

Strategies for a Cross-Cultural Ecofeminist Literary Criticism

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Interdisciplinarity, multiculturalism, internationalism—according to Cheryll Glotfelty, these are crucial areas for ecocriticism’s continued development. Drawing on fifty years of interdisciplinary work in Women’s Studies, ecofeminist literary critics with a history of work in multiculturalism would seem well poised to offer bridging strategies toward an international ecocriticism. Are there insights we can draw from the analyses of multicultural feminisms within the United States to guide the development of ecofeminist literary criticisms cross-culturally? What features of this ecocriticism will need to change? For if both feminism and ecocriticism are grounded in specific material, cultural, and economic relations to place and history, then ecofeminist literary criticism cannot be expected to remain the same from one set of eco-social relations to the next.

Like much of ecocriticism, ecofeminist literary criticism is grounded in activism, and committed to using literary criticism as a strategy for ecodefense. In the west, ecofeminism is an environmental theory and practice that developed in the 1980s through antinuclear peace protests at Greenham Common in England, as well as at Seneca Falls and at the Women’s Pentagon Actions; it has roots in feminist vegetarianism through Feminists for Animal Rights, antiracist feminism through the Woman Earth Feminist Peace Institute, feminist earth-based spiritualities and feminist political engagements as well as through the international Green movement. After nearly two decades of activist and theorized engagements, ecofeminist literary criticism took root in U.S., Australian, and European ecocriticism, reaching ecocritics in Japan, China, and Taiwan in the past decade.

The key characteristics of ecofeminist literary critique in western contexts include efforts to

1. illuminate relationships among humans across a variety of social, cultural, economic, and political differences, and between humans and the rest of nature, exploring the ways that these human relationships shape our relationships to nature—to our own embodiment as nature, to other humans classified as “nature,” and to the environments and species with whom our lives come in contact—and

- contribute to or diminish the freedom and flourishing of all participants affected by these relationships;
2. critique the many forms of alienation, hierarchy, and domination (including but not limited to speciesism, sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, ageism, ableism, and anthropocentrism) and advocate the centrality of social diversity and biodiversity as necessary foundations to our survival on this planet; and
 3. emphasize the urgency of political action aimed at ecosocial transformation: healing alienated individuals, cultures, and systems, through transformed and egalitarian spiritual, psychological, literary, agricultural, ecological and/or economic practices; dismantling institutions of oppression and building egalitarian and ecocentric networks in their place (Gaard & Murphy 1998).

Ecofeminist literary criticism draws on and contributes to an interdisciplinary array of approaches, from feminist literary criticisms and ecofeminist theories to feminist ethics and philosophies, radical environmental philosophy, critical animal studies, and radical economic and political theories about globalization, economics, ecology and politics.

Most fundamental to ecofeminism is the insight that the culture/nature dualism of western culture is gendered: that is, men and masculinity are associated with culture and culture is valued, whereas women and femaleness are associated with nature and both are devalued. These linked valuations lead to hierarchy, which is then used to justify the domination of women, nature, and all those so associated. Exposing these conceptual linkages—in literature and culture as well as political thought, media, education, and other aspects of society--has been a key component of ecofeminist ecocriticism. But is the culture/nature gender dualism of western culture relevant in eastern cultures as well? Can western ecofeminist analyses be useful in exploring contemporary Chinese women writers' views of "nature" by examining conceptual associations among women and animals, feminized or queer sexualities, and natural elements (i.e, water, air) as gendered manifestations of "nature" and therefore subject to exploitation by masculinized "culture"? To explore these and other related questions for a presentation at ASLE 2009, I set up paired readings of texts--Taiwanese writer Ang Li's *The Butcher's Wife and Other Stories* and Asian-American feminist Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats*; Taiwanese writer Chu T'ien-wen's *Notes of a Desolate Man* and U.S. radical feminist Susan Griffin's *Woman and Nature*; and Chinese author Hong Ying's *Peacock Cries at the Three Gorges* with Chickasaw-American

feminist Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms*—and through this comparative approach, sought to develop strategies and boundary conditions for a cross-cultural ecofeminist literary criticism.

Globalization and the Limits of Language

What I discovered immediately were the limitations of language, as a symbol system that is contextually inflected. Certainly the insights of postcolonial theorists Trinh T. Minh-ha, Homi Bhabha, and Edward Said are relevant in pointing out the ways that literary texts and language itself are multiply-layered systems of meaning with perhaps countless referents that make interpretation inexact if not impossible. The difficulty increases, and the meanings become even more elusive, through the process of translation, which requires that the original writer's symbol system be understood and conveyed accurately and inclusively in another symbol system, replete with its own references, histories, and contexts. Finally, differences of power among subject positions for writer, translator, and reader influence the production and reception of literary texts.

