

**Karen Thornber. *Ecoambiguity: Environmental Crises and East Asian Literatures*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012.**

**ISBN: 9780472118069.**

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As a key figure in world literature, comparative literature and East Asian studies, Karen Thornber's book *Ecoambiguity* draws on all these disciplines to provide an ecological reading of works from China, Korea, Japan and Taiwan, with a focus on ecodegradation. While written to be understandable by English speakers, the book includes enough direct quotations from the novels, short stories and poems discussed that those with knowledge of the original languages these works are written in have the opportunity to engage with the texts on a deeper level. The book also allows for multiple audiences, giving enough background information that those new to East Asian studies or ecocriticism are not excluded, but those with an understanding of the fields are given enough direction that they can skip the historical overviews.

Following the introduction and literary/historical background, *Ecoambiguity* is divided into two main parts, one investigating (in order) "ambivalence," "uncertainty" and "contradiction" in the representation of environments, and the second analysing (again in order) "acquiescence," "illusions and delusions," and then the "green rhetoric" involved in relationships between people and damaged environments. Rather than separating texts

based on country of origin, Thornber's deliberate decision to work thematically allows the discussion to examine the connections between depictions of the environment and behaviours in texts cross-culturally in ways that reveal the very widespread impact of degraded, polluted and at-risk environments. In this move Thornber runs the risk of not addressing the language, cultural and historical specificities within which each text is produced, something she acknowledges. In order to combat such criticism Thornber uses the introductory chapter to give nation and language-specific historical overviews, as well as introducing contextual information where relevant within the close readings she performs. This approach allows her more flexibility in her analyses and gives readers used to seeing texts within national literatures the opportunity to examine the possibilities when texts are seen as world literature and read alongside each other. This also allows Thornber to better account for such transnational problems as ecodegradation by reading texts in ways that open up discussions.

Through its ecological readings of East Asian texts, *Ecoambiguity* offers a new perspective on environmental crisis that does not take Europe or the United States as its central focus. At times Thornber refers to texts from these traditional centres of ecocriticism, most frequently Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, but only at points in the text where such references contribute to the discussion. This is particularly the case when such texts have been translated into various East Asian languages and have had a considerable impact on an author or movement there. In this way Thornber is careful not to fall into the trap of considering European or US-based ecological studies as the inevitable or transparent way to engage with human relationships to the environment. Rather she is careful to theorise using a variety of scholars and to point out instances in which US or European scholars may be useful, but only to the extent that they are influential on the texts of study. In this regard the notes section is an incredibly useful resource for both experienced scholars and those beginning in the area, as it lists a wide variety of sources and texts—a further demonstration of Thornber's extensive and careful reading.

The notes also contain a longer discussion of choices Thornber has made in regards to terminology as well as extensive background information. Thornber makes the point that “[i]n the United States and Europe most ecocritical scholarship draws from American and European literatures, and even in Asia discussions of the relationship between literature and damaged environments has focused disproportionately on Western examples” (18). *Ecoambiguity* attempts to combat this trend by focusing on East Asian texts and languages and foregrounding the cosmopolitan connections these texts engage. As such she presents ecological criticism that

pays attention to non-Western texts and languages in a way that opens up the field.

*Ecoambiguity* also opens up new areas of investigation in comparative literature and East Asian studies. Thornber discusses how:

[M]ost humanistic research on East Asian literary works that discuss interactions between people and nature has looked at creative manipulations of the latter: literary celebrations of nature. . . . Much less has been published on East Asian creative negotiations with environmental damage, despite its presence in thousands of years of Chinese-, Japanese-, and Korean-language literatures, and particularly in the region's twentieth- and early twenty-first century creative corpuses. (17–18)

Thornber recognises that there is a long history of this kind of literature, but puts her emphasis on an engagement that investigates new ways of reading and perspectives. She also examines modern Japanese, Korean and Chinese texts from the region rather than performing a “West and non-West, broadly defined” (22) analysis that has been more prevalent.

A final fascinating aspect of this book is the way Thornber uses the idea of ambiguity itself. For Thornber “[a]mbiguity here emerges not primarily as an ethical or aesthetic value but as a symptom of epistemological uncertainty that is parsed both sympathetically and exactly as a deficit of consciousness and/or implicit confession of the impotence of writers and literary characters” (6). In examining how environmental degradation is treated by narrators, characters and personas in these texts Thornber is seeking not to find the most ecologically “sound” text or make judgements in regard to whether texts are sufficiently critical enough, but rather to investigate how attitudes, behaviour and information contribute to issues or even to ignorance of the problems. While it may seem this is rather fatalistic, Thornber notes that:

Consciousness of ambiguity does not necessarily hamper efforts to repair environments; in fact, it can foster broader cooperation. It also encourages a surprising flexibility in attitudes and behaviours that can help relieve many of the problems facing human and nonhuman communities. (12)

Here Thornber identifies the way in which she hopes her analysis will be used: rather than viewing problems as insurmountable and people as unable to grapple with the difficulties because of ambiguity, the analyses Thornber produces try to reveal the ambiguities within such situations precisely to allow people to better understand the complexity of many of these

situations. Thornber denies that any human life is able to have a completely invisible impact on the environment, however certain behaviours and attitudes can have a lesser impact—though these can still exhibit intricate forms of ambiguity that may have serious consequences. In this Thornber is not trying to apportion blame or assign certain damage to specific groups, but rather to investigate the way all behaviours and attitudes can be surprisingly complex and contested, arguing that a better understanding of these interactions is actually the first step towards addressing problems with effective measures as well as sensitivity to all involved.

Two aspects of the book some readers might object to are the way Thornber uses many unconventional and at times almost resistant readings in her analysis, as well as the fact that she covers a large number of texts which limits the number of extended, very close readings. Each chapter begins with a close reading of a single text and then extends outwards thematically with Thornber using continuities and contrasts between texts to structure the rest of the chapter. For some readers this may appear too brief or like she is trying to cover too much ground, however at no point does it appear disruptive; the transitions between texts are very smooth. Further, while many of the texts may not be discussed in as much length as some readers may desire, the endnotes compensate for this with considerable information on the texts and their backgrounds. This is also a necessary part of performing such a wide-ranging analysis: it is impossible to do hundreds of extensive close readings within one book, and so Thornber makes the decision to bring out only the most relevant and fascinating aspects of each text in a way that links it with others and leaves the reader to investigate each instance further if they wish.

The other possible issue of contention is that Thornber often uses unconventional and at times even resistant readings to make her arguments. This could also be seen in two ways. On the one hand, it seems very much like Thornber is very carefully picking certain parts of texts and arranging them to make her point in ways that may not be accurately representative of the texts in their entirety. On the other hand, at various points Thornber is careful to point out how various parts relate to the text as a whole, as well as discussing the ways in which these texts have been read before, and the ways in which these readings may enhance, or at times disguise, aspects of ecological degradation. For example, much criticism reads depictions of the environment for its symbolic potential, a valid perspective Thornber argues, but one that ignores the fact that these depictions can be read for their comments on the environment as well. This move will not convince some readers who will still see such readings as against-the-grain, however I believe it is actually one of the most significant aspects of

the work. Thornber takes some very well-known texts and reads them in ways that reveal the ways in which such texts are rich with multiple interpretations. Rather than seeing this as a detriment, I saw this as one of the text's biggest strengths and a positive sign of criticism that is engaged in pushing boundaries and finding new ground in ways that are too important to ignore.

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