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Post 9/11 and Narratives of Life Writing, Conflict, and Environmental Crisis

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Volume 17 Issue 3 (September 2015) Article 20
Simon C. Estok,
"Post 9/11 and Narratives of Life Writing, Conflict, and Environmental Crisis"
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol17/iss3/20>>

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 17.3 (2015)**
Thematic Issue ***Life Writing and the Trauma of War***. Ed. **Louise O. Vasvári and I-Chun Wang**
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol17/iss3/>>

Abstract: In his article "Post 9/11 and Narratives of Life Writing, Conflict, and Environmental Crisis" Simon C. Estok argues that there are four seemingly disparate and disconnected topics — war, migration, ecophobia, and life writing — which need to be discussed in tandem in order to produce deeper understandings of both the production and effects of post 9/11 narratives. Estok argues that narrative landscapes changed radically since the beginning of the twenty-first century and that this results in a combined effect both of terror reportage and of environmental crisis narratives. The pace and character of reportage blurred, erased, and expanded various boundaries and these changes will be increasingly central to discussions about life writing and its relation to environmental crisis writing.

Simon C. ESTOK

Post 9/11 and Narratives of Life Writing, Conflict, and Environmental Crisis

Wai Chee Dimock explains that "after the World Trade Center, and after Katrina, few of us are under the illusion that the United States is sovereign in any absolute sense. The nation seems to have come literally 'unbundled' before our eyes, its fabric of life torn apart by extremist groups, and by physical forces of even greater scope, wrought by climate change" (1) and Giovanna Borradori argues that "in a post 9/11 global community, the immediacy, accessibility, and urgency of writing about the world have created narrative models that are new and that therefore require new models of understanding" and that the "link between terror and territory" is as unmistakably geopolitical as it is environmental (xiii). Conveyed through narratives infused with what can only be called a life writing impulse, post 9/11 literature has sought to re-stabilize the suddenly unstable ontologies that the West has come to inhabit, exploiting the conceptual indeterminacy of terror from war. Along with literary and other artistic cultural documents, there has been a phenomenal barrage of mass media narratives that have urgently sought such stability. One of the effects of this bid for ontological stability has, ironically, been a destabilizing of generic forms, with news reportage blending into life-narrative, fact and fiction collapsing into each other, and materiality creeping out of reach for a constituency whose attention is at best increasingly partial. The implicit and explicit indifference toward the natural environment in dystopic visions of both the present and the future and the apocalyptic, militaristic model out of which these narratives grow need serious attention, as do the ways in which media responses mime life writing in their attempts to sell news stories by "personalizing" them as if they were about individuals.

The giant step in the West out of medieval ontologies was the Renaissance triumph of humanism, but the United States took it one step further. In imagining itself in isolation, the U.S. effectively drew the line between the ontologically considerable and the ontologically inconsiderable—in effect between the human and the nonhuman. Two hundred years ago, when the U.S. was still young, Alexis de Tocqueville cautioned against a society wherein "each citizen ... generally spends his time considering the interests of a very insignificant person, namely himself" (627) and claimed that in such a state where "all a man's interests are limited to those near himself, folk ... form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine that their whole destiny is in their hands" (653–54). By the time 9/11 happens, the destiny Tocqueville describes is clearly not so readily in hand. To what extent is this crisis of a nation under siege, this "city upon a hill" reduced to dust and debris, its denizens indistinguishable from the ruins through which they walk, a "scary disconnection of the human from the not-human" (Bell 33)? And how does post-9/11 life writing in the U.S. become more focused in this moment of negation and negative differentiability?

