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Reading Place and Identity: 
An Ecocritical Approach to the Poetry of Ee Tiang Hong

Agnes S. K. Yeow

Abstract: This paper argues that place in Ee Tiang Hong’s poetry is an index for physical realities and that these realities help shape and are shaped by identities such as those of the postcolonial, diasporic Chinese who call Malaysia their land and home. In his treatment of wilderness and ecology, Ee critiques the systematic displacement of both the soil and the son of the soil. For Ee, the history of the land is fused to communal and personal history.

Key words: place identity ecology wilderness diaspora home

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In this essay, I will be discussing the work of the Malaysian Chinese poet Ee Tiang Hong (1933 – 1990). I will mainly be demonstrating that in his work, identity and place-in-nature impinge on each other and that through the lens of Ee’s environmental consciousness, the nonhuman world functions not only as an abstract trope but also as an extension of the concrete reality and lived experience of a Malaysian Chinese community in Malaysia. In Ee’s universe, personal, moral, social and political preoccupations do not float amorphously above ground level but bear a visceral and physical connection with the land. I propose that although Ee’s “expanse of green” and “golden peninsula” (Myths for a Wilderness 26, 1) are figural, an examination of their material implications and the sense of place and natural reality which shape these representations is a step toward reconciling the systems/networks of culture with those of the land and redressing the hegemony of culture over nature. While Ee’s work lends itself to postcolonial/diasporic critique,
an ecocritical reading adds substantial depth and insight into the issues and contexts implicated in the work itself. If ecocriticism "deconstructs writing about landscape as a political act" (Davis 196), examining how postcolonial writers represent the geography and nature of their respective universes as well as how these felt and lived environments affect literary choices can shed light on the issues of self, society and history which preoccupy these writers.

In his "Foreword" to Ee Tiang Hong’s *Myths for a Wilderness*, Edwin Thumboo discovers in the poetry "an inclusiveness of vision which ensures that even the apparently straightforward nature poems tend to harbour moral comments" and that in poems like "Tembusu" and "To A Shrub", nature "instructs and soothes, is both metaphor and therapy" (x). Thumboo’s observation hints at the romantic sensibility of Ee’s inclusive vision in which the human world has a direct correlation with the nonhuman and in which nature as instructor and therapist is an active ministering presence. Thumboo is also probably the first critic to speak of "literary ecology" in the context of commonwealth writing. He considers the writer of the new literatures as being "enveloped by multi-ecosystems" or "multiple literary traditions, each of which is marked by particular linguistic, literary, and aesthetic preoccupations that constitute what can be conveniently called a literary ecology" (“Twin Perspectives” 213). While the literary ecology as explained by Thumboo relates more to the writer’s cultural environment, the concept is remarkably apt in helping to describe the complex network of relationships and interconnections between the various components of a writer’s *total* environment which includes both the cultural and natural. I hope to show that in Ee’s poetry, the "crisis of identity, of place and purpose" (Thumboo, Foreword xiii) is implicated in the ecological crisis precipitated by human rapacity and will-to-power over the course of Malaysia’s colonial and postcolonial history.

Ee was a seventh-generation Straits Chinese or Baba who defined himself as “a true son of the soil”; his sense of a “total self” was grounded in the “natural integration of cultures” (“Literature and Liberation” 28; italics added); a hybrid of Chinese, Malay and European cultures. Malaysian soil had been colonized by three Western powers, namely Portuguese, Dutch and British consecutively, and Malacca (Ee’s birth-place) had been a crucial possession for all three Empires given its strategic position along the Straits of Malacca. The Straits Chinese men (Baba) and women (Nyonya) refer to those “born primarily in what was formerly the British-ruled Straits Settlements of Malacca, Penang and Singapore. The origins of the Babas are shrouded in speculation owing to the lack of written records, though the first Baba community is believed to have been set up in Malacca in the fifteenth or sixteenth century through intermarriage between Chinese traders and the local population” (Leong 214). Over the centuries of cultural intermingling, the Baba Nyonya community has created a culture which is a syncretic blend of Chinese, Malay and European cultural traditions.

If ecology is defined as the study of the earth as our home, the Baba as the son of this Malaccan earth having traversed “decades of ash and earth” (“Heeren Street, Malacca,” *Myths* 1) is a well-placed ecological model and mediator for a well-regulated ecosystem in which the web of connections and interdependency between self, society and place transcends ethnic differentiations and restrictive nationalist agendas prevalent in Malaysia in the years before Ee migrated to Australia in 1975 (Ee died in Australia in 1990). Ee’s departure from Malaysia was due largely to the post-independence race politics which privileged ethnic Malays as the indigenous people of the land. In May 1969, racial tensions culminated in violence as bloody race riots erupted. Indeed, Ee strongly resisted the racialising discourse of the state, regarding the term Baba itself as “a piece of the landscape / harmonising the tongues and ways / of home, neighbourhood and school, / mixing, mediating, more than / Chinese or Malay / of both the flesh and blood” (“Heeren