

Syaman Rapongan's Littoral Gothic and EcoGothic Asia

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Since the emergence of modernity, the perceived Eastern emphasis on the harmony between humanity and nature has been profoundly challenged and reshaped by the processes of globalization, industrialization, and militarization. Asia, as a geo-poetic imaginary and a geo-political locus, projects both utopic imagination and dystopic anxiety. It juggles between tropical paradise and over-populated mega-cities, philosophical serenity, and militarized bio-hazard zones. It boasts both keen recyclers and key polluters in the world. Landscapes by both non-Asian and Asian authors about or in Asia magnify, problematize, and sometimes accelerate such disquieting and polarized projections. Recent publications on Asian literatures and cultures have offered new ecological perspectives and insights, showing the necessity of addressing global environmental crises through more diversified and situated methodologies and perspectives.¹ Built upon previous scholarship, this special issue on EcoGothic Asia is one of the very first scholarly attempts to address the intimate connections between Asian landscapes and ecological consciousness through the dual lens of ecocriticism and the Gothic mode.

Syaman Rapongan, a contemporary Indigenous writer from Taiwan, once compared spearfishing in the subtidal zone in the Pacific Ocean at night as “drifting into the esophagus of the evil spirit” (“Let the Wind Take the Evil Spirit Away”).² While night diving has been a traditional way of living for the Tao (Tau) people of Orchid Island, an island situated to the southeast of the island of Taiwan, not only does the darkness in the underwater world instigate fear in the minds of Indigenous fishermen, but the subtidal zone Rapongan frequents is also a treacherous terrain for both men and animals, with deep trenches connected to a valley nicknamed “The Valley of Cattle Grave” by the local tribesmen as, in the past, Tao people would chase straying cattle out of their sweet potato fields into the valley, and thus send these animals to their early death. It is also a place where people might find floating bodies of their relatives, victims of accidental drowning. The cove where Rapongan fished, facing another nearby island, Jiteiwan (in Tao language, or “Lesser Orchid Island” in Chinese) is called by local people as “the evil spirit’s

Ximending” (a well-known shopping district in the Taipei City). The two metaphors—“an esophagus of the evil spirit” and “the evil spirit’s Ximending”—might not be a coincidence, if we consider how for Rapongan and his people, the sea and urban consumerism, symbolized by the capital city’s commercial district, both represent an economic (as well as ecological) hunting ground, with their shared affinity in the predatory relationship of consumption and production, or in Rapongan’s case, the obtaining of natural resources for one’s survival.³

As will be shown in the collection of essays, creative writing, interview, and translation featured in this special issue, the projected ecological intimacy between the human and the nonhuman in Asia has never been free from its demons, monsters, spirits, and ghosts. Rapongan’s Indigenous sea-writing is a case in point. Rapongan’s piece was published in *United Daily News* in 2003, a time when the claims made by the Tao people to their ancestral rights and aboriginal identity began to be noticed publicly.⁴ The early 2000s was when the Tao people finally terminated their contract with the Taiwan Power Company over the storage of nuclear waste since the 1970s, after more than two decades of protest (Lin). Not only has commercial fishing been colliding with the spearfishing and flying-fish traditions of the Tao people, but the islanders have faced the risk of radiation exposure and various other forms of toxic pollution on a daily basis.⁵ If we see Rapongan’s story as an EcoGothic allegory, the Tao people’s wrestling with the sea and colonial capitalism, both symbolically and literarily, offers a glimpse of how, despite the tribal people’s best effort to outmaneuver the invading cattle, or later, their aquatic prey, they remain, like the bovine casualties in the story, inadvertent victims of the energy regime of the government with its toxic waste. The Tao people’s ecological entanglement with the nonhuman world, complicated by their social-political tension with the ruling government in Taiwan, finds various manifestations and resonances with the works discussed in the special issue.

