

1) Detailed panel description

Agential Landscape in East Asian Literatures

The session proposed here is meant to open new meeting grounds for ecocriticism and its kindred realms of literature, culture, film and forms of communication in general. We in this group have already engaged in eco-criticism of one kind or another with our individual research and publications, with various group study sessions and frequent exchanges at scholarly venues over the past decade or so. We feel that we have reached a moment where we need fresh impetus, depth of theoretical understanding and broad institutional support in propagating ecocriticism. One way to achieve that end is to make use of the forum provided by MLA as more diverse meeting grounds to broaden the discussion and/or debate on directions of “posthumanism.” As key evidence of the post-humanist turn in Humanity studies, we choose to initiate at MLA an informed discussion on a set of issues centered on the fundamentally transformed nature of “landscape.” *Anthropocene* is a neologism that refers to humans’ massive “built” habitats that have disturbingly altered the earthly topography, and over time have infused their presence in the human subconscious as “natural” landscape. In this panel we focus intensely on such alteration of human perception of the nonhuman material world by revealing how it has wrought illusion, displacement and transfiguration of humanity’s relationship with water, land and other forms of materiality which for ages used to fuse humans with the nonhuman world for sustained livelihoods, but is now tipped towards total disconnect and discordance.

As part of a theoretical break-through in ecocriticism, we have become wary of the limitations of past eco-literature, eco-poetics and nature writings in general in evoking Nature as an inscrutable and mystical entity suspended from the reality of human evolution, and we are convinced that evoking that kind of Nature can no longer bring forth genuine spiritual revival or sentimental consolation while dealing with the developmental crises we face today. With equal intensity, we have also explored how natural forces *other than* the human have evolved alongside human development amidst such built habitats, and have done so to a point that they are now “getting back at us” in *more than* human ways, exposing the loopholes and pitfalls of our knowledge and mastery of the earth. Ironically, they have also made possible recent paradigm-shifting scientific discoveries in animal and plant intelligences as well as in geological sentience that have together shaped modality, function and efficacy in mediating and/or resisting humans’ built habitats. Unfailingly, they have once again underscored the *interdependence* between humans and the non-human world through “agential” modes—assemblages, networks and fields of non-human forces—to frustrate, sidestep and forestall the hubris and domineering design of the humans. By studying recent East Asian literary, dramatic and filmic works, we panelists explore the complexity in humans’ approach to the notion of “interdependence” and highlight the complex and ingenious ways in which eco-conscious humans try to bespeak the agential non-human voices while nullifying their own anthropocentric impulses.

Panelists listed below have all embraced degrees of efficacy for agential natural forces and in earnest approached the vitality of human-nature interdependence as the driving force for their research. Simon Estok addresses the issue of agential landscapes in *Life of Pi* (Yann Martel)

and *The Hungry Tide* (Amitav Ghosh) by thinking through Giorgio Agamben and Asia. He explores these authors' two recent novels and their representations of non-sentient agency through the lens of Agamben's notions of exceptionalism and argues for ethical consideration of agential landscapes. Through close readings of representations of agential landscapes, he concludes that that each novel enacts a radical carrying across from East to West, a bridging and translation of very different histories of relations with natural environments that ultimately must be read as deeply questioning the exemption of the physical worldscapes from ethical consideration. Peter Huang echoes Karen Barad's notion of "agential realism" as the core theoretical framework and applies it to posthumanist performativity in order to valorize the agency of nonhuman nature. He stresses that nonhumans play an important role in natural, cultural practices. By connecting Barad's "agential realism" with Rachel Carson's "weed aesthetics," he reads a Taiwanese nature writer Wu Ming Yi's recent novel *The Man with the Compound Eyes* and demonstrates how a posthumanist performativity in averting the nature-culture dichotomy by way of a magic realist narration of a fictive imagination of a garbage island floating near the east coast of Taiwan.

Kota Inoue applauds Kenji Miyazawa's strong interest in wide-ranging fields of natural science such as zoology, botany, geology, and meteorology, and reflects on the Japanese poet's kaleidoscopic array of non-human actors—snow storms, winds, volcanic rocks, forests, birch trees, frogs, deer, birds, wildcats, bears, and even elephants—in largely rural settings. Inoue studies this non-human cosmos as the biotic incubator for hatching agential lands and sentient fauna and flora that actively interact with humans. A case in point is how, in Inoue's view, Miyazawa creates agential landscapes which were still confined in marginalized space, and the dynamics between agency and marginality mirrors his own marginalization from the literary circles. Xinmin Liu revisits the 18th-century English school of "the Picturesque" in the light of Jane Bennett and Stacy Alaimo's insights on the "undomesticated" grounds intersecting nature and culture; tracing its aesthetic genealogy out of traditional Chinese garden art, Liu scrutinizes the ambiguous primacy of human domestication of land as disposable assets over the deep and intriguing materiality of landscape. He evokes the award-winning architect Wang Shu's conviction to "linger in moments" when appraising the lived habitat and celebrates Wang's affective bonding with the materiality of dwelling as an ethical choice because it leads one to expose the limited and futile ends of human-centered causality and directionality; it compels us to be enthusiastically aware of the *agential* forces of our land-based existence.