

Ecozon@ with love

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Congratulations and welcome, *Ecozon@*! May this journal support a lively meeting of minds around the globe as we pool our best ideas about culture and environment, story and place, ecocriticism and the earth. There is no telling what ultimate effect *Ecozon@* will have in the world. Perhaps Scholar A will publish something in this journal that will be noticed by Reader B, who will make a recommendation to Professor C, who will be inspired to teach Text D, which will be read by Student E, who will go on to start Group F, known for spreading Idea G, leading to positive changes H, I, and J. It could happen. It does happen. If it didn't, why would we write?

I would like to introduce this short essay rather unconventionally by sharing an email exchange I had with *Ecozon@*'s general editor, Carmen Flys Junquera, in which I unsuccessfully attempted to decline her kind invitation to contribute a piece to this inaugural issue:

Dear Carmen,

It's good to hear from you, and thanks for the reminder about *Ecozon@*. I have been contemplating what I might write that responds to your stated topics. To be honest, I find myself without anything important to say about the field. I have spent the last twelve years working on regional literature, editing a comprehensive anthology of Nevada literature (831 pages) and giving many public lectures around the region to educate people about Nevada's surprisingly rich literary tradition. (I do this so that people who live in Nevada--so many of them newcomers to the state--will, through story, more strongly identify with this place as home--and, hopefully, take care of it.) So I'm afraid that I'm not positioned well these days to speak broadly about directions of the field in general. If I get an inspiration, I will let you know, but, honestly, my attention has been so focused on the micro that I don't think I have anything worthwhile to write about the macro. Thanks very much for the honor of the invitation though, and best wishes with the journal!

Cheers from here, Cheryll

Six minutes later:

P.S. Carmen, one more thought: If you would like me to write something that explains the motivation for my last decade of regional research, discusses my recent public lecture tours in Nevada (and what I observed), and maybe speculate about the role of regional studies in our global era, I could do that. It's complicated, and the piece may consist mainly of questions.

Cheers, Cheryll

Dear Cheryll,

Actually, as I was reading your previous email, precisely that thought came to mind. Why DO you think it is important to focus on the regional, the local place? That is just what Ursula Heise is criticizing as a very American thing while she moves towards eco-cosmopolitanism.¹ I think it would be very interesting as a possible debate. So, I hope you will accept the challenge!

Best wishes, Carmen

Dear Carmen,

I accept the challenge.

Best, Cheryll

It might seem strange that after co-editing *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, which attempted to persuade literary scholars to take up environmental thought, my next major project would be to edit an anthology of literature from the U.S. state of Nevada, intended for a regional audience. Why would someone with access to a megaphone choose instead to whisper? The Nevada project removed me from the evolution of ecocriticism. Or did it? A forthcoming review of *Literary Nevada: Writings from the Silver State* describes the book as “a labor of love” (Cremean). Indeed it was, and it may be that some or many of the future directions of ecocriticism in the twenty-first century will likewise spring from a critic’s love.

¹ Flys-Junquera is referring to Ursula K. Heise’s *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*, in which Heise critiques an “excessive investment in the local” by American environmentalist thinkers, arguing for “eco-cosmopolitanism,” or environmental world citizenship” (Heise 10).

I moved across the country to join the faculty at the University of Nevada, Reno in 1990. Sometimes we get lucky. After spending nearly a decade in graduate school hunkering down under the gray skies of upstate New York, I was euphoric to find myself in the arid West, where the mountainous horizon silhouetted against the sunset was as sharply defined as Japanese kirigami. The vast sky was open and clear, the air tinged with aroma of sagebrush, *the sun!, the sun!, the sun!* a bright god of clean heat that spoke to a deep need too long repressed. I decided then and there that if I did not get tenure I would be a card dealer in the casinos--anything to stay. After a mobile childhood propelled by my father's career and later by my own education, I thirsted to take root and take to heart Gary Snyder's call to "find your place on earth, dig in, and take responsibility from there" (Snyder 1975: 101). I soon learned that Nevada's problems are legion, its national reputation as a wasteland being one of them, linked to many others, some environmental, such as being targeted as the site for the United States' only high-level nuclear waste dump. Nevada seemed to suffer from a self-image problem, I sensed, as many of my students wished they weren't "stuck in Reno," wished they were somewhere else.

As a literary scholar, I decided that one way to contribute to my place on earth would be to discover, collect, and publish Nevada's literary heritage. I recently completed the book and embarked on a series of public humanities lectures around the state to share Nevada literature with Nevadans. In my evangelical zeal, I fancied myself bringing enlightenment to the small towns of the state's rural hinterland, communities that had little access to culture. However, it was I who became enlightened. People across the land were doing amazing things culturally to improve their local environments, understood to be "the places in which we live, work, play, and worship" (Adamson, Evans and Stein 2002: 4). A retired woman in the small town of Searchlight had worked tirelessly to create a splendid museum of local history. A Basque hotel in Winnemucca had converted its back room to be a community arts event center, featuring poetry readings, lectures, and music. A group of enterprising citizens calling itself the Ely Renaissance Society had revitalized the dilapidated mining town by raising money to commission twenty-eight beautiful murals and sculptures that depict facets of the town's cosmopolitan history and culture. An art collector in Eureka had spearheaded the restoration of a 19th-century Opera House, whose calendar of cultural events draws a crowd from a 300-kilometer radius. And everywhere, people were writing. The books that I was given along my lecture circuit expressed a deep engagement with place, exactly the kind of respectful, reciprocal relationship to the environment that ecocritics celebrate in the work of more widely known authors. For example, in his self-published chapbook, *Ruby Mountain*

Rhymes, ninety-year-old Jack Walther, who has ranched outside of Elko for most of his life, writes,

I am part of this range of waving grass,
Part of the evening breeze, the gentle rains that pass.
I am the horse or range cow that moves out there so free.
Deep down within, they seem a part of me.

I am the snows on the mountain that cause the streams to flow,
Spreading out on the valley, urging the grass to grow.
The meadow in the valley, the leaves and branches of a tree,
They are more than a thing of beauty. They are a part of me. . . . (Walther 2)

There is a lived wisdom in these lines and in the life of Jack Walther--and in the community service of a host of other dedicated citizens--that has much to teach, even in an age of globally scaled problems. These people, who are on the ground and integrally attuned to specific places, play a crucial, hands-on role in caring for, restoring, and celebrating environments around the globe.

Those who argue that we must become world citizens, mindful of planetary systems, are absolutely right. Problems such as climate change, clean-water scarcity, and loss of biodiversity will require that people around the world work together, imagining the whole earth as our collective backyard. At the same time, I think, we should not underrate the value and environmental efficacy of a local sense of place. Every place on earth needs its champions. There is no global constituency that is going to concern itself with Ely, Nevada. I believe we need to become “*both-and*” thinkers, capable of multi-scaled responses to the problems and opportunities of our time. We should follow our hearts as well as our heads. Heeding our individual callings will mean that some ecocritics will work primarily on regional literatures and activities, while others will focus most of their efforts on international questions and issues. All of it is important work. Critical diversity is a sign of health in an intellectual field just as biodiversity is in a tall-grass prairie.

Is eco-cosmopolitanism an oxymoron if it entails frequent flying? Electronic journals such as *Ecozon@* can help foster eco-cosmopolitanism without enlarging our carbon footprints. How can ecocritics use the World Wide Web to empower local people to take care

of their place on earth? How can regionalism avoid narrow-mindedness and globalism avoid overgeneralizing? Can *Ecozon@* promote *both* a sense of planet *and* a sense of places?

Works Cited

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