

## Reading *Ecoambiguity*

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Karen Laura Thornber, *Ecoambiguity: Environmental Crises and East Asian Literature* (Ann Arbor: The U of Michigan P, 2012), 688 pp.

Karen Thornber's *Ecoambiguity: Environmental Crises and East Asian Literatures* is a daring book. Its breadth is huge, its contents encyclopedic, taking up "several hundred writers and texts from six continents—from Nobel Prize winners and others translated and celebrated around the world to individuals and creative products little known even in their own communities" (26). While it focuses on East Asian literatures, the scope of this book is global. Its purpose, Thornber explains, is to "examine how literatures addressing environmental degradation—particularly those in East Asia—regularly grapple with ecological ambiguities" (27), to urge us to "look more closely at how individual literatures address urgent matters of global concern but also that we consider literary negotiations with these issues regardless of the national corpus to which the texts belong" (434), to give "attention not primarily to the cultures of any single nation or region, but rather to the global cultures of environmental degradation, and to those of their frequent subsets and facilitators: cultures of environmental ambiguity" (94).

Because of the sheer size and the enormous amount of research packed into this book, because of the almost immeasurable volume of good work that this book does, and because of the unprecedented carrying across of issues important in the environmental humanities in East Asia to Western readers, it feels very wrong to do anything here except speak glowingly of this amazing and daring book; nevertheless, addressing some of its deficiencies adds even more to the tremendous breadth of conversation this book begins between East Asia and the West. What makes the book daring is its shocking originality. As Thornber notes in the introduction, this "is the first book in any language on Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Taiwanese literary depictions of damaged environments" (6).

The book offers a nice balance of historical contextualizing, work which is very necessary, since the book is clearly directed toward a Western constituency. Not all of this history, however, is entirely accurate. Thornber speaks glowingly, for instance, of South Korean president Lee Myung Bak's green initiatives: "Between September 2008 and December 2009, Lee Myung Bak," Thornber explains, "[. . .] allocated 80 percent of Korea's total fiscal stimulus spending to green stimulus spending, the highest percentage in the world" (75). She then goes on to talk about one of these stimulus projects: the Cheonggye Stream (McCune-Reischauer: Ch'önggyech'ön). As Thornber correctly

explains, it is “a stream in the middle of the city that was an open sewer after the Korean War, was covered with concrete in the 1950s, and now is popular with both ducks and tourists” (488). The Lee government took down the concrete over-pass that ran the length of the cemented-over stream. The stream has been “restored.” Thornber mentions prizes it has won. She mentions how the stream represents a change in attitudes.

What Thornber doesn't mention is the fact that the stream no longer has a natural source, meaning that all of the water has to be pumped in artificially—at tremendous cost, both financially (six million dollars annually) and in terms of energy. Mentioning this would help her argument about ambiguity. Here we have a stunningly attractive stream on the site where a stream ran for millennia, a stream that became a slough of filth and was finally covered over. The “restoration” represents an impressive accomplishment for Lee, but at what cost to the environment? How much energy is used to pump in the water? How much energy is used for the light shows that illuminate the bridges and the fountains and the artificial waterfalls? And with all of the traffic diverted to the core of the city's winding and clogged streets from what was a very efficient overpass that spanned from the eastern part of the city to the center, how much petroleum does the stream cause motorists to use, and how much more smog results? Thornber might have done better to speak less glowingly, more critically, and more accurately of this tremendously ambiguous project.

Despite the occasional inaccuracy, this book is daring for trying to do so much. And who can blame the author, the problems we face being so big? Indeed, it is part of the breadth of the problem that Thornber is trying to address that accounts for the encyclopedic breadth of this 688 page book. This is a book that you can pick up anywhere and start reading, as you would an encyclopedia; it is not the sort of book that you sit and read from start to finish. It is difficult to imagine who would do such a thing, who would have an interest or expertise in such a dizzying breadth of material—except, of course, someone reviewing the book.

