



Imagining Oneness: Charting Ecological Currents in Edwin Thumboo's Poetry

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Abstract

Eco-poetry is a special kind of expression that effects an imaginative unification of the human mind and the more-than-human natural world, thereby leading/guiding the former to an alternative way of being in the world. It is an efficient system for evoking the feelings of a community. It is also an artwork that evinces the interrelatedness of all life forms and preservation of landscapes. Keeping this in view, the paper examines the unexplored poems of Edwin Thumboo to accentuate how these serve the aforementioned functions, despite the inconsistencies in the poet's ecosophy, that is, his representation of nature as an independent, healthy place, and having spiritual significance. It discusses Thumboo's continuous engagement with the more-than-human natural world: his identification with other life forms, expression of concern for non-human spaces, and representation of viable ecological communities in his poetry.

Introduction

In one of the chapters titled “What Are Poets For?” from *The Song of the Earth* (2000), deep ecocritic, Jonathan Bate, states that the Romantic writers regard poetic language as a special kind of expression, which has the capacity to effect “an imaginative reunification of mind and nature” (245). Bate uses the term “ecopoetics” to describe these Romantic poems, and considers such poetical works as efficient systems for “recycling the richest thoughts and feelings of a community” (247). These are the artworks that evince an alternative way of being in the world in consonance with environmental ethics. Dark ecological thinkers, new historicists, and other literary theorists, find the representation of human harmony with non-human nature by British Romantic writers and deep ecocritics problematic. They regard nature not merely as the natural world of which human beings are a minuscule part, but also as the Other of culture, and a “singular, abstracted and personified religious being: the monotheistic God” (Williams 69). To put it another way, the Romantics and deep ecological thinkers sometimes consider nature as the jungle of plants that is being ravaged by humans or a spiritual entity that is capable of imparting lessons. In his groundbreaking work, dark ecologist, Timothy Morton, emphasizes that such existing dualism between human beings and nature is the major philosophical reason for humans’ destruction of the environment. He provides a theoretical model for dispensing with the idea of nature and dissolving the distinction between subject and object, nature and humans/culture, by suggesting that “if we experience the fact that we are embedded in our world, then we would be less likely to destroy it” (*Ecology Without Nature* 64). Instead of casting off the term nature altogether like Morton, urban

ecologist, Ashton Nichols, stresses that we are never out of nature. Nature stands for the physical world of which the humans are a part. Furthermore, he depicts an environmental criticism grounded in “*urbanature*” that doesn’t hold wild nature and urban life as distinct, but suggests that all human and non-human lives are connected “in a complex web of interdependent interrelatedness” (xiii). In other words, there is no absolute separation between the spaces cultivated and inhabited by human beings, and the non-human natural world.

This paper discusses the poetical works of Edwin Thumboo to examine how they imagine an alternative way of living upon the earth. This is despite inconsistencies in the poet’s environmental psychology/philosophy, that is, his portrayal of nature as an independent entity with spiritual powers. Given this caveat, an ecocritical analysis of these poems indeed reveals Thumboo’s land ethic, his illustration of the “*urbanatural*” lifestyle that goes beyond the notion of nature as a world distinct from humans, his exemplification of viable ecological communities, and his association with other life forms. Through these literatures, the poet aims to evoke man’s harmony/oneness with other humans and wild nature.

