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# **Review of *Ecocriticism and Asian American Literature: Gold Mountains, Weedflowers and Murky Globes* by Begoña Simal-González, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020; XV, 273 pp. ISBN 978-3-030-35618-7**

The environmental humanities has been carving out more and more analytical space, especially in the field of literary criticism, with a focus on its rhetorical dynamics and tensions within human and non-human relationships in the contemporary world. An environmental dimension also helps to negotiate and investigate certain sociocultural concerns and contexts within the boundaries of space and nature, with their mutual impact on both representation and interpretation of these relations through a lens of critical theory. *Ecocriticism and Asian American Literature: Gold Mountains, Weedflowers and Murky Globes* bridges environmental thought and the ecocritical potential of Asian American literary works, at the same time breaking the nature/culture dichotomy, which has proliferated to a considerable extent over the past few decades, and seems to be deeply rooted in essentialist modes of reasoning. Begoña Simal-González deftly navigates through uncharted waters of ecocritical thinking, and takes the readers on a journey which will leave them wonderstruck and inspired to search for their own path of eco-interpretation in the realm of literary works.

The volume constitutes the book series: “Literatures, Cultures, and the Environment” devoted to exploring environmental concerns in cultural and sociohistorical contexts. Chapter 1 serves as an introduction and a springboard for surveying the field of ecocriticism, where the author promises to fill in the theoretical void of ecocritical study and aims at “re-engaging Asian American literature with the new navigational tools of ecocriticism” (2). Simal-González fulfills this promise

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in full measure, since her ecocritical lens helps to reinterpret and reinvent new perspectives on a close reading of Asian American literary works. The selection of literary works is impressive as well, as it spans a period of over a century, from Edith Eaton's *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* (1912) to Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013). By exploring a variety of disparate texts, the author addresses a wide range of environmental issues and guides the reader across a turf of apparently tangled theoretical conceptualizations. The term 'turf' does not appear here accidentally. A useful property of a turf allows for lifting it and planting elsewhere in order to make a deeply-rooted lawn. Similarly to this process, ecocritical tools offered by Simal-González enable the reader to 'replant' critical theories anew and tailor them to the particular characteristics of the analyzed writings. In this introductory chapter, the author also draws our attention to the fact that for a long time environmental ecocritics had eluded an analysis of the already strained relationship between race and nature. Regardless of her own apprehension before handling this issue, Simal-González admits that "environmental criticism proved an excellent plow and the Asian American texts turned out to be far more fertile than expected" (2).

With this in mind, the author devotes Chapter 2 to the analysis of the first-contact narratives with their focus on the environment and its natural properties, where she successfully attempts to draw parallels between the characters' first-contact experiences of America. Simal-González juxtaposes the narratives of Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* (1946) and Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* (1980) to reveal disparate renditions of the father figure. Moreover, the analysis of the figurative use of the terms 'fog' and 'foggy' through the veil of poems, helps to notice the same sense of confusion and disorientation among immigrants on the new continent as depicted in Kingston's work. The motif of fog is also conspicuous in Gish Jen's *Typical American* (1991), where it intermingles with the artificial, human-made environment of monumental New York. Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989) is another example of fascination with a technological landscape of human-made artifacts. Simal-González emphasizes the fact that such a landscape eventually turns out to be a toxic one, as it builds up a somber, post-pastoral—almost apocalyptic—vision of the human era and, as a result, is a harbinger of "a new, transnatural nature" (38).

Chapter 3 focuses on the first Chinese American writer, Edith Eaton, and her criticism concerning the widespread animalization of Chinese Americans as an overt token of their denied humanity. Especially conspicuous throughout the nineteenth century, racial nativism among white Americans contributed to forging the non-assimilationist paradigm, which prevented Asian American communities from merging into American society and stained them with a widespread prejudice that "the inscrutable Chinese (American) would remain an inassimilable Other" (45) for the rest of their lives. Simal-González also employs a historical lens to analyze the problem of naturalization in the United States and points to the fact that "Asian Americans have historically been 'naturalized as an other in America'" (47), as American legislation denied them equal rights and opportunities from the very beginning of their settlement. The author aptly argues that the trope of animalization deprived racialized others of their human dignity and—through animalizing strategies—rendered them non-human, vermin-like and tantamount to the Yellow

Peril. An anti-Chinese mindset, predominant in nineteenth-century America, evinced itself in Orientalism and sinophobia, which was concomitant with the fact that “Chinese people were regarded either as objects of exotic curiosity (‘pets’) or as potential threats (‘pests’)” (50) respectively. Edith Eaton, under the pseudonym of Sui Sin Far, attempted to break the simplistic stereotypes of the Chinese. The anti-miscegenation laws, prevailing in the United States at the time, did not make this task any easier, since the persistent perception of the immigrants as a potential threat to American society, perpetuated existing stereotypes and precluded discarding the pet/pest binary. Simal-González succeeds in depicting “how ‘nature’ has been used to subjugate and marginalize racialized others” (76), proving that “Eaton’s work contributed to dismantling the racist animalization of Chinese Americans” (14).

