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# The Ecocritical Erotic in Marjorie Evasco's "Elemental"

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## Abstract

This brief article explores the critical entanglements of nature, matter, and the human body in Marjorie Evasco's poem "Elemental." Through ecocritical erotic writing, the text establishes the "trans-corporeal" relationships between human desire and the natural environment, the language of the erotic and the craft of poetry, and the writer and the task of ecofeminist writing. Ultimately, this essay suggests that the text and the author engage with the *ba'i* as an indigenous source of femininity, charting a direction toward native Philippine ecofeminism.

**Keywords:** *ba'i*, ecocriticism, ecofeminism, erotica, Marjorie Evasco, trans-corporeality

## Introduction: Essentialism, Ecofeminism, and the Erotic

The relationship of women (and their bodies) to nature and the environment is a theme replete in literature. While these texts often celebrate and affirm women's intimate/innate connection to the natural environment, these also reinforce the essentialism of the "ecofeminine" that characterized the ecofeminism movement of the 1990s (Gaard 35). This relationship has "mistakenly gendered the earth female" to serve a movement that is individualized, apolitical, and elite (Gaard 38). Moreover, Western ecofeminism asserts new-age spiritualism that has reduced women to the "Mother Earth" trope in literature or "goddess-

worshippers" that are as ethnocentric as these are unfounded (Gaard 32). In the Philippines, however, women's affinity to the natural world is embedded in precolonial cultural practices and beliefs throughout the archipelago. The *babaylan* and *binukot* (Visayas and Mindanao) and *mandadawak* and *mansip-ok* (Northern Luzon) share similarities in the gendered communion with nature and the spirits. Similarly, the *diwata*, a commonplace character in Philippine mythology, is often gendered female. However, these precolonial roles are shared between cisgender women and men and thus are not tied to the anatomically female bodies but are, in some cultures, feminized. The *babaylan*, for example, is a role that "rested not on anatomic difference alone, but on the social

elements of occupation and prestige” where men have performed gender-crossing to be suitable for the role (Garcia 163). In these examples, and many others across the archipelago, women or the feminine occupy an essentialized yet culturally traditional role that has placed them in mediation with the natural world.

Despite these precolonial roles shared across gender, the trope of “Mother Nature” or Inang Kalikasan eventually shifted to nationalist projects that turned women’s connection to nature into an affinity for domestic work. As “natural” caregivers and nurturers, the figure of the mother became the essentialist foundation for embodying nationalist tropes: *Inang bayan* (Motherland), *ilaw ng tahanan* (light of the house), and *bagong bayani* (new hero). While *bagong bayani* does not necessarily refer exclusively to women overseas workers, it has arguably fused both Inang bayan and *ilaw ng tahanan* embodied by the figure of the Filipina domestic laborer as national “labor-commodities” (Tadiar 155) and the subject of national sacrifice (Piocos 2019). In a way, these female/feminine roles began to forward nation-state interest through the cooptation of bodies and labor and, to a large extent, women’s working bodies. While a wealth of scholarship presents how women, especially migrant domestic workers, reclaim their bodies and labor from their coopted conditions (e.g., Constable 2009; Parrenas 2001; Tadiar 1997; Piocos 2019), women writers who emerged (and diverged) from the (patriarchal) development of Philippine literature, most notably in the decades of the 1970s toward the 1990s, considered writing, in English and their native language, as a way to “emancipate” themselves while tackling issues on class, race, and other socio-political concerns (Kintanar-Alburo 224). These writers fuse the earlier romantic tradition with a keen awareness of contemporary issues “strengthened by a sense of regionalism and even feminism” (Dimalanta 315), signaling the continuously expanding notion of what constitutes womanhood/femininity in the literary arts. Similarly, the expanding critique on women’s natural affinity and folk and precolonial representations (For the figure of the *diwata*, see Lucero 2007; the *babaylan* see Mananzan 1991 and Garcia 2009, and Inang Bayan see Rodriguez-Tatel 2014) demonstrates the potential for reclaiming these tropes from the cooptation of nation-state agenda and the trap of Western essentialism. Thus, the feminist task of emancipation pursued by the “new women writers” (Kintanar-Alburo

224) of the past decades can be extended to reworking folk and precolonial representations of women, pointing to the potency of an “Indigenous spiritual premise” upon which Philippine ecofeminism can be conceived (Benitez 40).

