Tamkang Review 51.2 (June 2021): 45-62.
DOI: 10.6184/TKR.202106_51(2).0003

Botanically Adrift: Writing Ecological Estrangement in *Two Trees Make a Forest*—On Memory, Migration and Taiwan

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This essay contributes to literary criticism on ecobiography through an analysis of Jessica Lee's *Two Trees Make a Forest.* A genre of life writing which reflects on the imbrication of a human and their ecosystem, ecobiography can be defined through two main themes: the dissolution of the human and non-human, and attention to local environments and ecosystems. However, *Two Trees Make a Forest* challenges the first of these themes through the obvious disconnect between Lee and the natural environments of Taiwan. Lee attempts to uncover her Taiwanese history following the deaths of her grandparents, and travels to Taiwan for three months to learn the language and explore the island's natural environments. Throughout her ecobiography, she continually reflects on her unsettlement in Taiwan given her estrangement from her history, and expresses this through reflections on Taiwan's geology and plants. More subliminally, her disconnect from her maternal family's culture is expressed through the way she chooses to write about Taiwan's natural history. Her accounts privilege writing by travelers and colonizers, rather than Taiwan's Indigenous peoples. This may be attributed to language difficulties—Lee's main language is English and she accessed translated, printed material—and because of her Western education. Lee also aestheticizes the environments through which she moves, dwelling on their obvious attractions (particularly the plant life) rather than the

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(Received 7 March 2021; Accepted 8 July 2021)

incursions of human habitation and industrialization. This necessarily leads to a rewriting of one of the themes of ecobiography, in that ecobiographical texts are not so much about representations of the dissolution between the human and its ecosystem, but about the desire for dissolution, and how this can be attained, or not.

The essay closes with a meditation on whether one can simply belong to a place by accessing that place's language, and on the need for time to acquaint oneself with an ecosystem and the cultures that it supports. It concludes with the suggestion that arboreal companions can prompt us to think about human relationships with local ecosystems on a much longer scale.

Keywords: Ecobiography, nature writing, Taiwan, ecosystems, Indigenous people

Concomitant Things

"The earth and forest are concomitant things, the trees in need of the right altitude and soil, the ground holding itself together in a web of roots," writes Jessica Lee in *Two Trees Make a Forest: On Memory, Migration and Taiwan* (38). The noun "concomitant" stems from the Latin word *concomitāri*, meaning "to accompany" (from the prefix *con,* "together," and *comitāri,* "to go with as a companion") ("Concomitant"). Lee's quote shows how the soil is companion to the tree, helping it to grow to reach sunlight, while the tree's roots are companion to the soil, binding it together preventing erosion, and retaining moisture. Humans, too, are accompanied by soil and trees, for trees absorb carbon dioxide, give us oxygen, and draw off cloud and rain from the sky, which in turn gives us water to drink. A literary representation of this mutuality—of a human's interaction with the things that nourish them—is known as "ecobiography," a form of life writing which represents a humans' imbrication in their ecosystem, and their reflections on their relationship with that ecosystem. This essay analyzes Lee's *Two Trees Make a Forest* as an ecobiography. It examines the impact of family loss on Lee's relationship to Taiwan's ecosystems and her expression of her initial uncertainty and tentative rootedness in terms of Taiwan's environment, particularly its geology and botany.

In earlier research on ecobiography, I posited that "if we cannot have a life without the lives of other inhabitants such as fungi, bacteria, air, or orchids, then it becomes desirable, in creating an autobiography, to include the lives that sustain and shape it: the *autos* [or self] of a biography should include our environment" ("From the Miniature" 15). While Lee includes her reflections on trees and other elements of Taiwan's environment in *Two Trees*, she does not refer at length to the severe threats that deforestation and human intervention pose to this environment—that is, she does not tell the whole story of Taiwan's ecosystems. I argue that her dislocation from Taiwan appears not only in meditations throughout the text, but also in her narration of the history of Taiwan and its landforms. The structure of her work suggests that her vision replicates the accounts by travellers and visitors that she uses to understand Taiwan's living world. This, in turn, illustrates that ecobiography does not always chronicle harmonious connections between humans and the nonhuman world, and may indeed function as a vehicle for reflecting on what such rupture means.

