

**Environmental Justice and Third Wave Ecocritical
Approaches to Literature and Film**

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In Alejandro González Iñárritu's film, *Babel*, a wealthy American couple travels to Morocco, leaving their Mexican nanny and children at home. Peering from the windows of their air-conditioned tour bus, the wife suddenly slumps. Minutes before, two young Berber boys take aim at the bus with a rifle given to them to protect their goats from jackals. They want to see how far their bullet will go. Iñárritu's focus on the Berbers (who have survived in North Africa since the seventh century B.C. by fiercely resisting various invaders including the Arabs) draws his audience's attention to the plight of the world's indigenous peoples. Like other indigenous peoples, these boys have been denied access to education which is depicted in the film by the sharp contrasts in dress, language, and living conditions between the Berbers and the Arab-speaking Moroccan authorities who pronoun to the global media that the shooting is surely the work of terrorists. The rifle, acquired by the Berber family from a wealthy Japanese big-game hunter, becomes a symbol of how First World peoples exploit the resources of indigenous peoples through hunting, tourism, mining, logging, or oil extraction, while poverty draws indigenous peoples into participation in the economic and environmental exploitation of their own cultures and resources.

Like the citizens of Babylon after the fall of the Tower, Iñárritu shows how his characters are surrounded a "babble" of political, economic, and media discourses that have uneven effects on different groups of people. The American couple, for example, is eventually rescued while the Berber family is hunted down and their images flashed by the global media around the world. Arun Appadurai might have been commenting on these characters when he observes that the forces of globalization take place on a scale so large that it "vastly compromises the capacities of actors in single locations to understand, much less to anticipate or resist" (17-18). However, he argues that there are "new possibilities for equity hidden in ... [the] workings" of globalization (1). These possibilities lie in the potential for each of us, especially those of us who are teachers and students, to use our access to "resources for learning, teaching and cultural criticism" to help build communities with a "global view of globalization" (Appadurai 4).

Overwhelmingly, ecocritics have tended to agree with the notion that writers, readers, scholars and teachers have access to resources that might counter linked social and environmental injustices. In *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Cheryl Glotfelty writes that the role of the “ecocritic” is “to ask how literature and literary criticism can be a force for or against environmental change” (xix). In *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, Lawrence Buell surveys the ways that the field has paralleled and kept pace with increasingly complex environmental debates. Buell writes that the environmental justice movement (first examined in the *The Environmental Justice Reader*) has had a powerful impact on literary studies. While “first wave” environmental criticism concerns itself with nature writing and conservation-oriented environmentalism, “second wave” environmental criticism increasingly concerns itself with environmental justice and “issues of environmental welfare and equity” (112). In his co-edited collection, *Shades of the Planet*, Buell adds that large-scale events, like Hurricane Katrina, require us to think “environmentally” and “ecologically,” and (because a Category 3 hurricane does not originate inside the nation) “against” and “beyond” nationness (227). Buell goes on to (re)read his previous work on *Moby Dick* as an entry point into a wider array of texts, including Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* and Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange*. Like these novels, with their transnational perspectives, *Moby Dick* can be seen as “harbinger of contemporary ecoglobalist imagination” (242).

Buell’s ecoglobal reading of Melville is a wonderful example of what Scott Slovic and I have called “third wave” ecocriticism (6). This critical approach builds on the first two “waves,” as defined by Buell in *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, as it examines multicultural literatures and arts that intuitively recognize “ethnic and national particularities” while, at the same time, transcending “ethnic and national boundaries” and exploring human experience from ecoglobal perspectives (Adamson and Slovic 6). In what follows, then, I want to nest Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead* and Iñárritu’s *Babel* within the context of the Earth Charter, The Seventeen Principles of Environmental Justice, and The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in order to explore further what “recognizing ethnic and national particularities” yet, “transcending ethnic and national boundaries” might mean. I will also explore why third wave approaches must continue to pay careful attention to the potential of the local, regional, and national to shelter individuals, groups, and ecosystems from injustice.

