

## Ecology and Indigeneity: An Exploration of ASEAN Literatures

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### Abstract

*This special issue on ASEAN literatures seeks to commemorate the founding of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment-Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASLE-ASEAN). An inaugural ASLE-ASEAN conference on Southeast Asian environmental literatures and ecocriticism, titled *Global in the Local*, was organised at the National University of Singapore, on 1 and 2 August 2016. Our objective in sharing select papers from this conference, that have been further expanded and revised through this special issue of JOE, is to share ecological concerns regarding the ASEAN region with a larger readership. We wish to celebrate the founding of our organisation, as well as record the beginnings of a larger conversation on the interactions between literature and nature within ASEAN.*

### Introduction

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The conference was an excellent start to this conversation with oral and poster presentations by over thirty academic and non-academic environmental humanists from various ASEAN nations. Participating nations included Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore. In addition to stimulating ecocritical dialogue and interconnectivity in the region, ASEAN nature writing was also showcased. The event featured a book launch, as well as creative eco-readings by Singaporean poets and novelists. This special issue aims to present ecocritical readings of ASEAN literatures from across a range of ecocritical disciplines and ASEAN nations. Hence, we feature a diverse array of topics that incorporate assorted fields such as riverine writing, children's literature, and ecocritical discourses of the "urbanatural" as well as of the information age.

In *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), Kenyan author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o claims that "language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we perceive ourselves and our place in the world" (15). The ASEAN region is made up of several nations with their distinct cultures and languages. To claim cultural homogeneity based on a political affiliation might appear at best foolhardy and at worst contrived. Therefore, in bringing together ecocritical scholarship from around ASEAN, we are not attempting to homogenise or indeed make a claim for any coherence in our varied and distinctive traditions. However, in going through the articles that have been carefully selected, we are attempting to promote the idea that strong intersections and cross-pollinations have occurred over several centuries within the region. These intersections have produced a variety of genres, both classical and modern, that display diverse approaches to nature eminently worth exploring.

To this end, we would like to discuss the contents of the individual papers, beginning with the two plenary addresses.

Hannes Bergthaller explores the idea of ecological immunity, juxtaposing this with the concept of ecological community. For him, ecological immunity pertains to the boundaries that are habitually drawn between contemporary human society and the external (natural) world. He argues that Kim Stanley Robinson's science fiction novel, *2312*, ultimately embodies a synthesis of community and immunity, and unifies the two ostensibly opposing concepts.

Scott Slovic's essay presents a complex exposé on the interactions between information and ecocritical studies. Slovic focuses on the various means through which empirical data is gathered and communicated within environmental art, activism and writing. He argues that contemporary ecocriticism has registered a shift, moving from relying on the emotional, personalising power of focalisation inherent in first-person narratives, to a more self-reflexive approach wherein texts themselves question what exactly constitutes an effective means of disseminating a message of environmental awareness.

Lu Zhengwen analyses "A monk walks along Orchard Road," a poem by Filipino writer Rodrigo V. Dela Peña, Jr on the titular Orchard Road in Singapore. He argues that Peña depicts Orchard Road as what Edward W. Soja terms as "Thirdspace," wherein categorical boundaries between seemingly opposing epistemic concepts are reconciled. Ultimately, Peña's work questions the validity of establishing strict dichotomies such as natural/urban, past/present and capitalistic desire/abstinence.

Arka Mondal studies the works of Singaporean poet Edwin Thumboo, tracing how the poet's work "effects an imaginative unification of the human mind and the more-than-natural human world." Despite apparent inconsistencies in Thumboo's approach to ecology and the environment, Mondal nevertheless argues that Thumboo's work establishes new ecological communities as well as providing a means to connect to non-human spaces and organisms.

Apple Audrey L. Noda takes an informed look at the short stories of Severino Reyes's *Lola Basyang* anthology. Within the contexts of Filipino identity and children's literature, she traces how the intrinsic wildness of childhood interacts with the externalised wilderness in

Reyes's settings. Ultimately, she argues that immersing oneself in the immediate danger of wilderness is a necessary precondition for the development and actualisation of the individual self.

Chitra Sankaran investigates the Laotian short story "The Roar of a Distant War" by Viliya Ketavong, focusing on the intersections between environmental literature and representations of the apocalypse. Rather than apocalyptic fiction's existence as an extension of fantasy, she argues that Ketavong's work is deeply invested in both the private and public realms of human histories, politics and instrumentality.

Uma Jayaraman's paper discusses the tensions between humanity and non-human elements in two short stories: Yeo Wei Wei's "National Bird of Singapore" and the Malaysian writer Angela Jessie Michael's "Walking Women." Just as non-human entities are silenced and marginalised in both stories, so are marginalised human characters dehumanised by other people through their association with these seemingly disempowered non-human beings. Thus, through an eco-poetic lens, Jayaraman examines "whether human dignity can be salvaged from the debris of anonymity conditioned by an anthropocentric perception of existence.

Gurpreet Kaur looks at the link between women, animals and violence through a lens of material postcolonial ecofeminism. She analyses Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* and Lee Yew Leong's short story "Honey, I'm Off To Be A Jellyfish Now." In both stories, she traces how women and animals, whilst adopting marginalised positions within the texts' societies, are in fact able to claim a position of centrality within the texts as protagonists. Just as women and animals become mutually constitutive lenses through which the plight of each is read, so do the two texts' female characters begin to blur the boundaries between nature and culture.

Qi Feng Lin analyses Suchen Christine Lim's *The River Song*. As its title suggests, music is a central motif in Lim's text. Accordingly, Lin analyses the tightly-knit relationship between Singaporean Chinese culture and the Singapore River in the text, both of which are bound by both literal and metaphorical music that flows across the riverbanks.

Nguyen Thi Dieu Linh enacts a spatial study of the various places and settings featured in *The Dreams of Chestnut Colour*, a prose collection by Vietnamese writer Hoang A Sang. Nguyen analyses settings such as the Woodland and the Urban on the psychical, symbolic and physical levels, arguing that the author depicts relationships between natural and man-made spaces to discuss ideas such as Vietnam's rapid urbanisation, as well as ethnic tensions between the minority Tay and majority Kinh people.

Chaiyon Tongtukkaeng examines Chang-Rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*, focusing on its representations of a Japanese Army Camp in World War II. Tongtukkaeng attempts a spatialised reading that spans the two main settings in the novel: contemporary America and the war-torn Southeast Asian rainforest during WWII. He argues that Lee's novel, when read through the lens of Andrew Thacker's notion of "literary geography", catalyses a

resistance against dominant political ideologies which disenfranchise individuals such as the comfort women of the War.

We hope this special issue will generate an interest in environmental literatures and ecocritical scholarship of the ASEAN region. We believe it will initiate a critical dialogue with other indigenous eco-writings and stimulate scholars to engage with ASEAN eco-narratives.

### **Works Cited**

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