This brief essay explores this potential by focusing on Marjorie Evasco and her poem “Elemental,” analyzing the author and the work as demonstrating native Philippine ecofeminism in which the distinct eroticism in the text and the author’s sensibilities are critically positioned against the prevailing essentialized, ethnocentric, and reductionist ecofeminism of the West. Specifically, the subsequent analysis focus on the erotic underpinning of the poem guided by Stacy Alaimo’s assertion of “trans-corporeality” where “the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world” (Alaimo, *Bodily* 2). Trans-corporeality is achieved through what I describe as the ecocritical erotic or the fusion of language and the natural world in erotic writing that is “active,” “agentic,” and critical of society’s omission of female desire (Gwynne 6). Evasco writes eroticism as a kind of “hunger,” a simultaneously bodily and symbolic experience (Peracullo 26) explored through formal poetic techniques and themes of love and passion imbricated in the erotic imageries intimated through nature.

Ultimately, I extend Lian Sing’s reframing of *ba’i* (2019) to understand further the femininity/feminism engaged by Evasco in her career and craft. Evasco and the poem “Elemental” point to an aspect of/direction for Philippine ecofeminism, charting a feminine “native clearing” (Abad 2004) where *ba’i* can be tapped as a potent source of the writer’s sensibility. In this way, the “native clearing” investigated in this essay is foregrounded by writers such as Evasco by utilizing native and empowering sources of femininity from which to forward Philippine ecofeminism that is attuned to “indigenous” and “vernacular thought” (Benitez 41). Before elaborating on my analysis, the following section provides additional contextual information, including a brief biographical note of the author and details of her works.

### **Biographical information: Marjorie Evasco**

Marjorie Evasco was born in 1953 in Maribojoc, Bohol, Philippines. She is a poet writing in two languages: English and her mother tongue, Binisaya

(Boholano-Visayan). In 2010 she was given the SEA (South East Asian) Writers' Award for poetry by Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn (now King of Thailand). In addition, she was awarded the Aning Dangkal and the Gawad Balagtas for poetry in English and Cebuano by the Philippine National Commission on Culture and the Arts and the Writers' Union of the Philippines, respectively. She represented the Philippines in the Poetry Parnassus festival in the Southbank Centre during the 2012 London Olympics. Among her writing residency grants were those awarded by the Rockefeller Center for Studies in Bellagio, Italy, the International Writers' Retreat in Hawthornden Castle in Midlothian, Scotland, and the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa. Her poetry collections *Dreamweavers: Selected Poems 1976–1986* and *Ochre Tones: Poems in English and Cebuano* won the National Book Awards for Poetry in 1987 and 1999, respectively. Her poetry has been translated into several Philippine and world languages, the latest in Korean. Her poems in local and global circulation can be found in the Norton Anthology *Language for a New Century: Poetry from the Middle East, Asia, and Beyond* (eds. Ravin Shankar, Nathalie Handal, Tina Chang), *The World Record: International Voices from Southbank Centre's Poetry Parnassus* (eds. Anna Selby & Neil Astley), *Sustaining the Archipelago: Philippine Ecopoetry Anthology* (ed. Rina Garcia Chua), *The First Five: A New Collection of Southeast Asian Writing* (ed. Chan Wai Han), *Agam: Filipino Narratives of Uncertainty and Climate Change* (ed. Regina Abuyuan), and *Harvest Moon: Poems and Stories from the Edge of the Climate Crisis* (eds. Rehanna Rossouw, Alexandra Walter, Padmapani L. Perez, Renato Redentor Constantino). Marjorie Evasco is a Philippine Center for International PEN member and a University Fellow and Professor Emeritus in Literature at De La Salle University, Manila.

