocal foods, preservation of the local through marketing and promotion of, for instance, Hubu Alley culture at the national (and perhaps even international) level both preserves the local and threatens in commodifying it to reduce it simply to commodity, to strip it of its local flavor, as it were, by removing it from the local and reproducing it in the nonlocal.

The noodles that were once only there in Hu Bu Xiang (户部巷, Hubu Alley), prepared on the spot (and at risk of disappearing altogether), are now available for people like me as “Wuhan Hot Dry Noodles” in large red bags (plastic, of course) containing eight individual servings (each with several plastic packets of spices and oils) and good for a couple of years on the shelf. I've eaten these noodles outside in the winter in the cool grey rain in Hubu Alley, jostled by people and scooters, warmed by the steam and the smells of the street-side cooking, a witness at once to words I couldn't understand and expressions of satisfaction and pleasure that I certainly could

identify with as I slurped along. I've also eaten those noodles at my computer, warm and dry and alone. The local is preserved ... good for two years, based on the package. What cost preservation?

Immediately outside the East Gate of Hubu Alley is an enormous McDonald's doing a thriving business. There, of all places. Chutzpah.

The other problematically preserved local cultural tradition Chen discusses is Jiqing Street—an outside night market of restaurants, dai pai dong (大排檔, street-side stands), and lots of people. It is a place of profound smells (burning meats, frying vegetables, scooter exhaust), sounds (some sweet, as musicians come to the tables outside of the many restaurants; some less sweet, as people hawk and haggle and barter), and tastes (too many to catalogue). It is a place said by many to epitomize Wuhan and to be essential and indispensable to what Wuhan is: as Chen explains, “Jiqing Street has almost become the logo of the indigenous culture of Wuhan.” But all things change, and the world that enabled Jiqing Street to develop is very different now than it was then. There is less of a need for being outside on hot summer nights, air-conditioning being so readily available. There is less of a chance that Jiqing Street could even have become what it is if things were always as they are now. There is less certainty now than ever that Jiqing Street is even necessary outside. One of the recommendations for keeping the place alive has been to move it inside. All sorts of questions about tradition and what it means come up, and Chen skillfully follows these and their ecological implications.

No less concerned with tradition are the other three essays in this Special Cluster. Won-Chung Kim's “A World in a Rice Bowl: Chiha Kim and an Emerging Korean Food Ethic” starts with the rather untraditional image of the Westerner in Korea and the question such a person is likely to hear frequently: did you eat? Kim explains this question (because it is not as simple or obvious as it appears) in the context of culinary culture in Korea. Deftly revealing the social and historical centrality of food to Korean identity, Kim explores the spiritual dimensions of eating through discussions of the ecopoet Chiha Kim. One of the things this allows is the development of an argument that current views toward food in Korea are in some ways very different from the ancestral traditions. In these traditions, food is complexity, and “eating a bowl of rice amounts to knowing ten thousand things—that is, knowing how a bowl of rice is produced and eating it correctly is the most important thing we should know in life.” Kim argues that for Chiha Kim, complexity is the key point and that food should not be so simple and fast as “fast food” culture currently has it: “eating is, above all things, an exchange of energy and one of the

most intimate and direct forms of communion with others because by eating others we become, literally and figuratively, one with them."

Keeping the notion that "we are all guests and hosts at the dining table of the planet earth," Kim argues that Chiha Kim "thinks we can open a new world by changing our attitude toward our food." Indeed, this is an argument that ecocritics at Bloomington showed is becoming more and more important. This is a kind of new world shaped by environmentalist visions rather than by the fat hands of corporate greed. We know how important our food is to the exchange of energy, how horrendously wasteful meat is, how, "most simply put, someone who regularly eats factory-farmed animal products cannot call himself an environmentalist without divorcing that word from its meaning" (Foer 59). We know that food is complex, is not just a matter of what you or I want and that, as Kim explains, in eating, "we are participating in a sacrament of exchanging and sharing energy and lives."

The implications of food for environmentalist thinking, wide-ranging and complex, are, as Kim points out, also contiguous in many important ways with traditional tenets embedded in Donghak philosophy, wherein we find startling likenesses of contemporary ideas about inter-connectedness and the enmeshment of humanity in nature. Beginning with a foreigner in Korea and leading us on a tour-de-force fleshing out of the ecological implications of food in the poetry of Korean poet Chiha Kim, both through close readings and detailed theoretical observations, Won-Chung Kim massively complicates the question "have you eaten?"

Su Hsin Huang's provocatively entitled "The Authenticity of Fake Meats" also offers a series of surprising complications. Using Taiwanese writer Li Ang's *The Butcher's Wife* and Paiwan writer Ahroyong Sakinu's *The Sage Hunter* as her literary touch points, Huang charts important structural connections. Discussing *The Butcher's Wife*, Huang shows analogies between practices of the meat industry (such as butchery) and practices of misogyny (such as rape). Huang shows that in both the fictional work of Li Ang and in contemporary real life situations, there are violent and fatal implications of the profession of butchery. In her discussions of *The Sage Hunter*, on the other hand, Huang explicitly discusses analogies between conceptual and material violence, between the systematic decimation of the Aboriginal Paiwan people of Taiwan and the widespread erasure of traditions and sustainable practices, an erasure concurrent both with an emergent industrialization of food production practices and with the large-scale reformatting of the natural environment for

mono-crop agribusiness in Taiwan. Huang's take on tradition grows out of her analyses of the matter of meat within the joint contexts of Taoism in Taiwan today, on the one hand, and the visionary near future in our collective possible global tomorrows, on the other hand.