I will begin by underscoring Thumboo’s representation of viable ecological communities devoid of “environmental racism”¹ (Curtin 145) in his literatures. The best example of this is the poem, “Ulysses by the Merlion,” which was published as part of a collection in 1979. It is a conventional narrative of diverse immigrants who settled in the island of Singapore, and worked collectively for economic success. These people with “unequal ways,” who came from distant shores to make a life for themselves in Singapore, began to transform together in an attempt to “(e)xplore the edges of harmony” (*The Best of Edwin Thumboo* 70). In other words, the racial and cultural differences among them have not been impediments in their struggle for coexistence. The poem alludes to Singaporean history, celebrating Singaporeans’ spirit of unity amidst racial diversity. The diversity is evident in the way people pray, laugh, and “women dress and greet.” Though they have preserved some of their distinct customs, these people seek similar attributes, “Search for a [common] centre,” in order to maintain stability. The figure of Merlion (a “Half-beast, half-fish” creature) is noteworthy. It is a symbol of oneness. The early settlers of different races have come together and used the available technology to create this national symbol. The work of art arouses among people “a collective sentiment of active participation” (*The Best of Edwin Thumboo* xxvii) in its creation. The act of living in harmony with each other despite racial dissimilarities reminds one of Thumboo’s “A Brother,” where the poet acknowledges racial differences, and yet states that an African can be his brother. Poems like “Ulysses by the Merlion,” indeed help in imagining viable ecological communities, that is, egalitarian societies, where the residents of all races and religious creeds can peacefully coexist.

Of particular value is Thumboo’s concern for the loss of green landscapes resulting from the excesses of urbanization in fast-paced Singapore. In “Evening by Batok Town,” Thumboo becomes critical of governmental policies by portraying how “landscapes are the first victims of progress” (*The Best of Edwin Thumboo* xxx). The poem is about Bukit Batok, a residential town located in the west of Singapore. It depicts the transformation that the town has undergone due to rapid modernization. The “green-slope hills [that]/Descended into plain and swamp” are replaced by “high-rise and high-way” (*A Third Map* 119). Moreover, there are descriptions of squatters clearing the land and directing the streams. Besides land exploitation, phrases like the “taxi’s irritating honk” indicate that the town is affected by noise pollution. Such references to eco-degradation remind one of contemporary Chinese writer, Zhao Benfu’s *The Era Without Soil* (2009), where he describes how rapid urban development has replaced soil with concrete buildings leading to environmental problems like air pollution and noise pollution in Mu City. The tall buildings have shut the stars and moon from view, removed patches of vegetable plots spread over the

area, and replaced trees and grasses. The message conveyed by the novel is that the success of the construction of the city does not lie merely in what is added, but also in what is retained.

Thumboo seems to disseminate a similar idea through his poem as he “expresses his concern over the proclivity to over-organize, to plan to the last detail, to standardize and regiment” (Hong 34). He depicts the way in which wild nature has succumbed to the forces of urbanization. Like Bukit Batok, the poet describes elsewhere how the entire area of Mandai that earlier comprised of “custard apples,” “rubber seeds,” and “durian trees” (*A Third Map* 112) has been transformed. Thumboo is not critical of the establishment that “made possible the decencies and security of civic life,” but challenges “the excesses of a zealous official” (Hong 71). He undercuts strictly anthropocentric views of the environment, which lack an “ethical observation towards land” and instead value land based on “economic self-interest(s)” (Leopold 204). He calls for “[a] land ethic [that] simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.” In other words, the poet is of the view that humans should change their role from conquerors of the land-community to plain members of it. They should respect their fellow-members that include non-human nature. “Evening by Batok Town” evokes the need to maintain a balance between sustainable development and environmental management; to establish harmony between progress and conservation; to embrace and safeguard green places. It becomes not only the means of preserving the past, but also countering the absolute emphasis on urbanization and development. To put it another way, in critiquing the urban excesses, Thumboo’s literature serves as “an imaginative counterdiscourse...a cultural critical metadiscourse” (Goodbody 70). As Glen A. Love observes in “Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Criticism,” such “nature-oriented literature can help redirect us from ego-consciousness to ‘eco-consciousness’” (*The Ecocriticism Reader* xxx).