The poem "Elemental" first appeared in print in the 1992 groundbreaking Philippine erotic anthology *Forbidden Fruit: Women Write the Erotic*, edited by Tina Cuyugan. "Elemental" was subsequently included in the collection, *Returning a Borrowed Tongue: An Anthology of Filipino and Filipino American Poets* edited by Nick Carbo in 1995, and eventually in Evasco's 1999 National Book Award-winning collection *Ochre Tones: Poems in English and Cebuano*, where the poem appears together with a Cebuano version.

### Trans-corporeality in the Ecocritical Erotic

Marjorie Evasco's "Elemental" is a free-verse poem in English whose persona yearns for a beloved, nurturing a desire that slowly ripens in the season of blossoming jasmine and succulent mangoes on the island of Siquijor. This section examines the metaphors and imagery presented in the poem while paying close attention to the formal structures of the poem, such as stanzas and other versifications, strategic enjambments or line breaks, and the unique use of the English language to draw the trans-corporeality of the text.

There is a season to this ripening  
the way sap of tree rises to fulfill  
fruit of the topmost branch  
or the motion of jasmine  
climbing trellises to show off  
a single blossom at new moon tide.

Immediately, the poem's language draws us closer and bears a tone of passion or sensuality, demonstrating a notable technique of erotica, where sensuality is not just subject matter but also the way language/words can evoke sensuality. For example, the poem's inaugural lines, "There is a season to this ripening / the way sap of tree rises to fulfill," already elicit the sensual relationship between "ripening" and "fulfillment," words evoking urges both from the body and the botanical but are similarly considered natural. We are introduced here to the writer's ability to find the interrelationship between the physical and the environment, where the environment's natural motion simulates the body's desires. The first stanza narrates the natural simulation as a slow, even sensual, motion that brings into the readers' senses a series of images: the rising tree sap and the crawling jasmine, climaxing/ripening into this season's "blossom," a "fruit" of "fulfillment" "at new moon tide." Soon, this blossoming of desire declared by the poem's persona "ripens" into a reason that will be revealed to us in the subsequent stanzas.

In Miranda-Maniquis's review of the poem, she describes Evasco's poetic eroticism as one which brings readers to "a different plane" of stirring (6), and this is undoubtedly illustrated through the text as it turns nature into the bodily and the bodily experience as "natural," creating an erotic nexus constituting the physical, emotional, and natural/environmental. In this stanza, the persona's desire comes both from

carnal and natural origins, planes the poet brilliantly navigates, reflecting a mastery of sense, sensibility, and sensuousness. Our senses are teased by the hint of jasmine, the sticky sap from trees, the smell of salt in the air, and the sound of crashing waves, shimmering under a new moon. Desire is emergent (“ripening,” “blossoming”) as it is also kept inside the persona’s slow-stirring tension (“sap”). The poem sustains this tension and nurtures this yearning like fruits yet to be in season or with the patience of climbing vines on trellises; their movement is subtle, almost invisible, but in a moment, becomes overgrown.

This erotic tension can be linked to Jeane Peracullo’s description of “hunger” and its vernacularization, “*kumakalam ang sikmura*,” as key to Filipino women coming into an ecofeminist consciousness (25). While she focuses on the negative valence of hunger that articulates “the body in pain” (Peracullo 27), Evasco’s poem figures hunger through the body in pleasure. My transposition of Peracullo’s analysis of “hunger” and how it is an experience of gendered oppression and a site for women’s struggle does not mean equating the pains of hunger to sexual pleasure but pursuing and extending her analysis that hunger is an “embodied experience” of ecofeminist praxis (Peracullo 27). In Evasco’s poem, hunger can be conceived beyond its negative valence without losing its political implications. In other words, hunger is experienced in various ways through the body and is ultimately harnessed as a source of empowerment and agency. In Evasco’s poem, hunger is a pleasurable experience where nature and its gradual gestations reflect the lover’s yearning.