Barriers

Cecelia Konchar Farr and Philip Snyder coined the term "ecobiography" in 1996 to define a form of life writing in which "it is impossible to tell where the Self ends and Nature begins or where Nature ends and the Self begins: ego and eco are inextricably intertwined" (203). Their definition suggests a seamlessness between humans and their environments. In 2001, life writing scholars Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson expanded on this definition of ecobiography, describing it as "life writing that interweaves the story of a protagonist with the story of the fortunes, conditions, geography, and ecology of a region and reflects on their connection (sometimes failed) as a significant feature of the writing" (268). Smith and Watson's parenthetical reference to failure indicates that sometimes the connections between a life writer and their environment may not in fact be seamless. Such is the case with Jessica Lee, who opens *Two Trees Make a Forest* with a "Note on the Text" that announces "language barriers play a prominent role in this story" (ix). She explains that she uses traditional Chinese characters in her narrative, as is common in Taiwan, but also "a combination of the older Wade-Giles Romanisation system and Hanyu Pinyin (Mainland Chinese) to transliterate names, places and other details from Mandarin" (*Two Trees* ix). These barriers, and her choice of language in *Two Trees*, is informed by Lee's life and family history, and the intertwined histories of Taiwan and China.

Lee's grandmother, Po, was born in China in 1924, the daughter of a wealthy Nanjing landowner and merchant (*Two Trees* 91-92). After World War Two, civil unrest in China flared due to tension between the Communists and Nationalists. Po, who had become a secretary at the Air Force Headquarters in Nanjing, arranged for a transfer to Taiwan to escape the conflict. In Taiwan, she met Lee's grandfather Gong, a skilled pilot who flew in the war and trained in America. Lee's mother was their only child. In 1957, when Gong was fifty-five, the family moved to Canada. Lee's mother was twenty when they emigrated. She married a Welsh man and had two children, Lee and her sister.

Lee grew up to study environmental aesthetics and history in Canada and Britain, and then moved to Berlin. During this time, she went through a relationship breakup, and to assuage her heartache she set herself the task of swimming in a different lake each week, for a year (even in winter, when she broke the ice open with a hammer). She recounts her experiences in *Turning* (2017), and some of the concerns which Lee raises in this memoir foreshadow those in Two Trees. In *Turning*, she writes, "I live in that unsteady balance, a borderland marked on my body. It brings up a kind of uninterrogated discomfort"

(Lee, "Swell"). Lee explores this discomfort in *Two Trees*, probing the sharpness and silences of her family history, in which her grandparents' relationship was fractured by distance, trauma and incompatibility. Following her grandfather's death, Lee returns to Taiwan with her mother and "lamented the years we'd stayed away" (*Two Trees* 15). She feels herself bound to the island but cannot articulate why, writing that "whatever force had stitched my grandmother and my mother to this place had caught me, with just a thread at first, then bound me to it still stronger" (*Two Trees* 16). Later, she returns again, this time for three months to practice her Chinese, write and hike. Through her literary responses to the island's living world, particularly its tectonic shifts, forests, and shorelines, she attempts to make sense of her Taiwanese past and her—until this point—obliviousness to it.

Earthquakes and Shorelines

Migration defines Lee's background, and her knowledge of her Taiwanese family's history is muddied. Her father's "large family held a kind of gravitational pull" (*Two Trees* 13), but there is no family on her mother's side in Canada. She knows that her grandparents "had been born in China, but considered Taiwan home" (*Two Trees* 14) and occasionally hears mentions of wars, government leaders, fighter jets and communism. After her grandparents' deaths, Lee pieces their stories together from a few primary sources: scraps of conversation while they were alive, stories told by her mother, a tape recording of an interview she had with Po, a telephone bill, and a letter written by Gong. These last two documents, unearthed after Po's death, draw Lee and her mother to relatives in China, and prompt Lee to investigate her Taiwanese and Chinese heritage.