Some of Thumboo’s ecological poems accentuate his deep attachment to non-human life forms. In “Autumn, Iowa City,” the poet identifies with “Squirrels” and “catfish/[that] Leap and tease the surface into ripples” (*A Third Map* 128), while in “Townsville,” the poet’s love and reverence for flowers leads him to give a detailed account of their activities. The flowers sing and bloom, “make such music/With their eyes, do a pirouette,” and are able to “feel the sudden pleasure” (93). Like Thumboo, the British Romantic poets express their love for non-human species, identify with other living things, depict pleasure in wild nature, and aspire for an “imaginative reunification” (Bate 252) of the human mind and more-than-human natural world. Their poetry is the “song of the earth,” which inspires a harmonious relationship between the “external environment and ecology of mind” (251-2). Thumboo’s personification of flowers in “Townsville” echoes Wordsworth’s “The Daffodils,” where the poet depicts thousands of daffodils as dancing, aided by the breeze. A contemporary reader might assume such lyrical claims as “poetic exaggerations, rhetorically suspect forms of anthropomorphism, overly sentimental and poetically overblown...[but] the idea of ‘animate nature,’ however, included a belief that all living things—and perhaps even nonliving things—are connected by the ability to please or to be pleased²” (Nichols 87-88).

The Romantic poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge were inspired by the medical doctors and experimental scientists of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, for example, Erasmus Darwin, who discussed the idea of animal and plant pleasure in their works. Darwin linked the sex life of plants with human sexuality, and also explained that the pleasure in any animate nature extends to the entire biotic realm. Thumboo’s depiction of the flowers’ ability to “pool their smiles” and “To lift our day” (*A Third Map* 93) exemplifies the latter idea. Such poetic representation can indeed be traced back to the early nineteenth century Romantic writings, when ecomorphism was replacing anthropomorphism. Moreover, Thumboo’s portrayal of the flowers’ tendency to “hesitate” brings back the memories of naturalist John Bartram, who noted that there was much to be learned about “sensation” in plants, even

though animals were known to possess human “faculties, & pashions [sic] … & intellect” (*Correspondence* 690). It is lucid from the above discussion that Thumboo’s poetry provides one of the “most essential insights of ecological thought… [namely] the interrelatedness of all life forms” (McKusick 28). They suggest a deeper connection between human beings and the non-human natural world, that is to say, “unity in multeity” (quoted in Gigante 23). It is worth mentioning that, like Bate, Thumboo is conscious of the “gentle yet potent power of poetry to create insight and experience (*The Best of Edwin Thumboo* xxxii). In “It is Special,” he catalogues the elements that form a poem, namely, images, words, and emotions, and uses them in his other poems to move and inspire. By depicting the image of a catfish teasing the surface of water (see above); by accentuating the emotions of flowers, the poet tries to evoke a sense of identification with non-human life forms.

An ecocritical appraisal of Edwin Thumboo’s other poetical works would show that there are certain inconsistencies in his representation of nature. For example, the poet sometimes portrays nature as an independent entity and having spiritual significance. In the poem “Scene,” he states that “Nature conjures semi-colours,/Elucidates epiphanies” (*A Third Map* 122). Nature, here, does not stand for the material world that includes human beings. Such interpretation of the natural world by British Romantic writers have been contested by many theorists both past and present. American literary theorist, Jerome J. McGann, views the British Romantic writers’ spiritualization of the material world/nature as a way of disguising politics and escaping historical reality. He avers that the subjective projection of nature as “free of the ruins of history and culture is the grand illusion of every Romantic poet” (91). In the “Introduction” to Wong Yoon Wah’s *Durians Are Not the Only Fruit*, Thumboo elucidates how nature is a source of learning for him. He states that “[l]iving closely with [nature] and observing her rich variety to unlock her discourse” enables him to skim “its profound, life-long lessons” (xv). He is also concerned about the fact that the same nature that has the capacity of shaping the doors of perception has been invaded and severely damaged, in spite of the growing attempts to save her. Thumboo’s representation of nature as a teacher can be compared to Wordsworth’s personification of nature as a moral guide, who is able to teach humans by disclosing all her secrets. Such a notion of the natural world as an independent being, “an ideal image, a self-contained form suspended afar” (Morton, *The Ecological Thought* 5) that acts as a tutor, has been deconstructed by Timothy Morton. His theory of “mesh” posits the interconnectedness of everything, and therefore, the need to think not “‘without nature’ but only ‘without “nature”’ as a touchstone of intellectual certainty and moral purity or guidance” (Clark, *The Cambridge Introduction* 70). This would lead to the consideration of nature as “the totality of the material universe … [that] embraces everything, barring the allegedly supernatural” (Clark “Nature, Post Nature” 75). Similarly, Bill McKibben undercuts the notion of nature as a world distinct from man, in *The End of Nature*, while Emmanouil Aretoulakis calls for a “posthuman ecology” that disregards “the idea of nature as a specific entity” (175).

