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Ve-Yin Tee, ed. *Romantic Environmental Sensibility: Nature, Class and Empire*. (Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 304 pp.

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A novelist, sculptor and ideological tinkerer, Ve-Yin Tee applies an imaginative mind to the curation of an engaging and eclectic volume of Romantic ecocriticism from a diverse international assemblage of contributors. Tee here takes a broader view of the Romantic canon than in his own previous targeted Romantic criticism. The volume creates a space for an open exploration of ideas about the significance of class and race in the construction of Romantic ideology and the legacy of this ideology in the aesthetic and ethic of environmentalism today.

For Tee, the concept of “nature” carries “historical baggage, freighted with an obfuscating [and class-coded] preoccupation with wilderness and beauty” and “has now become a debilitating delusion in our era of environmental catastrophe” (4). However, the idea of nature cannot and need not be eschewed altogether; rather, what is needed is a careful deconstruction of nature and an examination of its parts. The Romantic movement was dominated by upper-class writers and mired in colonial ideals. Consequently, the aesthetics of nature and environmentalism it begot remains today largely fixed in an upper-class and neo-colonial perspective, which counterproductively perpetuates ecological destruction and disenfranchisement. Perhaps through careful ecocritical examination, Tee implies, the Romantic idea of nature could be tinkered into a shape that inspires more effective and just efforts in the fight against global ecological destruction.

Tee is loosely allied, then, with other contemporary environmental historians such as Carolyn Merchant and Richard Grove, who have retraced and examined the construction of nature, and problematized its use historically as an ideological focal point for the generation or perpetuation of social and economic inequality. The two parts of the book, “Green Imperialism” and “Land and Creature Ethics,” are titled in tribute to Grove and to Aldo Leopold, respectively. Tee writes, “By placing essays reflecting the diversity of Romantic environmentalism at home and abroad beside each other, it is my fervent hope to put the spirit of these two very different people in conversation” (11). He succeeds in this, as critical environmental histories of British imperialism in the first part of the book meet comparative explorations of British land ethics in the second part.

Part I, “Green Imperialism,” opens with Kuri Katsuyama’s close reading of early Romantic-era descriptive accounts of Chinese gardens, produced by members of a British Embassy to China. Katsuyama sets the tone for the first part of the book as she demonstrates through reflection on the aesthetic descriptions of these British visitors that “aesthetics [are] never [...] abstracted from the social and political contexts in which all of us are embedded” (18). The essays to follow in Part I continue this work of teasing out and showcasing the aesthetics of Romantic nature as they have been used to construct class-based and race-based hierarchies upon landscapes in global contexts.

As these essays take us across Chinese, Indian, American, and British landscapes and through time, the distinctness of these landscapes blurs evocatively. We find ourselves in San Francisco’s “Ecogothic Chinatown,” (Li-hsin Hsu) and upon British plantations in India (Rosie Dias, Romita Ray), and the reader is able to observe how concepts of nature and class on one landscape have inspired powerful aesthetic responses on others. A perfect example can be found in Laurence Williams’s discussion of British gardens and their roots in Chinese upper class garden aesthetics and the values they represented, which extended and morphed within the British class imagination.

Rosie Dias takes us to British colonial India for a nuanced look at the construction of social status upon the landscape. And in a stirring conclusion to Part I, Romita Ray builds upon Dias’s momentum as she traces the tiger as a symbol, both of ferocious nature, and, when beheaded for a grizzly trophy, colonial domination in the British tea plantations of Assam. With this powerfully evocative final contribution to a vivid series of imagistic and thought-provoking chapters, the reader is left at the end of Part I to contemplate independently the ideas that have been disturbed and dislodged. Part I succeeds in inspiring the reader to new ideas and a shifting perspective on the role of Romantic ideology in global imperialism. Nevertheless, the reader is left craving some synthesis; a short conclusion, perhaps, to situate the new ideas in the history of ecocriticism or articulate explicitly the questions that have been raised which warrant further critical examination.

The latter half of the volume, “Part II: Land and Creature Ethics,” focuses much more narrowly upon the British landscape and British environmental sensibilities and aesthetics. It therefore lacks the sweeping scope and wildly engaging twists and turns of Part I. However, the reader benefits from a more structured and iterative pedagogical experience as the contributors deliver a focused and in-depth curriculum on the class dimensions of British nature writing. This second part brings to the fore the lesser-known writings of working-class British Romantics for long-overdue critical analysis, in service to Tee’s ambition for the book to “recover an alternative, or marginal, or suppressed land ethics from the Romantic period” (7).

In his own chapter contribution in this second part, Tee returns to his roots as a critic of Romantic literature. He contributes an in-depth comparative analysis of the work of the affluent Romantic poet William Shenstone and that of James Woodhouse. The latter was a working-class shoemaker-poet who drew his inspiration from the very same manor house grounds that inspired Shenstone’s better-known nature poetry. Adam Bridgen, Yuko Otagaki, and Simon J. White attend as well to the lives and literary works of lesser-known, working class poets of the Romantic period in

Britain. Together, the contributions construct a case for looking back with respect and critical attention to the working-class Romantics, whose poverty resulted in relative obscurity but also in much more direct and frequent contact with the land and living creatures about which they wrote. White highlights, for instance, in his discussion of the British upper-class compulsion to a “tidy” (235) and perhaps “sanitized” land aesthetic, that working-class writers of the period are well placed to provide alternative and perhaps more realistic representations of natural beauty. Bridgen articulates the central case of Part II most explicitly when he states that the writings of working-class Romantics provide a rich “archive” for “uncovering a more critical history of environmental exploitation” (188).

The book might have been further expanded, perhaps, into the ideological landscape of American Romanticism. It would be instructive to see connections drawn between British environmental aesthetics and their politicized American successors—for example in discussions of “public land,” “enclosure,” the image of an “unpeopled natural wilderness,” and the influence of these ideas upon the United States’ anti-indigenous land management crusades. Perhaps we might look for such analyses and more about the influence of the global diaspora of British Romantic aesthetics and ideals in future edited volumes from Tee.

This stimulating collection of chapters leaves us with many new curiosities; the volume raises more questions than it answers, and provides little synthesis for the reader, but we come away with a sense of great possibility for creatively re-assembling “nature” and environmentalism by re-examining the Romantic canon that gave them life. All of the contributors would likely agree that ecocritics must lift up diverse and counter-hegemonic portrayals of the land and its creatures, and remain conscious and vigilant of the roles of class and empire in the history and aesthetics of the environmental movement. Some conception and construction of “nature” is perhaps inescapable, but we need not subscribe to a hegemonic construction, and in fact we need not have only one Romanticism or only one nature. To quote an adage now used by environmentalists of many different stripes, “the future is eclectic.”