In Chapter 4, Simal-González undertakes an ecocritical reading of Maxine Hong Kingston’s *China Men* (1980) and Shawn Wong’s *Homebase* (1979) through the prism of a cultural-nationalist project that voices claiming America for Asian Americans. For this purpose, the author employs two ecocritical tools: “the concept of land empathy and a process of land incorporation” (14). The aforementioned works are scrutinized in the light of literary conventions such as (post-) pastoralism and the prevailing discourse— cultural nationalism. The term “inlanding,” which Simal-González coins for the purpose of this study, refers to “the voluntary or involuntary incorporation of human bodies into natural landscapes, especially those construed as ‘unspoiled’” (102), which neatly inscribes into the analyzed immigrant narratives. In the process of inlanding, human form no longer melts into the landscape but gains its own visibility.

Japanese American literature assumes a different frame of reference due to its high saturation with post-internment trauma and resulting ramifications for the Japanese and Japanese Americans after the Pearl Harbor attack. The mass incarceration of over a hundred thousand people of Japanese descent reverberates in numerous testimonies of the Nisei—the immediate descendants of Japanese immigrants, who—apart from fighting prejudice and discrimination from the hands of American society—also struggle with their hybrid identities. Their literary works are abundant in references to nature and how the internees, especially the first generation of Japanese immigrants—the Issei, find solace in nature and attempt to adapt to adverse environmental conditions by means of small-scale landscaping, ornamental gardening and cultivating their own vegetables. Such a horticultural therapy becomes a tool of emotional healing for numerous inmates. In Chapter 5, devoted to Japanese American literature, Simal-González applies the theoretical lenses of biopolitics and material ecocriticism to examine four literary works: Monica Sone’s *Nisei Daughter* (1953), Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James Houston’s *Farewell to Manzanar* (1973), Perry Miyake’s *21st Century Manzanar* (2002) and Cynthia Kadohata’s *Weedflower* (2008). In her analysis, two types of interaction come to the foreground within the camp perimeters: herding the internees into former holding pens and horse stables (“animalization”) along with extreme temperatures and dust storms, which made it difficult to adapt to such an arid desert habitat (“environment shock”). Simal-González also employs the biopolitical *campo* paradigm, theorized by Giorgio Agamben, in order to trace the agency of the internees

and their gradual transformation from the *homo sacer*, where “Americans of Japanese ancestry became (...) the individuals that could be dispensed with for the sake of the nation, regardless of their loyalty and citizenship” (153), into *homo agricola* and finally into *homo ecologicus*. Thus, the author nails her point that “the paradigm of traditional agrarianism, with its goal of ‘taming’ nature, was initially the prevalent one in concentration camps” (169).

Chapter 6 is committed to the analysis of Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* (1990) and Ruth Ozeki’s *My Year of Meats* (1998), *All Over Creation* (2003) and *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013), which depart from conventional Asian American narratives. The phenomenon of globalization that they deal with testifies to recent transnational and transnatural paradigm shifts in ecocriticism. Yamashita, revealing “the anthropogenic ecosystem of the jungle junkyard” (223) in the heart of the Amazonian rainforest, testifies to the notion that the nature/culture dichotomy has long ceased to exist and what we are currently witnessing is the constant entanglement of the human-nature relationship, where the artificial (plastic) environment has already blended into pristine nature. As an example of post-pastoral fiction, *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* navigates—by means of blurring the distinction between the natural and the artificial—towards criticizing human greed and urges everyone “to denounce the ease with which human beings naturalize what is artificial” (228). Ozeki’s novels, marked with a feminist tinge, are especially amenable to an ecocritical reading, since they push the boundaries of traditional eco-thinking and encourage to adopt a broader theoretical perspective. For that matter, Simal-González successfully demonstrates “how Ozeki’s particular handling of different time-space paradigms ... allows her to reconcile materiality with immateriality” (215) and what consequences it holds for an ecocritical interpretation. Although every novel assumes a different eco-perspective (*My Year of Meats* focusing on the meat industry and domestic violence, *All Over Creation*—on genetically modified organisms, and *A Tale for the Time Being*—on metaphysical matters), Ozeki’s works demonstrate that resistance to detrimental practices, when applied judiciously, can curb toxic discourse and contribute to a better understanding of “global interdependence, indeterminacy, and the interaction of matter and consciousness” (235).

Even though—out of necessity—the selection of prose narratives has been narrowed down mostly to Chinese American and Japanese American literary works (and appears as the only limitation in this monograph), it has not prevented Begoña Simal-González from addressing issues relevant to ecocritical discourse. The ecocritical journey across first-contact narratives, racial nativism rampant in the nineteenth century, the mass internment of the Japanese and Japanese Americans in the 1940s, and finally, new currents in Asian American literature since the 1990s showcases that a cross-pollination of conventional and novel ecocritical approaches proves fruitful for innovative insights and drawing new lines of demarcation within the contemporary ecocritical paradigm.

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