To be clear, though, this is not an encyclopedia, and it has the kinds of important questions that a thesis-driven monograph should have. Some of these questions, obviously, are well-known and have been asked many times before, but it is important to keep asking these questions until we have answers. One of the questions Thornber asks is disarmingly unequivocal: “How severely must animals, plants, and other elements of the nonhuman damaged by people in turn harm people before people are moved to remediate and prevent further devastation of environments?” (114). This is a difficult question, and couching it in the third-person doesn't make it any easier. The people in the sentence are us—Thornber, me, and you reading this review, the academics who spout things that are very good but who nevertheless travel great distances for conferences and other matters. The quotation from Marilyn M. Cooper a bit earlier in the book gets closer to the guts of the question: “In the broadest sense, the question that drives the environmental movement is how to resolve the contradiction between the lifestyle of modern industrial society and the continued existence of [diverse] life on earth” (Cooper 36, qtd. in Thornber 105). Indeed, how?

It is tempting, given the gravity of the problems that such questions address, to answer in absolute terms—that this or that is wrong, that this or that is right, that we should do such and such or this and that. It is a relief that Thornber doesn't offer such absolutes but rather acknowledges that not only across cultures but within individual cultures themselves, such answers are unwise: "with social standards forever in flux, perceptions of (in)appropriate lifestyles and of what defines (ir)responsible behavior vis-à-vis environments alter regularly and often are contradictory" (103). An experience I had in Seoul some years back (one I discuss in the "Partial Views: An Introduction to East Asian Ecocriticisms") gets to the heart of the complexity of the matters here at hand. I saw something I initially thought very disturbing where I live in Seoul, but, as I pushed the issue, it turned out that I really didn't see what was going on at all. I live beside a stream (on the twentieth floor of a condo) in Seoul, upstream of where the Cheonggye Stream empties out, and I run along the stream every morning before sunrise. On several occasions, I have planted indigenous maple saplings illegally on public grounds along that stream. On a run once with Scott Slovic, who was in town for a talk, we planted a tree together. Not all of these trees have lived, to be sure, but some are now 20 feet tall.

Before dawn one morning in July 2007, I was running beside the stream and nodding to all of the other early runners in this dense city (it has a metro population of over 25 million). There was a man with a saw cutting down Acacia trees. I was astounded. There was a line of ten that he had already cut down along a hundred-meter stretch beside the stream. No one said anything. People tend to mind their own business in Seoul. Not me. I asked him angrily in Korean what he was doing. He responded fluently in English that Japan had stripped the land of vegetation and seeded Acacia in many places as part of the colonizing process. Acacia, an invasive species, now dominates many mountains in Korea. It was early, and my brain wasn't working well enough for me to formulate a response, and I ran on, doubting that anyone exercising that morning would have seen his actions as wrong—indeed, doubting that it was wrong, doubting the very applicability of the notions of right and wrong. His actions were bound up with questions about history, national identity, ecological preservation, pride, fear, resistance, and many other things. "Contradictions," Thornber is correct to note, "are at the crux of a diverse array of environmental problems and their assessments" (278). Looking at the man cutting the Acacia trees without thinking of the history of the region (a history that includes trees and people, landscapes and cultures, water and politics) can only result in ethnocentric shortsightedness and severely hamstrung perceptions. Perhaps cutting a tree is always an act of violence, and perhaps killing a person is too, but I am reminded of Barack Obama's comment in his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize: "A non-violent movement could not have halted Hitler's armies." All things must be viewed within their contexts, including the cutting of trees in the early Seoul dawn.

There is a growing consensus of the need for attention in the West to scholarly work that has been and is being done in the East. This growing consensus has to do less with a rejection of Western environmental theory, ethics, and approaches than with

addressing the one-sidedness of information flows, a one-sidedness that predictably and dangerously reiterates colonialist dynamics and structures. Central to much of the concern within the East Asian environmental humanities is the question of carryings-across, trans-lations. With so few people in Western scholarship able to understand Mandarin or Hangul or Japanese or Taiwanese, the onus has often been on the Asian scholar to translate for the Western scholar. Thornber's book in many ways performs such a carrying-across.