Lee's growing awareness that she has a history she never thought to explore, and the consequences of undertaking that exploration, lead her to identify with the geological upheaval of the island of Taiwan. The place, she notes, is "born into conflict at the junction of two volcanic arcs . . . an unstable landmass in perpetual confrontation" (*Two Trees* 8). The island also "marks the border of two tectonic plates" (*Two Trees* 8). Its Central Mountain Range, which runs for four-fifths of the island's length, and the Hseuhshan Range, which stretches across the north, are "flanked on either side by faults" while the Coastal Mountain Range in the east is "pressed between fault lines and the sea" (*Two Trees* 8). This geological instability has created the island's peaks, among the youngest in the world, which are "monuments to tectonic change set fast

into schist, gneiss, marble and slate" (*Two Trees* 8). The language which Lee deploys here suggests a turbulence that is both confined to and beyond the boundaries of the island, for the forces are far bigger than the land mass itself. It indicates that Lee's unsettling circumstances are shaped by forces that extend far greater than herself.[1]

As a writer who turns to her fellow living beings to understand her unsteady place in the world, it is not surprising that Lee draws on motifs of earthquakes, fractures, and fissures or, alternatively, the slippery demarcations of wetlands, sea, and sky. As the child of a Taiwanese mother and Welsh father, and as a person who has lived in Canada, Britain, and Germany, Lee finds herself suspended in a state of in-betweenness. This tendency, presaged by *Turning* as noted above, leads Lee to identify with ecotonal environments such as mangroves and wetlands. In her search for the endangered black-faced spoonbill, she visits Tainan, which sits on a coastal plain. Lee describes the mangrove forests lining the waterways: "The brittle seam between the mussel-shelled shore and the sea is elusive. Briny, interstitial things, on Taiwan's western coast mangroves are the last green thing before the Strait sweeps out towards China. They are at the border of land and sea" (*Two Trees* 129). A page later, she adds, "I've grown accustomed to thinking of the sea and sky as opposite things, cut through by a border. But the western flatlands blur these boundaries where water breathes in waves upon the shore, birds descend and speckle the shallows" (*Two Trees* 130). Lee achieves this blurring in the text itself by investing the sea with oxygen as it blows upon the sand.

On another occasion, on a hike in torrential rain up Mount Qilai, she notices "sensations in isolation: the tunnelled sound of the wind against my hood, my pulse hot in my ears, the tastes of salt and chalk in my mouth. I feel myself dissolve in movement the way sediment flows downriver" (*Two Trees* 84). The synesthesia of taste and environment, combined with Lee's dissolution in the rain, position her as indistinguishable from the world of forest and soil. The sense of indivisibility is only momentary, however, and at many other points in *Two Trees* Lee finds herself thwarted in her attempts to belong to Taiwan.

On a taxi ride, the driver asks why her Mandarin is so good for a foreigner, and Lee explains that her mother is from Taiwan. The taxi driver remonstrates with her, asking, "Then why is your Mandarin so poor?" (*Two Trees* 90-91). Lee does not think that a desire to know the environment and history from which

[1] For a discussion of posthumanism and ecobiography (which is beyond the scope of this article), see Jessica White's essay "Edges and Extremes in Ecobiography: Amy Liptrot's *The Outrun*," forthcoming in *Life Writing in the Posthuman Anthropocene* (2021).

she has been estranged is unique, as she knows of others "who have lost places or relatives, who have taken comfort in returning, as if exercising a muscle memory passed down through the generations" (16). After her unsettling exchange with the taxi driver, she retreats to the forests, but even here, she writes, she feels "unmoored" (91). Visited by thoughts of her grandparents, her stride "worked itself into a charm, hypnotic, and the worst came to me. I hadn't done enough, hadn't learned enough Mandarin, knew no Taiwanese at all, and hadn't taken enough of an interest" (91). She concludes, with sadness, "I speak in broken tones, making half-sense to everyone I meet. My world exists in halves" (95).

In earlier research on ecobiography, I reflect that "of the criticism that has been published on ecobiography to date, there are two major themes: the dissolution of boundaries between human and other-than-human, and attention to local environments and ecosystems" ("From the Miniature" 19). However, *Two Trees* has prompted me to depart from this thinking, because Lee's perception of the indivisibility of her self and the natural world is only momentary, and because her attention to Taiwan's ecosystems is mediated by her Western education, thereby limiting her narration of the stories associated with this ecosystem. This limitation is particularly apparent in her relationship with Taiwan's plants.