In my garden the bamboos arch  
over patch of grass, river stones  
upturned earth. Alone where weeds  
grow wildest, I think:

Structurally located in the middle of the poem, this stanza functions as an emotional hinge, a moment where the persona realizes “longing” as an emotional antecedent to “desiring.” We find the persona “[a]lone where weeds / grow wildest,” an image of solitude in a garden of “bamboos” arched over “grass” and “river stones” on “earth” that can easily be mistaken for serenity if not described to be “upturned” with “wild” “weeds.” The poet reminds us again of nature’s capacity to reflect our most intimate states, such as a

lover’s emotionally upended solitude. From the slow desiring illustrated in the previous stanza, we come to a lover at the throes and threshold of emotion who begins to “think.” This emotional juncture speaks of longing, but an underlying hunger can be felt. The punctuated suspense in the last line of the stanza creates a tentative hold, signaling the ripening of the thought and relieving the persona’s hunger/desire. This slight pause also enhances the hunger of the reader, who is also in suspense. In this way, there is an aching sensuousness held and experienced by both the lover/persona and the reader. Writer and critic Shirley Lua has also observed this emotional enjambment in her analysis of “Bodies of Gold,” one of the poems in Marjorie Evasco’s more recent collection *Skin of Water: Selected Poems*, published in 2009. In “Bodies of Gold,” Lua cites the “rhythmic break...a way of detaining, of arresting a moment” that provides an emotional immanence such as “the beat of the heart before an encounter with the beloved” (Lua 112), and this emotional postponement found in the poem’s emotional hinge as well opens a doorway to a memory, a wild thought. Indeed, the wild thought creates a pause, a heartbeat, before we are introduced to the beloved in a vivid memory the reader/lover is about to partake.

How the golden skin of mango  
broke between your teeth; how  
you swallowed the seamless sky  
over Siquijor, your body becoming  
an entire land I could intimate  
black moons from, taste of earth,  
rush of river songs, smell of air  
before rain, spray of flowers  
with strange names. Yes, there is

Reason to this ripening.  
You are goldened by my tongue.

In this stanza, the poet reveals the season in which desire has ripened: a memory of the beloved on the island of Siquijor. The “mango” enfleshes the lover’s memory, ripe and ready for its golden “skin” to be ravished and “broken between” the beloved’s “teeth.” At this moment, the beloved, despite a memory, is vividly described, a feat of carnality where the projection becomes almost tangible. The third line from this stanza heightens the carnal scene/memory into the mythical. The beloved begins to embody legend, taking shape as



the serpentine dragon, *bakunawa*, from Philippine mythology, known to swallow the sun, moon, and other heavenly bodies. The beloved has the power not just of the carnal but also that of divinity. The sibilant sound from the alliteration in this line ("swallowed," "seamless," "sky") reinforces not just the image of the serpent but the sensuality enhanced by the trick of alliterated sounds. Moreover, the hunger previously discussed turns into insatiable temptation, alluding to the biblical book of Genesis, where Eve submits to the snake's insistence to partake of the fruit of knowledge. In this scene, hunger's physiological pain that is "insistent, clawing, and gnawing" (Peracullo 37) becomes mythical/divine. Siquijor serves as the erotic and emotional backdrop of the poem. The island is surrounded by its own myth and mystery, from rumored island witches to ancient spirits in Balete trees. The poem magnifies the island's mysticism through the simultaneously divine and mythical eroticism spurred by the persona's memory. Indeed, the fiery and passionate imagery in this stanza recalls the island's origin when it was named "Isla del Fuego" (Island of Fire) by Spanish colonizers.