Yet, unlike *East Asian Ecocriticisms: A Critical Reader* (Macmillan 2013), Thornber's book works from the outside reading in; *East Asian Ecocriticisms*, on the other hand, proceeds on the assumption that the work in East Asia is important and that scholars in East Asia are in the best position to articulate the importance of the region's work for the larger ecocritical community. One of the unfortunate results of Thornber's position is that at the very outset the book establishes the Western reader as the normative model and the East Asian writer as the third person Other. When Thornber argues, for instance, that ecoambiguity in East Asia "might surprise readers accustomed to conventional images of Asian ecological harmony" (6), the word "readers" tacitly assumes that the category of readers is naturally Western, not East Asian. When Thornber goes on to refute the notion "that *they* love nature and intermingle peacefully with it" (6; emphasis added), the "us/they" binary is much more uncomfortably clear. This book does profoundly good work, and one doesn't want to nitpick, but neither does one want to gloss over the dangers of daring to speak from the outside, regardless of how breathtakingly encyclopedic the utterances.

At any rate, it is a good thing that Thornber doesn't confine her discussions to East Asian literatures, since the central concept about which she is theorizing is hardly unique to such literatures or cultures. As Hannes Bergthaller puts it in a discussion about the growing global dimensions of ecocriticism, "[s]ince the effluvia of tailpipes and smokestacks do not stop at the borders of nation states, neither can ecocriticism" (274). Thornber defines her central concept—ecoambiguity—as a global issue wherein we see "the complex, contradictory interactions between people and environments with a significant nonhuman presence" (1). The concept of environmental ambiguity is meant to describe the complexities we face in responding to the vexed issues raised by rapid ecological change and degradation and the multiple ways fiction and poetry highlight the absence of simple answers and the paucity of facile solutions to environmental problems. Ecocritical scholarship, Thornber argues, has yet to give sustained attention to these complex ambiguities, and it is one of the explicit goals of both her book and of *East Asian Ecocriticisms* to investigate some of the many possibilities in this regard. This said, though, there are some problems with Thornber's formulation of "ecoambiguity," and these need addressing.

Thornber sets "ecoambiguity," it seems, somewhere between ecophobia and ecophilia (a cousin of E.O. Wilson's biophilia):

To be sure, ecophobia can explain much of people's desire throughout history to control (parts of) the natural environment and engage in such massive destruction of nature as large-scale deforestation and species eradication. Likewise ecophilia seems to propel

people's embrace of nature, as well as promote environmental remediation and conservation, and, in fact, inspire the field of ecocriticism itself. (9)

The source of this seems to be "Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness," which reads as follows on the matter of ecophobia:

While this contempt and fear, which I am calling ecophobia, does not represent the sole trait that characterizes our relationship with the natural world, it is as yet a remarkably unattended one. Its opposite would, to some extent, be the biophilia Edward O. Wilson defines as "the innately emotional affiliation of human beings to other living organisms" (31). Certainly Scott Slovic is accurate to note that "ecocriticism is actually motivated by biophilia" (Scott Slovic, email to the author, September 16 2008). Admittedly, biophilia indeed seems to be the *motivation* but not the *object* of ecocritical inquiry. The object of such inquiry certainly must centrally include ecophobia and how it patterns our relationship with nature. (Estok, "Theorizing" 219)

Centrally, but not singularly, an important point that seems inconvenient for Thornber's argument. "In contrast [to theorizing ecophobia as a central matter of concern]," Thornber explains, "I argue that ambivalence, or ambiguity more generally—albeit that of the relationships between people and the nonhuman—is precisely what needs theorizing" (444). Initially, this sounds very reasonable, but when we carry the conversation a little bit further, we start to see that the position is less than completely tenable.

Of course, ambiguity is everywhere, but what would happen if we really did what Thornber is suggesting and walked away from the concept of ecophobia (or biophilia, for that matter) in favor of ecoambiguity? One way to come at this question is to work through an analogous model and to ask what would happen if we decided against theorizing about homophobia in favor of homoambiguity. Certainly a similar case for homoambiguity over homophobia could be made analogously to the case Thornber makes for ecoambiguity over ecophobia. But who would make such a case, and for what reason? What would be the politics of such a stance toward the notion of homophobia? What kind of denial would this be? And what position(s) would such a denial implicitly endorse? What would happen if, following the same analogous pattern, Thornber argued for gynoambiguity over misogyny? Again, what would be the politics of such a stance toward the notion of misogyny? What kind of denial would this be? And what position(s) would such a denial implicitly endorse? My intention here is not to bash Thornber but rather to engage in the conversation she began and to see where it goes. Despite the many great things this book does, it doesn't seem that the conversation on ecoambiguity can go very far at all.