This special issue has contributors from Brunei, Japan, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, and the USA. It features a wide range of haunting landscapes in Asia, ranging from an ancient city lying underneath modernized Khon Kaen in northeastern Thailand, to the Iban communities of Sarawak, Malaysia, from Aokigahara, the suicide forest on the island of Honshu and the bay of Hakata on the island of Kyūshū in Japan, to the teak trade in the northern towns of Thailand and palm oil plantations of Malaysia and Indonesia, from Sri Lankan jungles and beaches and the Sungai Ingei jungle of Brunei, to the toxic waters of the oil-rich Niger Delta and the Greater

Khingan Mountains of China. Indigenous folklore and supernatural beings also abound in the works discussed here, with creatures like the *orang bunian* hovering over the Bruneian jungles, sea turtles at San'in-dō charged with supernatural force during the night of Obon, and orangutans being perceived as the reincarnation of humans in Iban mythology, to name just a few. Human agents are, unwittingly or not, active participants in this EcoGothic cycle of extraction, consumption, and destruction. The female suicide bombers of The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a militant separatist group in Northeastern Sri Lanka, are described as bestial and “mosquito-like”, while governmental corporations that destroy forests in China are “like a swarm of steel locusts”. Migrant workers of different ethnicities or Indigenous groups from rural areas from Bangladesh, Isan (Northeast Thailand), and other disadvantaged economic regions are excluded from the center of political power and yet subjected to social-economic oppression and the dire consequences of colonialism and modernization. A recently widowed American comes to the suicide forest in Japan looking for “a perfect place to die”, while radicalized characters in China turn against humanity after their exposure to Western environmental thought. In one way or another, these works evoke a deepened sense of dread and fear, implicitly or explicitly linked with depressing facts about environmental degradation and global warming caused by excessive industrialization and militarization, capitalist economic and energy regimes, and relentless extraction of natural resources.

The “EcoGothic”, as an interdisciplinary approach that investigates the intersection between the ecological and the Gothic imagination, provides a useful epistemological and methodological tool to rethink how these aesthetic representations, philosophical thoughts, and social-cultural or environmental discourses in (or about) the Asia / Pacific region complicate our understanding of human-nonhuman interactions. In the past decade, publications dedicated to the discussion of the EcoGothic in contemporary literatures and films have flourished, spearheaded by the collection of essays in *Ecogothic* (2013) edited by Andrew Smith and William Hughes.⁶ There has also been increasing critical reflection on “ecophobia”, a concept often associated with the EcoGothic,⁷ and its subsequent critique of the environmental division between what is pure and what is impure is further explored by critics such as Martha C. Nussbaum, Heather I. Sullivan, and Sarah Jaquette Ray in terms of its political and ethical implications.⁸ The proliferation of dark ecocritical terms, such as Gautam Basu Thakur’s “Necroecology” (2016), Timothy Morton’s “Dark Ecology” (2016),

Rayson K. Alex and S. Susan Deborah's "Eco-Fear" (2019), Pramod K. Nayar's "Ecoprecarity" (2019), and Fred Botting's "Monstrocene" (2022), to name just a few, provides a useful indication of how the dark side of human-nonhuman connection has been investigated with critical vigour.

Despite the plethora of publications linking nature with fear, there has not been much critical discussion on the role Asian landscapes play in reconfiguring the EcoGothic. Responding to the recent call made by Katarzyna Ancuta and Deimantas Valančius to "decentralise' the Gothic", this special issue speaks to such a lacuna by including submissions that explore the enmeshed nature of human-nonhuman relationships and examine the interconnectedness between the natural, the supernatural or the unnatural, the diseased, (dis)possessed and contagious bodies – human or nonhuman – the haunted as well as haunting landscapes, and the terrifying or monstrous flora and fauna in literature in or about Asia. The issue investigates how the EcoGothic imagination in or about Asia conceptualizes or addresses the notion of human-nature co-existence and the precarious state of human-nonhuman (dis)harmony, and how reading literatures of ecological crises, disasters, or extinctions can help us reimagine Asia as a heterogeneous geography.

Petrofiction, Plantation, and Postcoloniality

The essays in this collection can be divided into three threads. The first thread contains two essays by Jamie Uy and Esther Daimari, which speak to the slow violence of environmental exploitation and degradation caused by globalization, postcolonial development, and even military terrorism in Malaysia, Nigeria, and Sri Lanka. In "Foliage and Fog: Uncanny Petrocultures in Tash Aw's *We, the Survivors* and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*", Uy shows how petrofiction from the Global South "exposes the darker side of globalization" and expands the scope of EcoGothic studies, which was previously preoccupied with European and North American landscapes. Uy analyses the dystopian atmosphere, fragmented narrative style, and crime fiction conventions in the novels by Aw and Habila to foreground "the ruinous aftermath of Western imperialism and neoliberal capitalism" in Malaysia and Nigeria, revealing how extractive economies are made "palpable and monstrous" through the portrayals of "the forbidding jungles of Malaysian palm oil plantations and the toxic waters of the oil-rich Niger Deltas". As Uy observes insightfully, "Oil is Nigeria's 'black gold,' while palm oil is Malaysia's 'red gold.'" The comparison with Nigeria and Nigerian literature deserves more ecocritical attention in terms of the country's "political and physical landscapes"