Botanical Estrangement

As a child growing up in "vast and unrolling woodlands" in Canada, Lee was attuned to the "seasonal dance" of pines and maples and to the "red flame of autumn, the spare and silent retreat of winter" (*Two Trees* 16). In Taiwan, however, she finds herself "botanically adrift, as unsure of the trees as [she] was of the ferns that sprouted from window sills" (*Two Trees* 16). She turns to her mother for help with learning about Taiwan's plants, and receives "the Mandarin names of the plants I had no reference for, passed on from my grandfather to her . . . her childhood through the names of plants" (*Two Trees* 18). As Lee tries the new words out by turning the names "over in my mouth, stretching their shapes into my mind," she finds "a longing to remember the things I had not known" (*Two Trees* 18). This longing appears to be not only ancestral, but aesthetic. Lee's attraction to Taiwanese plant life is obvious, manifesting in lush, sensory descriptions. On her hikes, she encounters "camphor laurels, peeling elms, charcoal trees, banyans, and sugar plums," which are "overrun with the unfurling of ferns beyond number, with giant taros that stand gaping under heavy rain. The parasols of the eight-fingered *Diplofatsia* reach their hands to the sky.

Their many greens stand layered, saturated and deepened" (*Two Trees* 17). Lee creates a sense of plenitude with the words "overrun," "number," and "many greens," and of expansiveness through the size of the taros and the *Diplofatsia* reaching upwards. It also suggests the vastness of time that Lee needs to learn about the multifarious plants in her new environment.

Lee describes how, on encountering new species, she writes their names out repeatedly, draws them to commit them to memory, and writes their names in Hanzi, "copying Chinese characters despite [her] clumsy script" (*Two Trees* 94). This account of learning new names is nestled within an account of the hike on Shuise Mountain in which, she writes:

> Fern and taro overlap the path, branches hang heavy with lianas I do not know. I cannot see beyond the understorey, which has wound its way over the top of the trail, forming a green tunnel that rises rapidly uphill. I struggle to bring order to the scene. (*Two Trees* 94)

In contrast to the luxuriant and expansive description of the "many greens" cited above, this description is replete with negatives: Lee does not know, she cannot see, she struggles to make sense of what is before her. Her sense of frustration is reinforced by the heaviness of the liana vines, and the claustrophobia of the green tunnel. Lee concedes, "This is not a place I could simply learn, and it is not mine anyway. I belong in a forest in a much bigger, colder country, where sugar is boiled and thrown on snow, not pressed from cane on a hillside" (*Two Trees* 95). Her frustrations appear on yet another hike up Mount Qilai later in her story. In the dark, pre-dawn hours, she encounters "plateaus of smaller plants, growing minutely and staunchly in the cold . . . It looks like a Scottish moor transported across the world. Most of the plant names remain unknown to me in the darkness" (*Two Trees* 83). The darkness is literal, because the sun has not yet appeared, but it also signals Lee's lack of knowledge about Taiwan's botany. Furthermore, her comparison to a Scottish moor reveals how her knowledge has been shaped not only by her belonging to a colder country, but also the influence of a Eurocentric education.

Writing in her column *Non-Native Species*, Lee acknowledges that "It took me years before I realized that I'd built my notions of beauty from the stories of a distant land" ("How the Literature of Empire"). Her Welsh-Canadian grandparents gave her "Beatrix Potter stories with farmers' fields, Roald Dahl books with fantastical forests and fruits, and a handful of stories about badgers," while painting-by-numbers with her grandmother taught her the names of British plants: hollyhocks, hawthorn, gorse, gooseberries ("How the Literature of Empire"). When she was twenty-one, she moved to Britain to study, undertaking a

PhD on the ways in which landscapes such as Hampstead Heath "transcended materiality and became idealized" ("How the Literature of Empire"). Seven years later, she moved to Berlin, where she wrote *Turning*. Only after she moved away from Britain did she realize how deeply embedded in her psyche were notions of British landscape.