So, then, how can we theorize about the ways that texts represent environmental issues? How can we analyze texts that

parody how people behave when confronted with damaged environments, particularly their tendency to procrastinate, to grapple with problems only when they become too large to ignore, to assume that the nonhuman exists for human benefit, and to improve remediation only if it does not in any way adversely affect human lives. (Thornber, 327)

While of course there is no single approach that will shed light on and answer all questions about how to deal with the contradictions such literature offers, surely the



privileging of the human over the nonhuman is central to everything that is going on in such texts and in theorizing about such texts. If such is the case (as I firmly believe that it is), then ambiguity is an effect rather than a cause, a branch rather than a root, a result rather than a reason. And if this is the case (and, again, it is difficult to see how such is *not* the case), then how do we address the root issue here, the anthropocentrism that keeps the human in a sanctified place above and immune from everything nonhuman?

One of the ways to get at this is to look at the dynamics involved with anthropocentrism. We can say without stirring any controversy that ecophobia is as inextricably involved with the broader category of anthropocentrism, as misogyny is with the broader category of sexism, and as homophobia with the broader category of heterosexism. Indeed, in each case the pairs seem (but are not) synonymous: ecophobia is not another term for anthropocentrism any more than misogyny is another term for sexism or homophobia for heterosexism. Moreover, in none of these cases are the ambiguities or the anxieties the causal issues; rather, they are the symptoms. Relatively speaking, anxieties toward gays and lesbians are a mild form of heterosexism; ambiguous feelings toward assertive women are a mild form of sexism; and ambiguous feelings toward the natural environment are a mild form of anthropocentrism. These anxieties and feelings of ambiguity may certainly be indicative of the deeper end of each category—homophobia, misogyny, and ecophobia respectively. If we see these categories each as a spectrum condition, then we might posit that gender anxieties occupy a space quite different than misogyny does; that anxieties toward gays and lesbians occupy a different space than flat-out homophobia; and that ambiguous feelings toward the natural environment of course are not necessarily in the same space as ecophobia. In each case, we have a spectrum of toxicity, a space where the toxicity is much less concentrated rolling on up to a space where the toxicity is acute. As heterosexism, sexism, and anthropocentrism are each a spectrum condition, no less are homophobia, misogyny, and ecophobia, and as are anxieties and feelings of ambiguity themselves. We all stand somewhere in these spectra, and it is good if we see where we stand. Then we can act. I don't doubt the value of theorizing about ecoambiguity; I do, however, doubt the value of doing it in the way that Thornber seems to be doing it, offering ecoambiguity a privileged space on a spectrum that it simply does not seem to deserve (remember gynoambiguity and homoambiguity). It would be more productive to see ecoambiguity as a part of anthropocentrism (with tinges of ecophobia and ecophilia) rather than to set up the kind of binary oppositions Thornber seems to be setting up. Not to disparage the work Thornber's book does, but in this regard, her theorizing seems a bit dubious.

Rethinking the role of the academic as activist means rethinking binaries and binary oppositions. It also means engaging seriously with the work of postcolonial scholars. At one point in the book, Thornber seems to slough off this work, commenting that "most of this research has concentrated on Western-language literatures" (18). No doubt this is true, but there is still a lot of relevance to this research. It would be interesting to see, for instance, how much further we could carry the conversation Thornber begins if we brought Rob Nixon's notions about "slow violence" into the

discussion. “[T]hreats that take time to wreak their havoc, threats that never materialize in one spectacular, explosive, cinematic scene” (Nixon 14) are as present in East Asia as they are anywhere else. Not engaging seriously with the research of Nixon and other eco-poco-theorists (regardless of their national or geographical foci) is a liability in Thornber’s book.