As a western ecofeminist reading Chinese and Taiwanese women's contemporary literature, I had to acknowledge the near-impossibility of becoming fully literate in the multiple contexts within which these texts have been produced—contexts that are simultaneously gendered, literary, historical, cultural, ecological, economic, and sexual. As a cultural outsider, I can point out some (but not all) of the themes that signal the transitions powered by “globalization from above” (Appadurai), or the influence of U.S. culture and economies on Asian literary contexts. I can shape questions about the meaning of the literary themes I observe, and their implications for social and environmental justice, but my answers may only be as reliable as my own partial knowledge about the multiple contexts in which these characters and stories develop. At the same time, I can explore the uses of cross-cultural feminism, highlighting women's oppression based on narratives of women who are cultural “insiders,” and through literary criticism, build theoretical frameworks for feminist solidarity, effectively “globalizing-from-below.” With other feminists working on issues of global feminism, I can challenge narratives that would legitimate women's oppression on the basis of cultural traditions.

Multiculturalism, Internationalism, and Cross-Cultural Feminisms

As Susin Moller Okin's volume, *Is Multiculturalism Bad For Women?* points out, under the rhetoric of multiculturalism, appeals for respecting social practices that require women's subordination have been advanced, and such appeals have been used strategically to

block feminist critiques across cultures. But sexism is a historic part of most cultures—not a unique feature of a particular culture, dominant or subordinate, West or East, first-world or two-thirds world—and it must be uprooted if women are to enjoy true freedom and equality within that culture. In developing cross-cultural feminist and ecofeminist literary critiques, it may be possible and even necessary to advance some minimum general statements about women’s conditions, needs, and rights globally. Transnational human rights organizations from Oxfam, UNICEF, and Amnesty International, to Women Living Under Muslim Laws, along with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, argue that oppression will not be legitimated with appeals to culture or tradition.

These generalizations about women must take into consideration intra-cultural differences of class, region (urban/rural), ethnicity, and sexuality. Particularly in the contemporary novels I selected for comparative reading, “globalization” often means *westernization*, and such westernization can be perceived simultaneously as a form of cultural, economic, technological, ecological, and political “progress” that improves the lives of the middle and upper classes while bypassing or even harming the lives of poor, working class, or impoverished Chinese and Taiwanese. Because the process of globalization is currently in motion, contemporary literary texts provide snapshots of characters and cultures in transition, creating plots that retain traditional values and beliefs about family, ancestors, spirituality, sexuality, and nature at the same time as they articulate western values and practices of sexuality, economics, and technology as taken on by the upwardly-mobile classes.

Where globalization—and particularly “globalization from above”—is seen from a first-world ecofeminist perspective as a form of colonization, this same globalization-from-above is often welcomed by the urban middle and upper classes of China and Taiwan, and the women of those classes as well, who see westernization as bringing freedom from restrictive traditional gender roles. These are the women who have the freedom, education, and resources to write fictional narratives, often representing their own roots in rural poverty and the traditional family. Do they speak for all women in their culture? Are their views universally shared? With bell hooks, ecofeminists strive to create “feminist theory from margin to center,” foregrounding the perspectives of the most marginalised—yet how can we locate these perspectives if we are reading the literature in translation, without being members ourselves of that second-world or third-world country, proficient in the language, histories, and diverse subcultures alike?

These questions were further illuminated in July 2009, when I taught a graduate seminar on Ecofeminist Literary Criticism at Tamkang University in Taiwan, and we discussed these features of language, literature, and translation. After studying some U.S. literary texts through the lens of foundational readings in ecocriticism and ecofeminism, students brought an ecofeminist literary perspective to bear in exploring intersections of gender, sexuality, class, and environment in their own literature and culture. These students' final papers were electrifying—analyses ranged from stray dogs, betel nut girls and rural agriculture to popular filmic and literary narratives, cartoons, and Confucianism—but what stood out most powerfully was the analysis of activism. In a U.S. context, ecofeminist criticism has advocated a confrontational approach to injustice, along with an advocacy of individual rights and direct action that is less acceptable in Asian cultures. Emphasizing community over individualism, and tradition over novelty, these Taiwanese graduate students suggested strategies for ecofeminist critique that retrieved more liberatory features from their own highly respected traditions of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Taken together, their essays articulated foundations for an ecofeminist literary criticism more suited to Taiwanese culture.

Any critique of cultural traditions and cultural narratives harming women and/or nature must be initiated and led by the women within the culture itself; ecofeminist literary critics will be little more than colonizers if we use this ecocriticism to legitimate criticizing other cultures solely in accord with our own standards for narrative form and content, gender equality and environmental health. Instead, what we can do is offer the tools of ecofeminist analysis to feminist literary critics of other cultures, and develop relationships with these cultural insiders so that we can work in solidarity. Collaborations and co-authored essays, with feminist colleagues in the East and the two-thirds world as first authors, offer suitable frameworks for developing an authentic and culturally-specific ecofeminist literary criticism. Such an approach requires “listening to the experiences and analyses of the women working for social and environmental justice within a particular culture, building relationships among cultural insiders and outsiders, and working in solidarity to support the insiders' efforts” (Gaard “Strategies”). Our participation as first-world ecofeminist literary critics should be to bring our excessive resources—visibility, publication, translation, conference presentation, guest lecturing—to support the efforts for self-determination and ecosocial justice led by the indigenous women writers of every world culture.

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