Back in Britain, on a visit to speak on a nature writing panel, she commented to a fellow panelist about her decision to stop writing about the place where she had studied:

> "It's bound up with my questions about beauty," I said, "how England takes up space in the cultural imagination even if you aren't from here." Underneath, I knew the discomfort we were pointing towards: words like empire, colony, or migrant. ("How the Literature of Empire")

Lee posted these meditations in 2020, a year after the publication of *Two Trees*. Although it is unclear if she is commenting on the writing of her ecobiography, what is clear is her awareness of the monoculture of nature writing, which she is working to redress through her editing of the *Willowherb Review,* a journal that aims to "provide a digital platform to celebrate and bolster nature writing by emerging and established writers of colour" (Lee, "About"). Despite this dedication to writing about the natural world in other cultures and languages, *Two Trees* remains shaped by an aestheticizing perspective that does not attend to Taiwans indigenous cultures.

Mappings, Groundings

Lee attempts to stabilize and orient herself in Taiwan by studying written records. She observes that she finds "a strange quietude in following these attempts to chart nature: through maps, through flora, through seismicity. They give me something tangible to keep track of, not because a map can be equated with its territory, but because it gives me some way of ordering the world and its complications" (*Two Trees* 186-87). This means that much of the information given to the reader about Lee's engagement with Taiwanese nature and history comes from printed sources.

Two Trees is divided into four sections that pertain to Taiwan's natural environment, and each section is prefaced by a title page with a Chinese word and its English translation: dao/island; shan/mountain, hill; shui/water, river; lin/forest, woods, grove or a group of like persons. She grounds most of these sections with a history, but it is often recorded history. For example, although

a timeline at the beginning of the book shows that the Indigenous settlement of Taiwan began approximately six to ten thousand years ago, Lee's history of the island begins with its geological birth some six to nine million years ago in the Miocene epoch. It then jumps to Qing explorers such as Yu Yonghe who ventured to the island in search of natural resources in 1697 (*Two Trees* 8-9). She refers to the Indigenous people at this point, but only as guides who showed Yu where to go along the coast.

When Lee learns about Taiwan's botany, she lists the travelers who have encountered the country's flora: Scottish botanist Robert Fortune, who made the first record of botanical study on the island in 1853; English biologist Robert Swinhoe, who surveyed Taiwan's natural history; Irish botanist Augustine Henry, who published a list of nearly 1500 plant species; and Japanese botanist Bunzo Hayata who, from the early twentieth century, devoted a decade to studying Taiwan's flora. Lee also reads historical floras (books that detail the plants of a particular region or habitat) because "lots of old plants and their semblance of order reveal a continuity between past and present. Meaning is held in who named a species and how they came across it" (*Two Trees* 173-74). For example, *Lophura swinhoii* (Swinhoe's pheasant) is named for Robert Swinhoe (*Two Trees* 79), while more than 1600 plants list Hayata in their name (*Two Trees* 79).

Lee acknowledges, too, that the naming of plants can be a precarious business because of "plants that can no longer be found, plants that have been rehoused under the new genetic parameters in the Angiosperm Phylogeny Group, plant names that have shape-shifted" (*Two Trees* 174). She notes that "plant histories—like human ones—have gaps in their genealogies" (*Two Trees* 174). One of the gaps in Lee's genealogy of the island's flora lies in the relationships between Taiwan's plants and Indigenous peoples. This may be because Lee consults printed material, and the Indigenous groups of Taiwan have an oral history (Adawai 302). It is also because she is not fluent in their languages. Additionally, little writing about Taiwan's natural environment has been translated into English. When Lee visits Taiwan's National Museum of Literature in Tainan, she discovers by happenstance a special exhibit on Taiwanese nature writing. Inspired, she tracks down what translations she can, "finding so little Taiwanese nature writing that has made the journey into English" (*Two Trees* 156).