Thumboo, however, moves beyond the word “nature” as it has been employed since the enlightenment, that is, beyond the projection of nature as a linguistic place, a fanciful mental image, and a spiritual entity. He also goes “beyond the nature versus culture split—toward the more inclusive idea of “urbanatural roosting,”” (Nichols xvii), that is to say, in the direction of a natural world that encompasses human civilization. The best example is the poem, “Chin’s Garden-I,” which is dedicated to his wife, Chin. The poet “enumerates the botanical presences and horticultural wonders of a garden” (*The Best of Edwin Thumboo* xxix) that stretches from the gate to Chin’s house. There is a portrayal of palm trees and garlic creepers that grow in close proximity to Chin’s residence. Moreover, there are references to wild fruits like “ciku, custard apple, papaya, banana, pomelo,” (85-6) that receive ample love and affection from Chin. The honey birds too seem to enjoy the urbanatural environment. Such representation of wild species, that is, plants and birds in the midst of human habitation, results in a more permeable barrier or no barrier at all, “between the world described as *human* and the world once described as *natural*”

(Nichols 186). There is a dynamic interplay between human beings and non-human nature, and as such, there is no return to “pure Nature” (quoted in Nichols 173). By pure Nature, I mean the cultural construction of nature as a region that is separate from and uninhabited by humans. Jonathan Bate was perhaps right when he said, “works of art can themselves be imaginary states of nature, imaginary ideal ecosystems” (Bate 250). While explaining the concept of urbanatural roosting, Ashton Nichols emphasizes that the cities should re-wild their human spaces, that is, the urban dwellers should grow and maintain plants around their houses, on their roofs and porches. I have tried to show how Thumboo seems to possess a similar ecocentric vision, through “Chin’s Garden-I.” It also reminds me of his poem, “NTI,” where the poet asks the readers to encompass and maintain gardens and green roofs: “Embrace the gifted places / The Chinese garden, sun-dial, / Green roofs” (*A Third Map* 123).

Conclusion

An ecocritical appraisal of Thumboo’s poetical works demonstrates his constant aspiration for human harmony/oneness with the more-than-human nature, despite minor problems with his ideas of co-existence, namely, his representation of nature as an independent entity and place, and having spiritual significance. The paper depicts how the poet aims for a relationship of concordance between man and other humans or wild nature in various ways. In other words, it makes a modest attempt to accentuate Thumboo’s land ethic that effects an imaginative yoking of the non-human natural world and consciousness. This also evokes his depiction of viable ecological communities “for recycling the richest thoughts and feelings of a community,” as well as his portrayal of a close link between human beings and other life forms. Moreover, an urban ecological insight into his literature reveals the poet’s representation of an urbanatural microcosm, where the worlds of birds, trees, and human beings, coalesce to form a version of ecotopia. It suggests humans are both a part of nature and in harmony with non-human nature. Through such analysis, the paper tries to justify that poets like Edwin Thumboo are green, and “by reading [his writings], by inhabiting them, we can start to imagine what it might be like to live differently upon the earth” (Bate 251).

Notes

1. American environmental philosopher Deane Curtin defines environmental racism as the connection between race and the environment, so that the oppression of one is connected to the oppression of the other.
2. Through this quote, I am trying to link Thumboo’s poetry with Romantic science or scientific declarations of Erasmus Darwin and Georges Louis Lécrerc, that not just human beings, but plants and animals are also able to feel/derive pleasure and evoke it.

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