and its involvement in “the international trade of oil” as a former British colony and its tropical environments. For Uy, the global EcoGothic “allows postcolonial studies scholars to go beyond the dialectic of East-West or Global South-Global North interactions” and inspires people to recognize “how environments and peoples are made strange — and how we can use narratives to welcome the stranger”.

In “The EcoGothic and Contemporary Sri Lankan English Literature: Reading Ecophobia in Patricia Weerakoon’s *Empire’s Children* and Roma Tearne’s *Mosquito*”, Daimari looks at the impact of colonial tea plantations and the terrorist attacks during the Sri Lankan Civil War on the human and nonhuman environment by associating colonialism and terrorism with ecophobia. Daimari argues that in the works by Weerakoon and Tearne, the sea, the forest, beaches, and tea plantations are “represented as sites of fear and terror, resulting in ecophobia” for colonialists and local people alike. The post-colonial Sri Lankan landscape inscribes the exploitative violence of plantation monoculture and military conflicts that creates monstrous possibilities for nature, as “the government paid more attention to war and defence budgets rather than the local environment and human welfare”. As Esther comments, both Sri Lankan writers “overturn popular conceptions of tropical islands as idyllic and show landscapes as historical and palimpsests of multiple histories, and how our past activities continue to haunt us through agential properties of nature that grow monstrous and overwhelm humans.”

Censorship, Hauntology, and Anti-Extractivism

The second thread includes two essays by Pimpawan Chaipanit and Rinni Haji Amran, which address the underlying tension between the emerging ecological consciousness in contemporary cultural productions of Thailand and Brunei, respectively, and repressive social-political regimes and governmental policies. In “Haunting Memories and Haunted Landscapes: Reading the EcoGothic in Apichatpong’s *Cemetery of Splendour* and Pitchaya’s *Bangkok Wakes to Rain*”, Chaipanit investigates how contemporary Thai fiction and film of the 2010s “survive[d] the repressive and censorious climate” by expressing a critique of industrial and environmental exploitation in Thailand through the language of haunting. As Chaipanit points out, while both Apichatpong’s and Pitchaya’s works “receive[d] international success”, this is contrasted “with their quiet reception in Thailand”. It is crucial to highlight the elements of haunting in both works

– “the spectres of Thai social-ecological memories and those who remember and refuse to silence them” – including the teak spirits and the Isan migrant labourers who are portrayed as displaced and marginalized in these two texts. By doing so, Chaipanit’s essay shows how a hauntogenic reading makes the implicit environmental critique in both works impossible to be ignored.

In “Into the Haunted Forest: Reading Anti-Extractivism in Aammton Alias’s *The Last Bastion of Ingei*”, Amran considers the haunted forest as an aesthetic technique to present “important counter-narratives to extractivist representations of nature in public narratives in Brunei, including government policy and advertising for environmental tourism”. Amran explores the role played by the *orang bunian*, supernatural inhabitants of the Bruneian forests, arguing for the anti-extractive resistance Alias’s novel represents through its focus on “indigenous ecological beliefs and practices”, in which “nature and the supernatural destabilize and undermine anthropocentric ways of knowing and relating to the nonhuman”. Amran’s essay highlights the fluid and interconnected nature of Indigenous groups “within Brunei and the wider Southeast Asian region”, and “the ongoing influence of Indigenous ecological wisdom in post-independent Brunei”, which assists “the diversification of local literary and cultural production”.