Lee does not ignore Taiwan's Indigenous peoples in her work—she briefly refers to their literature, although not its content (*Two Trees* 154)—and she has read English translations of works such as environmental activist Wu Ming-Yi's *The Stolen Bicycle* (Patrick). She notes that, in her research for *Two Trees*, she located the "nativist" literature of Taiwan, which "first emerged in response

to Japanese rule for preserving links to the Chinese languages" (*Two Trees* 6) and found that "the island's literature, from both Indigenous and Han Chinese perspectives, has long been preoccupied with land, with the mountains and forests that form the backdrop for the cities below" (*Two Trees* 154). She also illuminates how Taiwan's Indigenous peoples have been written out of history, particularly in terms of mapping. She explains that "the story of a place—lithic, living and forgotten—can be found in maps and what they include and leave out" (*Two Trees* 54) and notes that early maps of Taiwan—a sixteenth century Spanish map, a 1700 Qing map, and an eighteenth century French map—tend to leave out the mountains and eastern coast. In doing so, these maps "depicted a topography and a view that Indigenous people had been outside civilisation" (*Two Trees* 35). They had been on the island for five thousand years, until colonizers assimilated the groups or forced them to retreat to the mountains (*Two Trees* 35). Lee refers to Indigenous groups again in her history of the Nenggao Cross-Ridge Trail, recounting how in late 1930, "the Wushe Rebellion marked a last stand of Indigenous resistance to colonial rule" (*Two Trees* 64-65), when the Seediq people ambushed and killed over one hundred and thirty Japanese officials and their families attending a sports day.

While Lee recognizes the displacement of Taiwan's Indigenous peoples and recounts their agency and resistance, her failure to document their history and relationships with the island's plants is a missed opportunity, particularly when Lee's attraction to plants shapes her attempts to connect with Taiwan's environment. Opportunities to learn about Taiwan's Indigenous peoples and their culture are available through ethno/ecotourism (based upon Indigenous principles) in sites such as Tanayiku Natural Ecology Park (Hipwell), and through art and literature—Chia-ju Chang and Scott Slovic point to a "robust aboriginal community that plays an active role in politics, tourism, environmental stewardship and artistic expression" (ix). The little space that Lee offers Indigenous peoples in her rendering of the island's environmental history seems a re-inscription of the maps that marginalize these peoples, particularly when "the majority of Taiwanese, as much as seventy or eighty-five percent, in fact are of mixed Aboriginal and Han Chinese descent" (Huang 7). Lee's difficulty with connecting with Taiwan is apparent not only in her musings as she hikes, but also, more subliminally, through her failure to engage with Indigenous peoples' stories of Taiwan. This failure is, in turn, informed by her tendency to aestheticize her surroundings.

A Partial View

In the exhibition of nature writing at Taiwan's National Museum of Literature, Lee finds "rather realist worlds, with essays, poems and stories inextricably linked to activism" (*Two Trees* 155). The early works, written when Taiwan's hills were denuded of trees by forestry and cities were expanding rapidly, "contain an energy quite unlike the sweetened prose [she had] grown used to in British nature writing" (*Two Trees* 155). At the same time that Lee makes these observations, she does not recount the massive deforestation that began under Japanese occupation with the development of a lumber industry and continued until the 1970s (Thornber 85-86), nor the degradation of mountainous regions, with "garbage waterfalls," up to several hundred meters in length, in the mountains of central Taiwan (Thornber 88), nor the pollution from modernization and industrialization in the 1980s. When Lee does reply to industrialization in her writing, it is glancingly.

On her hikes, she writes of "shattered slopes—made worse by tree clearance, mining, and monocrop plantations," but she places this observation in the context of Taiwan's geology, noting that "mountains could be rattled all too quickly, their timelines fractured in mere moments" (*Two Trees* 23). This lends a sense of inevitability to the landslides, when in fact anthropogenic changes such as road building and the historical effects of deforestation contribute to landslide susceptibility (Chuang and Shiu). Other mentions of anthropogenic change are muted and passive, particularly in contrast to the lush language Lee uses when describing plants. For example, walking on Hushan, Tiger Mountain, she notices "the grey streets rolling out into the hills, the city expanding at a rate faster than the movement of mountains" (*Two Trees* 26). The verb "rolling" does not encapsulate the effects of urbanization on ecosystems and the animals they support. As Peter I-min Huang relates, Taiwan's last remaining leopard cats are threatened by the government and industrial developers who, in 2014, planned to "construct a multi-lane highway across a mountain area where some of the last remaining leopard cats survive in 'the wild'" (94); here "wild" is considered a place between urban and rural environments where the leopard cats are not completely impinged upon by humans (94).