The remaining lines quicken the rhythmic pace of the poem, and the reader is confronted by a sensory feast yet again: "taste of earth, / rush of river songs, smell of air / before rain, / spray of flowers / with strange names." The poet fleshes out this memory by recalling the same scene from the previous stanzas, enhancing the same senses stimulated at the poem's beginning. The slow stirring has ripened/blossomed into a myriad of nature's movements: a rushing river, air, rain, and a field of flowers. The poem's last lines arrive at certainty, the "[r]eason to this ripening." The lover ends with this declaration to the beloved: "You are goldened by my tongue." "Goldened" may well refer to the erotic in the memory where eating mangoes create a carnal/sensual image: the beloved's teeth, mouth, and neck dribbling in the mango's golden juice. However, this memory might also be "goldened" by the lover forging/committing to memory the beloved like valuable metal, shining and unforgettable, perhaps alluding to Midas's golden touch. For the lover who desires the beloved with greed sometimes, in extreme yearning, "monumentalizes" and casts the beloved as a venerated/worshipped object: a tragedy of the lover whose desire embellishes the beloved in the ideal. The beloved is cursed by the greed and paradox of gold: a presence that will never be enough, a beloved

here but not quite. This "monumental" ending to the poem captures the power of the romantic ideal where desire grows more potent not in languishing from the beloved's apparent absence but in finding ways to sustain the beloved's intangible presence, mythical or otherwise. In my correspondence with the author, she shares how this line was originally written as "I am goldened by your tongue," which was revised based on comments from early readers who have pointed out why the speaking lover gave the beloved power. The change "claim[ed] for the speaking lover that power to transform the beloved in language" (Evasco 2020). "[Y]ou are goldened by my tongue" becomes the final transformation of the beloved. The transformative power of language in this line suggests how the lover defies the pain of absence. Through the alchemic possibilities of language, the lover declares/conjures the beloved.

The ecocritical erotic is a poetic technique that reinforces the natural connection shared by humans with the natural environment and how these connections are centered on the body, both human and nonhuman. Stacy Alaimo's conception of the "trans-corporeal" is useful in this regard as, in a similar manner that she deploys this concept to her analyses of various cultural texts, "trans-corporeality" in Evasco's poetry also demonstrates how the environment "runs through" (Fromm quoted in Alaimo, *Bodily* 11) the body in various, discernable, and imperceptible ways. Evasco demonstrates the trans-corporeal by regarding both the natural and human body as equivocally having agency and thus supporting a seductive and symbiotic relationship of signification where the body's desire is deemed natural, and nature evokes such raw and primal urges. Evasco's poetry turns our attention to nature through the body: our urges, intimacies, and desires conflate with the world outside ourselves, while conversely, the environment teaches or reminds us of our own "nature." Erotica made this interrelationship of nature and humans more lucid, apparent, and in a sense, more felt. While the poem can easily be read from a gendered/female perspective/persona, the erotic language of the body and how it uses natural imagery to heighten desire/pleasure do not constrain the poem to female desire nor suggest a heteronormative one. Moreover, while the poem is replete with botanical imagery (e.g., fruit, blossom, jasmine, mango) might suggest the reading of desire as procreative, even reproductive, it also suggests a

fluidity (sap, the tide, the island), which adds more nuance to the persona's desire. Through the ecocritical erotic or eroticism that fuses language and the natural world, the poem and, by extension, the poet, reiterate the precolonial notion of women's natural affinity in which femininity, even womanhood, is not confined to a specific gender. Indeed, what is genuinely elemental is not just a return to what is "rudimentary about the physical world" but to "something not stripped at all but always only and ever itself, deep down" (Alaimo, *Elemental* 299). In other words, natural.