Suicide, Genocide, and Radical Hope

The third thread contains two essays by Kathryn Yalan Chang and Jeff Dories, which investigate suicide and genocide in connection to ecological awareness in a Japanese-American and an East-West context, respectively. In “‘A Perfect Place to Die’: Thinking the Eco-Gothic, Darkness, and the Dark Sweet in Gus Van Sant’s *The Sea of Trees*”, Chang explores the cinematic representation of Aokigahara Jukai as a “suicide forest” in relation to Timothy Morton’s “Dark Ecology.” As Chang notes, Aokigahara might be a location for dread, but it is also presented as a site of meditation and possible transformation through the transcultural depiction of the forest in the film that incorporates the Tibetan Buddhist notion of “Samsara, the cycle of life, death, and rebirth”, and its implicit ecological attempt at “re-enchanted[ing], instead of demonized[ing], the forest”. Chang’s essay teases out the representational complexity of Aokigahara in the film as more than a “virgin” wood or a Gothic forest haunted by the ghosts of the deceased, but it also warns readers of how “the whole concept of a suicide forest is ironically linked to the environmental problems we face now”, since “suicide is not an unusual path—it is the path of modern civilization”.

In “Decentring Anthropocentric Narcissism: The Novum and the Ecogothic in Cixin Liu’s *Three-Body Problem* and *Ball Lightning*”, Dories provides a nuanced reading of Liu’s engagement with Western environmental thought by juxtaposing Liu’s advocacy of science fiction as a fitting genre to combat anthropocentric ideologies, demonstrating his intertextual references to Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* and Peter Singer’s *Animal Liberation* in his novels to caution against the radicalization of environmental ideologies. Dories’s essay further shows how the use of the *novum*, a device that is completely new in Sci-Fi can make readers “feel dislocated and estranged from the unfamiliar situation” and thus “produce opportunities for critical reflection.” As Dories notes, the “gap between thought and action” in environmentalism “has profound ethical implications”. Doris’s reading of Liu suggests how Liu might consider the radicalization of environmental thought as an alternative form of anthropocentrism, which would result in human extinction.

Posthuman Survival: Lessons from Orangutans, Silkworms, and Sea Turtles

The creative writing, interview, and translation section in the special issue resonates with the essays in its concerted effort to provide alternative narratives to reimagine human-nonhuman relationships in the Anthropocene. In Christine Yin’s story, a composite of memoir, folklore, and fictional writing, the ecological knowledge of the Iban people serves as a regenerative force for the recent loss of her father. Jonathan Brewer’s three poems similarly draw upon his experience as a foreigner living in Japan, finding both terror and beauty in the historical deep time of the natural surroundings. The interview piece by Chiho Nakagawa brings the aesthetic and ecological complexities of Brewer’s poems to the foreground. The Japanese “weird tale”, translated into English by Samantha Landau, harks back to the oceanic Gothic in Rapongan and exemplifies the interconnectedness between traditional beliefs and innate fear beyond rational thinking.

In “Creating Legends, Kindling Hope, and Surviving – Beyond”, Yin combines folklore from Iban communities in Sarawak and personal memories to narrate the kinship between “the orangutan and human populations that share life in the Bornean rainforest”. The hybridity of genres results in a philosophical rumination on the close relationship between myths and reality, between transitional beliefs and the potency of story-telling. For Yin, Indigenous tales and legends convey important ecological messages and ethical implications, especially during the time of the pandemic, when we are “surrounded by the invisible alien that threatens to invade our bodies, damaging and

sometimes killing its hosts, who are trying to find a way to live in this new century”. Traditional beliefs, like the reincarnation of grandfathers as orang-utans, offer healing power to face the pain of the loss of loved ones “in a dystopian nightmare” like ours.

In Nakagawa’s conversation with Brewer about his three poems, “How Prescient the Worm”, “If This Were Noh”, and “Keeping the Mourning,” silkworms are discussed in relation to sericulture in Asian and American consumer culture, and the meaning of metamorphosis in both human life and nature is also addressed. Nakagawa and Brewer also introduce and explain the theatrical tradition of Mugen Noh plays that often feature supernatural encounters, Izumi Kyoka’s seductive female ghosts that turn men into animals, and the influence of Zeami’s Yamamba (a Noh play) on Brewer’s second poem. They further explore how the final poem evokes a complex sense of place and time that is both fictional and real, historical and contemporaneous, drawing one’s attention to the uncanny experience of one’s ecological consciousness.