Lee's neutral observations contrast with the numerous writers who have chronicled Taiwan's environmental degradation in their work including Zheng Qingwen (the English transliteration is Cheng Ch'ing-wen), Zhu Tianxin (Chu T'ien-hsin), Yang Mu, and Taiwanese Indigenous writers such as Topas Tamapima, whose story "The Hunter" features in the first anthology of Taiwanese Indigenous writing translated into English (Balcom). Iris Ralph, in her essay on

ecocriticism and activist efforts to protect trees in Taiwan, also cites ecocritics Syaman Rapongan, Wu Sheng, and Chen Yu-feng (126).

Dis/Connections

This is not to suggest that *Two Trees* is an incomplete or poor example of ecobiography—indeed its intricate structure and gorgeous prose make it an engaging and interesting read. However, its omissions say as much about Lee's placement in Taiwan as its inclusions. For this reason, one of the themes of ecobiography as I had previously conceptualized it—the dissolution of boundaries between human and non-human—needs to be refigured to encompass the *desire* for dissolution, and subsequent reflection on this (whether consciously or not).[2]

This makes *Two Trees* a useful work for thinking through what it means to understand a place. Given that so many of the sources that Lees draws upon are by people who have encountered Taiwan momentarily, and that she herself is not in Taiwan for long, perhaps what is needed to feel connected to an ecosystem is lengthy and sustained engagement not just with the ecosystem itself, but with the cultures and languages that spring from it.

The way in which humans access the natural world is mediated by language. Lee acknowledges this, maintaining that "our versions of the truth so often dwell in the language that we choose, but the words we use have consequences: they signify allegiances, shared histories, harms and losses" (*Two Trees* 148). But is cutting through to reality even possible when reality is mediated by language? Can Lee, in simply reading about another culture's botanical history, access its ecosystems? She muses, "I once saw my grandfather write out words from an English dictionary, using each one in a sentence. Perhaps they gave him access to a world different from his own. When I walk a trail and feel foreign, I can name a rock or tree" (*Two Trees* 186-187). Yet can Lee be said to connect with Taiwan and its environment when her botanical knowledge does not extend beyond printed, historical materials, and when her mother was born in Taiwan but she was not? How far does an ancestral imprint carry? Lee dwells on this conundrum after the aforementioned, frustrating hike up Shuishe Mountain. When the forest closes like a tunnel around her and she is forced

[2] I am very grateful to the anonymous reviewers for prompting me to articulate the relationship between *Two Trees* and ecobiography, and for the mention of phytobiography. I am also grateful to the early 2020 cohort at the Rachel Carson Centre for the Environment, with whom I workshopped a version of this paper.

back down the trail by a child-size macaque, she admits, in tears, "I cannot encircle the forest with learned words and then claim to understand it. I want to know this place, to feel some sense of familiarity, but that is not simple, not an easy thing" (*Two Trees* 98).

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which suggests that a people's language conditions the way they view the world (known as "linguistic determinism"), has been contested by the argument that even though there may not be a "one for one" equivalent, a word can always be explained in some other way, for example by a phrase (Aarts 367). This might indicate that Lee is able to access an understanding of Taiwan's environment through her reading and learning. However, it is worth considering her experiences alongside those of Wirlomin Noongar author Kim Scott, whose country is in southwest Western Australia. Scott explains the integral connection between language and land for him and his people, and in the possibilities for his regeneration, as he, too, grew up not knowing his culture or his place:

> there is something really deep and conceptual in these Noongar terms. As there is in *boodjar* for earth; and *boodjari* also means "pregnant." Ngangk is "sun" as well as "mother." *Bily* (or *bilya* in some dialects) is river and it's also navel or umbilical chord. So there's a lot more complexity in these concepts of connection and interrelationship than there is in the world-wide use of a term like "mother earth." There's an interrelatedness . . . there's the human form and other life forms latent in the landscape. (qtd. in Brewster 244)