At any rate, among the many things Thornber accomplishes both in this book and in her “Afterword” to *East Asian Ecocriticisms* is to describe some of the substantial challenges that remain for ecocriticism. She argues that these challenges are both *cultural* (linguistic and geographical) and *conceptual* and that despite the rhetoric of inclusiveness, ecocritics have limited themselves almost exclusively to creative texts written in Western languages, and English-language American literature in particular. Despite the fact that she doesn’t use many of the findings of the flourishing area of postcolonial ecocriticism, the reminder that the bulk of ecocritical scholarship has not taken into consideration writings from East Asia is an important one, especially since the region is one that has its own traumatic colonial past and is a region that is home to three of the world’s largest economies and nearly one-fourth of its people.

Both in the book and in the brief summary of the book’s argument which comprises her “Afterword” to *East Asian Ecocriticisms*, Thornber explains compellingly that East Asian and other non-Western literatures ultimately cannot be examined in isolation and that while cultures and environmental problems are distinctive, they are not unique, and the need to globalize ecocriticism remains acute. Precisely because damaged environments are a global phenomenon, literary treatments of ecodegradation regularly transcend their particular cultures of production and can be understood as together forming intercultural thematic and conceptual networks. Examining these networks will be an important part of our ecocritical, if not literary future, as I note in the Introduction to *East Asian Ecocriticisms*.

Using the work of postcolonial ecocriticism is surely necessary, but with an awareness that the anthropocentric thinking of so much of ecocriticism in general doesn’t simply disappear when a new level of solidly forward and progressive thinking is added to the mix. For instance, when Laura Wright argues that “in terms of the postcolonial environment, as in terms of all forms of creation and invention, imagination is at the forefront of change and is the impetus for possibility” (179), we hear a position that remains resolutely human-centered. Surely not *all* forms of creation and invention depend upon imagination? Surely we are little more than a tiny wriggle on a single blip of the heartbeat of everything: “On the day after humans disappear,” Alan Weisman assures us, “nature takes over and immediately begins cleaning house” (17):

Even if you live in a denatured, postmodern subdivision where heavy machines mashed the landscape into submission, replacing unruly native flora with obedient sod and uniform saplings, and paving wetlands in the righteous name of mosquito control—even then you know that nature wasn’t fazed. No matter how hermetically you’ve sealed your temperature-tuned interior from the weather, invisible spores penetrate anyway, exploding in sudden outbursts of mold—awful when you see it, worse when you don’t, because it’s hidden behind a painted wall, munching paper sandwiches of gypsum board, rotting studs and floor joists. Or you’ve been colonized by termites, carpenter ants, roaches, hornets, even small mammals. (17-18)

The problem with people has to do with perception. Whether we are going to call it ecoambiguity or ecophobia or biophilia (or something else), the problems with how we relate with the world around us have to do with how we perceive and imagine the world and our relations with it. Thus, when Thornber begins talking about a “crisis in perception” that seems to characterize so much of our literary representations of environmental degradation, she raises a crucial topic:

A large part of this crisis involves conflicting evaluations: change interpreted by some as justifiable, if not desirable, is seen by others as unforgivable, or even as a call to overhaul social structures and institutions; change interpreted by some as having no long-term consequences is seen by others as the beginning of the end. (375)

What we perceive is sometimes restricted by a simple failure of the imagination. When, for instance, we hear only good implications in phrases such as “the greening of the environment,” we are clearly not thinking of the greening of Arctic regions or of, say, Greenland. No sane person would want such greening to continue. Perception is also slave to experience and ideology. It is possible, for instance, to look directly at something without seeing it, as the average stereogram proves. Moreover, some (perhaps much) of seeing, of course, has to do with ideology. As John Berger explains, “The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe. [. . .] We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves” (8, 9). Ways of seeing and of representing what we see reflect our blind spots, our prejudices, and our limitations. Seeing is only ever partial. Thornber’s book—whatever its faults—broadens our vision. This book is a must-read for anyone working in the environmental humanities.

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