The questions Huang raises about the efficacy of fake meat as an ecologically friendly alternative to real meat move well beyond the issues of "food miles" to the very core of ethics, motives, desires, and, indeed, tradition. Perhaps one of the central, if understated, concerns in Huang's essay is the matter of representation. Artificial meat has become a thriving business. Often represented and therefore understood as an ethically and environmentally sound alternative to animal flesh, fake meat, Huang shows, is at the center of conflicting discourses and sparring representational debates. Huang convincingly reveals that things are more complicated than they seem. Setting questions about fake meat within the contexts of contemporary and traditional Taiwan, and within the contexts of a fast-disappearing ethical system that consciously recognized ethical implications of meat, Huang is able to show the deep importance of protecting minority positions, cultures, and identities and how very central questions about representation are to these positions.

Questions about representation are indeed profoundly complicated, and, as Masami Yuki shows in the final essay of this Special Cluster entitled "Why Eat Toxic Food?: Mercury Poisoning, Minamata, and Literary Resistance to Risks of Food," the Oscar-winning documentary film *The Cove* seems in some ways to use conflicting representations as a kind of a narrative hook. The conflict is between science and ethics. One of Yuki's conclusions is that science seems to have an ontological priority over ethics for a global constituency of documentary films. Yuki shows "a cacophony between scientifically framed discussions on mercury-contaminated dolphin meat and an emotional response to dolphin hunting practices" in *The Cove*. But Yuki's discussion of *The Cove* is itself a brilliant narrative hook, a prelude to her main discussion of three Japanese literary works that demonstrate a resistance to the authority of science and challenge scientifically-molded perceptions of food and toxicity. These works are Ishimure Michiko's *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow: Our Minamata Disease* (1969), Kato Yukiko's "Living by the Sea" (1981), and Taguchi Randy's *Hope in the Age of No Reliance* (2006).

Yuki is at her very best here, showing how science simplifies the complexities both of food and of representing food practices. Again, at the risk of sounding tedious, we see yet again that things are more complicated than they seem.

Focusing primarily on Ishimure's *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow: Our Minamata Disease*, Yuki shows "the complexities of dissimilitude between the people of the fishing villages and the majority of Japanese society in their knowledge, language, lifestyle, work ethic, and food culture." Yuki asks the difficult questions: "why did the people in the fishing villages of Minamata continue eating fish, shellfish, and marine plants that they knew had been contaminated by mercury-laden wastewater discharged from the chemical plant? Why didn't they eat something other than poisoned food?" The answers, Yuki shows, are in part dependent on definitions and representations of nutrition, and what sorts of priority these have; in part on class and the unavailability of alternative foods; in part on the efficacy of the representations themselves and on the affected population's willingness to accept these representations; in part on pride and tradition—there are no simple answers. Yuki gets into these complexities and concludes that "because of its chaotic yet creative force, literary resistance to food safety can provide a powerful framework within which to facilitate a careful and nuanced discussion on human relationships with the environment as are represented in what we eat."

This Special Cluster is all about translating complexities, not the least of which is in providing discussions of works not always available in English to readers of *ISLE*. Central to each of these discussions is an acute consciousness of the material importance of food and food habits. All of these papers acknowledge what Serpil Oppermann has recently termed "the ontological primacy of the natural world" (161) while at the same time theorizing in novel ways about the profoundly complex material relations of food, people, environment, discourse, and so on. This Special Cluster covers a lot of ground yet is only a beginning. Matters such as soil erosion and loss of soil fertility in Asia, or desertification, or terminator technologies, or of the effects of FTAs with the United States, or of equitable distributions of food, or of mono-cropping—indeed, many of the matters in the rest of the world are equally present as problems in Asia, problems waiting to be addressed. This Special Cluster is just a beginning of an extraordinarily complex conversation.

#### NOTES

1. See *2011 World Hunger Poverty Facts and Statistics* (<http://www.worldhunger.org/articles/Learn/world%20hunger%20facts%202002.htm>).

2. As Greta Gaard has commented, Fromm's "failure to understand the sciences speaks volumes—really, what is his qualification to publish his rant



on veganism? Is he a member of the American Dietetic Association? A biologist? He has no credentials to speak on this topic—and Americans fall for it every time, like Jesse Ventura (the wrestler) getting elected as Governor of Minnesota or Ronald Reagan as President of U.S.” (Gaard, 30 August 2010).

3. Huang is certainly not alone in noting this. See, for instance, McGregor and Vorley; Bailey; and McWilliams (cited also in Susie O'Brien's recent article “‘No Debt Outstanding’: The Postcolonial Politics of Local Food.” I am indebted to Serpil Oppermann for bringing this article to my attention.). None of this, however, is an indictment of the argument that vegan and vegetarian diets are more carbon-sensible than meat diets; rather, it is really the level of processing that is the issue here. Huang's argument, though, is that there is something intrinsically wrong with fake meat on an ethical level. It may be seen something like this: since we don't buy and eat fake dead babies, why should we buy and eat fake dead cows?

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