By learning Noongar through his elder Kayang Hazel, the country enters Scott and enlarges his self. He writes "[s]ometimes it's as if, learning to make the sounds, I remake myself from the inside out. As if, in making the sounds of the language of this land, I make myself an instrument of it" (Scott and Brown 236). This interrelationship between language and country is specific to many of Australia's First Nations peoples. It raises the question about the capacity for people who are not First Nations to connect with that place, particularly when, for First Nations peoples in Australia, a connection to country is bound up with lore, law and responsibility. After all settlers are, in one sense, tourists like Lee, and can learn from the traditional custodians about how to care for their natural environment.

Arboreal Companions

In concluding, it is timely to return to the quote with which I opened this essay, and to consider the sentences that precede it:

> Where humans have cleared the land for timber or mined the mountains for gravel, the slopes will flow freely. But in places and in time, their devastation is allayed by trees: the root structures of the forests help to stitch the mountains back together. (*Two Trees* 38).

Lee recognizes the importance of trees for mitigating landslides. She also recognizes that trees need particular conditions to survive and do their work of holding the earth together. On another level, these trees and their soil show that culture and rootedness in Taiwan also are knitted together. As Chang and Slovic write, "In a sense, Taiwanese ecocriticism provides a model for nuanced locale-specific, vernacular thinking about the environment and human identity" (xii).

Lee reflects local-specific thinking when she encounters some arboreal companions, the old, endangered Taiwanese cedars, towards the end of *Two Trees*. They prompt her to muse on her grandfather Gong, sent back to Taiwan at the end of his life when his family were unable to care for him. She feels grief and regret for the way he died alone and yet, at the same time, she acknowledges that her grandparents' deaths have brought her "new possibilities for knowing. Sadness has lightened, grown lean on my bones." In the cedar forest, she finds "a place where the old trees can span all our stories, where three human generations seem small" (*Two Trees* 211).[3] Perhaps her acknowledgement that "the forest stands despite us," that it is longevity that helps to create place, marks the beginning of her journey towards understanding her self amidst Taiwan's ecosystems.

[3] An interesting vehicle for considering human life versus arboreal life is through the lens of phytobiography, a cousin to ecobiography. Phytobiography, as conceptualized by Peter Vujaković, argues for a biographical approach to trees, documenting their life histories through their scars and relationships to other trees, and prompting the contemplation of "tree time," given trees' long sojourn on earth. Related to this is John Ryan's term "phytography," which is "critical posthumanist life writing about more-than-humans that pivots on the potential of collaborating and co-authoring narratives with plants, notwithstanding their profound otherness" (101). Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this paper to connect *Two Trees* with these engaging concepts.

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植物漂流：潔西卡・李傳記《雙木成林》生態疏離書寫中的記憶，飄移，台灣

摘要

本文主要藉由探討潔西卡・李旅遊回憶錄《雙木成林》對生態傳記作爲文學批評提出貢獻。生態傳記作爲人與生態系統密切關係的生命書寫文類，主要有二大主題：瓦解人與非人界線，以及關注地方環境與生態系統的重要性。然而《雙木成林》卻挑戰第一主題，而呈現作者與台灣自然環境的疏離，作者企圖追蹤祖父母之死，旅遊台灣三個月來挖掘台灣歷史，學習當地語言及自然環境。她的旅遊回憶錄的生態傳記書寫反映了她的離散失根以及與歷史，自然地質植物的疏離。她藉由書寫台灣自然歷史來表達與自己母系文化的隔閡與生疏。傳記中往往重視主流旅遊者及殖民者而忽略原住民聲音，更因爲語言及西式教育影響而過度浪漫地美化自然環境而對人類對自然侵犯及高度工業化的破壞，視而不見。而造成其生態傳記書寫，並非人與非人的界線瓦解，而是瓦解的企圖而力有未逮。本文結論思索人是否藉由了解當地語言以及熟悉自然與文化環境，而能歸屬於當地。本文主張與林中植物相伴可以增進人與生態系統共生共存的關係。

關鍵字： 生態傳記、自然書寫、台灣、生態系統、原住民