The short story “Sea Turtles” (1934) by Japanese writer Okamoto Kidō, translated for the first time in English and introduced to us here by Landau, addresses a similar concern about the tension between traditional Japanese folkloric belief and a more modernized way of thinking about nature. Landau notes how Kidō’s tale explores the EcoGothic theme of “nature tak[ing] revenge on a couple that breaks the taboo on going out to sea on the night of Obon, the summer festival of the dead”. In the story, the narrator reminisces upon a mysterious event that happened thirty years ago and took his younger sister’s life, when she and her fiancé went on a sailing trip in San’in-dō in Japan. As Landau explains, while the narrative is framed as “a tale within a tale”, “the main characters’ stubborn adherence to modern logical thought lends credibility both to the characters themselves and to the notion that some events truly have supernatural origins.” All these supernatural stories about orangutans, silkworms, and sea turtles disclose the ethical urgency to reconstruct our ecological epistemology in the Anthropocene.

Let’s return for a moment to Rapongan’s story introduced at the beginning of the Introduction. Towards the end of his fishing episode, Rapongan portrays himself as “the happiest man in the dark” when he manages to get a mitangoz (green humphead parrotfish) and then lies before daybreak with his “trophy” and his spear gun on the reef — the “pillow-sharing” moment as the

author calls it. The equilibrium that Rapongan achieves here seems symbolic, since such a human-fish intimacy is predicated upon his “conquering” of the prey, which underwrites an existential wrestling that is bound to resurface in the next haphazard moment of human-nonhuman encounter. The sea as the evil spirit’s esophagus further allegorizes the impending threat of the rapid melting of icebergs and rising of sea levels. As Val Plumwood makes it clear, “the otherness of nature” is continuous “with a human self” (160). Living in the Anthropocene, as Morton explains in *Dark Ecology*, is like living in a crime fiction, in which the detective is uncannily revealed in the end to be also the murderer (9). One can safely assume that darkness is the new green. To think green is to think darkly. To think dark because it is no longer sustainable to think about greenness, environmentalism, and the Anthropocene without seeing its shadowy side, without recognizing its haunting history. We are reminded of the dire consequences of industrialism, colonial capitalism, settler colonialism, and globalization on a daily basis.

The social-political complexity shown in the special issue further highlights the significance of situating the production of ecological knowledge in a more diversified local context, while problematizing the essentialist representation of Asia as a static, homogeneous landscape. As a whole, the special issue hopes to rethink environmental crises in relation to the Anthropocene by decolonizing cultural and political practice, resorting to indigenous knowledge, and advocating transcultural conversations, in order to address global issues in the environmental humanities more effectively. The EcoGothic as a methodological lens not only recognizes the heterogeneity of Asian ecological systems, but also further magnifies the elasticity, porosity, and fluidity of the world system and its fractures, disjunctures, and inconsistencies that persist to reshape and remake the subterranean self-other interconnectedness as simultaneously local and global, both human and more-than-human. The scope of this special issue, with its unique focus on Asia, testifies to the necessity of consistently engaging one’s ecological and dialogic imagination beyond the local or the national, the East or the West, to rethink our haunted existence on a planetary scale.

Notes

¹ On recent scholarship on Asian ecocriticism, see Thornber (2012); Estok and Kim (2013); Slovic, Rangarajan and Sarveswaran (2014 & 2015); Chang and Slovic (2016); Ryan (2017); Estok, Liang and Iwamasa (2021); Liu and Huang (2021).

² The evil spirit (Anito) is a malicious spirit feared by the Tao people of Orchid Island who share their ancestral roots with many parts of the Philippines. See Funk (2014). The translation of the essay is mine.

³ I had the opportunity to speak to Rapongan in a lecture he gave at the English Department of National Taiwan Normal University in Taipei hosted by Prof Iping Liang in June 2022 about his recent book. Rapongan's response confirms my reading here.

⁴ For more on the Tao people, see "Tao: Introduction to the Ethnic Group".

⁵ For more details on radiation ecologies, see Huang and Rapongan (2017).

⁶ Relevant examples include Principe (2014), Heholt and Downing (2016), Keetley and Tenga (2016), Keetley and Sivils (2018), the *Gothic Nature* journal (2019-), Parker (2020), Edney (2020), Blazan (2021), Tidwell and Soles (2021), Edwards, Graulund and Höglund (2022).

⁷ See Estok (2009 & 2018 & 2019); Hillard (2009).

⁸ See Nussbaum (2004); Sullivan (2012); Ray (2013).

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