In *Babel*, when the American couple does not return on time, their Mexican nanny, Amalie, reluctantly takes the couple’s blond, blue-eyed children across the U.S/Mexico

border to her son's wedding. On the way back to the U.S., a Border Patrol agent becomes suspicious, and after a series of sad and disorienting events that separates Amalie from the children, she is sharply questioned by U.S. authorities using a legalistic discourse she does not fully understand. This discourse, forged in support of international trade, renders Amalie powerless to defend herself and she is deported. William Greider has written persuasively about how international trade agreements are designed to cripple attempts to regulate corporations and undermine long-established national and local protections for social welfare and economic justice, environmental values, and individual rights, and this is an important insight for third wave ecocritics (Greider 20). Also, as I explain in a forthcoming essay on the influence of the environmental justice movement on environmental literary studies, much of the work currently being done in the area of transnational literary studies leaves border eradication in the realm of metaphor and culture while leaving the actual consequences of globalization and free trade on real world people and communities unexamined (See Adamson, "Literature-and-Environment"). Iñárritu details these consequences so vividly that it becomes impossible to romanticize the rhetoric of globalization which celebrates the weakening of borders so that capital and ideas can supposedly flow more freely.

Appadurai finds hope for resisting the unjust consequences of globalization in "a series of social forms" that can be characterized as "grassroots globalization" (3). The Earth Charter, is an excellent example of this social form and was created by an international community seeking to bring "forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace" (Preamble). The project began as a United Nations initiative, but it was carried forward and completed by a global civil society initiative. The drafting of the Earth Charter involved the most inclusive citizen participatory process ever associated with the creation of an international declaration.

In *Almanac of the Dead*, Silko creates characters engaged in a form of "grassroots globalization" that looks very much like the types of mobilization that preceded that drafting of documents like The Earth Charter, The Seventeen Principles of Environmental Justice, and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Indeed, these documents read like they could be summaries of Silko's larger themes. *Almanac* affirms the ecological unity and interdependence of all species, and calls for universal protection from toxic wastes that threaten the fundamental right to clean air, land, water and food (Environmental Justice Principles 1, 4). The novel also recognizes the right of indigenous peoples to control their own cultural heritages, languages, and resources (UN Declaration Article 33). The plot focuses on an indigenous Army of Retribution and Justice that includes a transnational

alliance of indigenous and non-indigenous groups working to claim these rights. Many critics have written about the affinities between this Army and the Zapatistas of Chiapas, Mexico, who rose up in 1994 to oppose the implementation of an international trade agreement that favored corporate agribusiness and disempowered indigenous farmers. As María Josephina Saldaña-Portillo has observed in her in-depth study of Zapatista organizing, the group took a stand against international trade agreements that threatened the “triumph of neoliberalism and globalization” by “demanding control over economic resources for indigenous peoples” (12). They based this stand on their rights as Mexican citizens, and, at the same time, as indigenous peoples. They were not working to “transcend” their national citizenship, but to claim it, along with all the civil rights that citizenship entails. Thus, Silko’s novel offers profound insight into the eighty years of dedicated work by indigenous leaders from all over the world who learned from the experiences of the American Indian Movement, the Zapatistas, and others, and who, along with their non-indigenous allies, organized the campaign for adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (See “About UNPFII). The Declaration recognizes the planetary richness and diversity of all peoples while, at the same time, affirming the right of indigenous peoples to organize locally and regionally for political, economic, social, cultural and environmental protection. Both the novel and the organizing around the Declaration illustrate why we must continue to pay careful attention to the potential of local, regional, and national (laws and initiatives) might shelter individuals, groups, and ecosystems from injustice.

Silko’s representation of hemispheric indigenous activism has important implications for third wave ecocriticism and highlights the reasons why Buell and others are calling for “ecoglobal” perspectives that help us recognize, to use the words of the Earth Charter, that we are standing at a “critical moment in earth’s history, a time when humanity must choose its future” (Preamble). By teaching films like *Babel*, we offer our students a “global view of globalization.” By teaching novels like *Almanac*, we offer students insights into emerging global civil society initiatives that are facilitating democratic participation in communities with a clear picture of “the political, economic, and pedagogic advantages of counter globalization” (Appaduai 19). Add to this curriculum other films such as *Flow*, which examines global water issues, and *Taking Root*, which examines Wangari Mathai’s social and environmental activism in Kenya, and we offer students additional examples of successful citizen participation that results in socially and ecologically beneficial change. Offering them resources that “globalize knowledge” prepares our students to “choose their future” more wisely.

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