

**Jennifer Wenzel. *The Disposition of Nature: Environmental Crisis and World Literature*. New York: Fordham UP, 2020. ISBN: 9780823286775. 352 pp.**

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In recent years, there has been a plethora of books in the humanities that focus on environmental themes, thus provoking a wide range of critiques of environmental issues in the broader humanities. These stances on a wide range of environmental phenomena are not only highly dialogical in an interdisciplinary perspective but are indeed insightful and provide strong support for our imagination, discussion, and practice of protecting the planet. However, an excessive interdisciplinary dialogue, on the other hand, may lead to unintended negative consequences. If left unattended, ambitious interdisciplinary works can easily be reduced to the products of humanities, leaving the existing disciplines without their attributed meanings or reduced to “area studies” with different methodologies. The most remarkable quality of Wenzel’s second monograph, *The Disposition of Nature: Environmental Crisis and World Literature*, is that despite its obvious interdisciplinary nature—not only does it discuss texts that straddle the Indian Ocean and a wide range of genres, but it also creates an integral dialogue between postcolonial theory, world literature, and the environmental humanities—it remains highly focused on an important master question about literature. What can (reading) literature bring to us or our planet (world/globe)? It forms the very foundation of the thesis presented in *The Disposition of Nature* by Wenzel, wherein she poses the thought-provoking inquiry: How can *literature* contribute to the Earth?

Such issues are epistemological topics that traditional ecocriticism as opposed to today’s environmental humanities cannot get around. As Wenzel notes, ecocritical scholars such as Richard Kerridge argue that literature serves as a response to the environmental crisis, prompting a call to action to protect the planet (16). It is challenging to find credence in such a utopian perspective, and it appears that Wenzel herself is decidedly skeptical, a sentiment she convincingly articulates through a series of compelling examples. She vividly illustrates how literature can inadvertently reinforce and normalize the workings of violent extraction regimes within

our natural environment. In essence, her emphasis on literature closely aligns with the ongoing discourse concerning the contemporary challenges faced by literary studies. Diverging from other scholars who have, over time, relinquished their commitment to the literary enterprise, her opposing perspective injects vitality into any apprehension surrounding this matter. In the current milieu, the imperative to engage in comprehensive literary reading and professional analysis, as well as literary criticism, remains more pronounced than ever. This necessity arises from the risk of transforming literary studies into a unidirectional adjunct of particular cultural agendas, such as environmental concerns, or dominant theories within the humanities, such as history and anthropology.

In insisting on a literary perspective on the environmental crisis, she focuses on how rescaling the reading of literature (and narrative works more generally), which she calls “reading for the planet,” (22) can help people become fully aware of how the interconnected world of many “worlds” is uneven in terms of real resources and risks. “Reading for the planet” considers the earth (rather than the global or integrated world) as an intricate, interrelated whole, examining the layers of connections and divisions between the whole and its parts, “from near to there: between specific sites, across multiple divides, at more than one scale” (2) and examines different power dynamics. It integrates Franco Moretti’s concept of “distant reading” with the practice of “close reading,” combining these approaches to foster a deeper understanding of the Earth as a critical framework for interpretation. She reminds us that on the scale of “reading for the planet,” “people can inhabit the same space without living in the same world” (8) or vice versa—even if they live in the same space, they may live in a different world.

To this end, she has engaged in a dialogue on world literary studies in recent years, in the same vein as Aamir Mufti, Pheng Cheah, and others, reflecting on the reading of world literature pioneered by David Damrosch, Pascale Casanova, and Franco Moretti. Although the three perspectives are not completely identical, generally “these texts are enthusiastic about taking the transnational movement of texts and genres as a framework for literary analysis” (6). She criticizes, “they often imagine a world of circulation without friction, where unresolved histories of economic, ecological, and epistemological violence are elided, naturalized, or euphemized” (8). In other words, in her view, referring only to the circulation of texts is too superficial to truly reflect and effectively criticize the imbalance in resources. From the perspective of the influence of world literature, the circulation of texts as the only reducing indicator weakens the theoretical potential and agency of world literature as a concept. The neglect of the radical power of the (world) literary imag-

ination in its cultural connections across the globe is an unimaginable loss and may even make “literature” contribute to the environmental crisis. This is shown in the following chapters through various examples.