### **Toward Philippine Ecofeminism: Writing Ba'i**

Marjorie Evasco pursues the possibility of reclaiming women's natural affinity with nature in her craft and career as a writer and educator. Her engagements, research, and creative publications often fuse environmentalism, feminism, and literature. However, more crucially, her poetics is deeply informed by the trans-corporeality in the craft of *balak* or Cebuano poetry. She articulates this in her interview with Usha Akella for *Cha: Asian Literary Magazine*. In this interview, Evasco talks about the Cebuano metaphor of "*dukugan*," which is "the spine or backbone" that "derives its energy from the structure of the human body as a complex integral organism." The metaphor is "the sap, the living juice" for *balak* (Akella). To Evasco, formal poetry techniques are not separate from our understanding of nature/environment, and one's local/natural sensibilities form the vital structure of imagination. Despite belonging to a generation of writers who wrote from and wrought in English (Abad 170), harnessing a "foreign" language to reflect a profoundly Filipino subject matter to create their own "native clearing" (Abad 176), Evasco emphasizes the equally potent local sensibility that shapes her writing in any genre and medium. In other words, the local and foreign language and environment are necessarily fused in her poetics. Evasco honed her craft among women poets who struggled to create a reality from a language they can consider loyal to what Edith Tiempo called their "inner promptings" (Tiempo qtd. in Abad 172). However, just like a poet "tilling the soil of language" (172), Evasco has uncovered a subject matter that is not just "Filipino" in sense and sensibility but also brought to the fore the subject of femininity.

Sing's reclamation of the term *ba'i* becomes helpful in deepening the understanding of femininity inhered in Evasco's craft and career. *Ba'i*, an indigenous concept pertaining to the sea and the sea as a mother (Odal quoted in Sing 122), converges Western ecofeminism with our indigenous conceptions of femininity and the genealogy of the subjecthood of woman and woman as a mother in Philippine literature, which creates a distinct native ecofeminine figure:

[Ba'i] as a feminine principle that not only perceives existence as deeply rooted in the sea as mother, and mother as woman, but also mother as active and autonomous; it is likewise a principle characterized by historically feminine traits such as fluidity, wholeness, creativity, connectedness, communality, and sustainability that then provides a perspective that questions the rigidity of the barrier between the human and the nonhuman. (122)

In the same manner that Sing argues that *ba'i* and its conceptual fluidity can be used to chart a deeper understanding of women and the environment (123), Evasco's *balak* expresses what is considered nonhuman as an elemental part of being human and essential to her craft. To an extent, this relationality is similar to how sexuality is often subsumed within "male-dominated spaces" of mainstream narratives (Gwynne 7), and writers such as Evasco respond by expressing desire through avowedly natural, feminine imagery. In a way, the underlying creative force behind the craft and career of Evasco captures the spirit behind *ba'i*. While *ba'i* speaks to the sea and sea-as-mother, I follow Sing's argument to recover this feminine principle's potency to articulate contemporary femininity paradigms. This native feminine principle is mobilized as the "sap" of Evasco's poetry. In a way, *ba'i* is the cogent feminine force behind the trans-corporeality of ecocritical erotic, motivating the writer to tap into a sensibility that merges the nonhuman and human worlds, the foreign and local. *Ba'i* is thus reconstituted as Evasco's creative agency behind her native clearing. Ultimately, Evasco demonstrates how the reclamation of the nature-woman affinity found in indigenous notions of femininity can chart the direction toward native Philippine ecofeminism.

This brief essay has analyzed the poem "Elemental" by Marjorie Evasco as demonstrating trans-corporeality

through the ecocritical erotic that revealed the critical entanglements between human and more-than-human relationships through its eroticism that fuses language and the natural world. By imagining nature through the bodily and accessing nature through the embodied experience in an array of erotic themes and techniques present in the poem, the nature-women relationship takes shape as a complex and fluid notion reminiscent of the *ba'i*. In this way, the poem and the poet demonstrate the potential to reinscribe indigenous conceptions of femininity in literature to forward native Philippine ecofeminism firmly planted on one's native soil.

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