Through a postcolonial lens, meanwhile, she considers what Rob Nixon calls “unevenly universal”—the vulnerability to environmental harm. She hopes to break down the formidable “quarantines of imagination” by focusing on imagination across social divides. However, given that “gestures toward universality or planetary community that do not grapple with this unevenness can effect a gentrification of the imagination, displacing communities and epistemologies in the name of breaking down barriers,” she advocates a “world-imagining from below” scenario. (9) In other words, she places otherwise unappreciated peripheral people in the context of the postcolonial, transnational, planetary environment and materiality in order to break through the top-down blind spots that often mark transnationalism studies (for instance, policy studies).

The disposition of nature, as she calls it, is at the intersection of several of these concerns, as well as a reflection on the logic of reduction, which she continues to track in later chapters: “what kind of thing nature is understood to be, and how humans arrange, control, and distribute nonhuman nature, often as ‘natural resources’” (3). In other words, she considers “assumptions about what nature is are mutually constituted with contests over how it is used” (3). With that, Chapters 1 and 2 (the first part) focus on the paradoxical relationship between “citizens and consumers,” while Chapters 3 and 4 (the second part) highlight the possible cultural correlation—local and also planetary—between resource logic and risk logic at various scales around the globe.

The first chapter looks at how three commodity-specific documentaries act as “a strategy for creating change” (44) when disseminated as cultural knowledge products of environmental disasters. Wenzel argues that these films provide an opportunity for people far away, as consumers and citizens, to bring themselves into the environmental crisis on the other side of the planet and thus provide an opportunity for them to want to make a change (for instance, green consumption). But ironically, for Wenzel, this in turn provokes the desire for consumerism. The second chapter, “Hijacking the Imagination: How to Tell the Story of the Niger Delta,” looks at the environmental destruction of global commodities such as crude oil in places like Nigeria and Tanzania through the analysis of documentaries such as *Sweet Crude* (2010) and *Curse of the Black Gold* (2008) and links it to the “geography of consumption” of commodities in North America and Europe. This chapter effectively illustrates her claim that “people can inhabit the same space without living in the

same world” (8). The third chapter illustrates the historical and cultural entanglements of global resource logic through a nuanced reading of the wasted and wasted lives in the short story *Dhowli* (1979) by Bengali writer and activist Mahasweta Devi. The fourth chapter delves into the cultural ramifications stemming from the tragic 1987 Union Carbide disaster, which wrought devastation upon the central Indian city of Bhopal. In a meticulously argued demonstration, this chapter strategically underscores the significance of bottom-up research and the constructive role literature can play in the realm of practical societal impact. Within this analytical framework, the author scrutinizes the manner in which international law facilitates the existence of transnational corporations in a state of simultaneous ubiquity and elusiveness, thereby affording these entities a means to evade accountability for their role in environmental degradation and the erosion of human rights. Instead, narrative texts such as *Animal’s People* (2007) by Indra Sinha are like “inconvenient forum[s]” that make the responsibility of transnational corporations explicit through “narrative jurisdiction.”

Both Wenzel’s mastery of the materials and the way she uses them to criticize and reflect on the current topology of the combination of environmental humanities, postcolonial literary theory, and world literature seems to be well developed and logically sound. However, there is one aspect that may be worthy of scrutiny—in its attempt to avoid the logic of reduction, its understanding of “literature” itself may also fall into such a logic of reduction. In this monograph, literature seems to be equated with narrative, or rather, too much emphasis is placed on the functionality of narrative. In other words, the so-called literature can only be “read for the planet” because literature points to some “events” about the environmental crisis. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that within the realm of literature, narrative literature is but one facet, and a substantial body of nonnarrative literature also warrants consideration. Therefore, it prompts us to ponder whether these nonnarrative works also merit examination. Do they possess critical relevance to humanistic concerns such as the environmental crisis, albeit through different means or at varying levels?

In any event, I believe a fundamental criterion for assessing the quality of a monograph is its capacity to engage effectively within its disciplinary boundaries while fostering broader accessibility. Evidently, *The Disposition of Nature* epitomizes this standard. To be candid, this work is not easily digestible, given its intricate web of textual and theoretical intricacies, and readers may find themselves navigating complex terrain. However, within the realms of environmental humanities, world literature studies, and postcolonial cultural examination, this publication

emerges as an imperative and noteworthy addition to the scholarly canon of recent years.

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Tian Jing Teh (he/him) is a PhD student and Provost Fellow in the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures at the University of Southern California. His research interests lie in transnational literature and media across the Sinophone worlds, world/global studies, critical island and ocean studies, environmental media, and border and migration studies. By remapping both real and imaginary worlds, specifically those related to remigrant storytelling traveling between maritime Southeast Asia and East Asia, his research seeks to reconceptualize the establishment of world literature and the ways in which it operates through intra-Asian and transpacific relations.