The destruction of a city (or the imagined destruction of a city) collapses any viable concept of "the human," since the presumption of the modern city as a concept rests on an understanding of the natural world as hostile, alien, and distinct from sovereignty. *Zwǎn*, *bloss leben*, *vita nuda*, bare life, unaccommodated human: each of these various terms describe life outside of protective social and political structures, as it were, to use Giorgio Agamben's terminology drawn on his concept of "bare life" (88; at best an inconsistent and confusing term — Agamben was not consistent or terribly methodical in the delineation of the concept). Charles T. Lee defines Agamben's concept of "bare life" usefully as "human subjects reduced to a naked depoliticized state without official status and juridical rights" (57). Terrorism is, by its very nature, engaged in the reduction of human subjects to the bare life, and although this is not the same as saying that they are reduced to the plane of nonhuman animals, the isomorphic similarities between bare life and nonhuman life are inconsiderable in the kinds of narratives that they are commissioned to produce. Agamben himself says this "bare life ... [is] a zone of indistinction and continuous transition between man and beast, nature and culture" (109). From these claims, it seems only reasonable to suggest that post 9/11 literature is as much about the dislocation of humanity from humanity as it is about dislocation from social sovereignty. The narrative implications for terror studies abound in this war-like space. In the preface to her interviews with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida on the topic of 9/11, Borradori maintains that "it is an open question ... whether terrorism can be sharply distinguished from war" (xii). Indeed, the perceived indeterminacy of the status of terrorism is one that George W. Bush quickly exploited with his "war on terror." Contextualizing herself and her place in the narrative of these interviews that she describes in her preface, Borradori notes that "mine is the story of a philosopher in a time of terror. Like every other story, it is uniquely woven into the life of its narrator" (x). And I would like to note that as with any other big event in the West (Pearl Harbor, the Kennedy assassinations), 9/11 has evoked personal contextualizing narratives.

In the evening of 11 September 2001, I was in the study on the second floor of my house in Seoul with my dog Babo working on my desktop and she was on the carpet watching CNN, which I had minimized in the top corner of the screen so that she would stay in the room and we could keep each other company. I did not notice the images coming in live from New York until Babo started making noises. I looked at her and then at the live images. Interesting movie, I thought. Pretty realistic. But it kept showing the same scene over and over again and it started to bother me, so I changed the channel. Seems the same movie was being shown on several channels. It took a few moments for me to realize that it was no movie. I turned on the television again and watched it for most of the remaining night. It just did not seem real. I had never been to New York, but after watching 9/11 felt I had to go to and did so at the first chance at the end of the semester. The ruins were still smoldering when I arrived in early December, but the media firestorm was only just beginning.

Borradori writes that "since the attacks of 9/11, the media have been bombarding the world with images and stories about terrorism" creating for viewers a situation that has less to do with "too much data" than with too little ability to translate data into knowledge and to translate that knowledge into the kinds of affect that produce real (and really necessary) action" (xiii). For all of the potential good of the massive exposure to media representations of important issues (for instance, ecological issues), over-exposure, and commercialism also produce their own kind of fatigue about a stressed and fatigued environment. Responses in Vancouver or Boston to environmental issues such as severe drought in the Middle East may be weak, an effect both of the numbness that results from over-stimulation and of the perceived distance between the site of the news and the reception of it. Similarly, responses in Vancouver or Boston to news about groups calling themselves Islamic states may be also weak, again an effect both of the numbness that results from over-stimulation and the distancing effect this has (which, compounding with the real physical distance of Vancouver and Boston from the news sites, results in a surreal blur). Miming life writing, news media try to bring the stories to a more personal level.

Life writing is a big tent under which huddle many, many forms of narrative. Louise O. Vasvári explains that "life writing — although a genre designation applied mostly in feminist and gender studies — is useful for many other types of texts. Life writing elides and blends generic boundaries between history, fiction, documentary, and literature in general, including the novel, to encompass autobiography, oral testimony, diaries, letters, the autobiographical novel, and other textual forms and genres" (Vasvári <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1422>>) and this is a crucial insight. To give an idea of how crowded is the space under which this big tent of life writing extends its inclusion, it is telling to look at the work of Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, who offer a list of sixty genres of life writing (Smith and Watson 2010 edition 253). Such a list is a very good beginning but one very much in need of expansion. Smith and Watson define "life writing" as "an overarching term used for a variety of nonfictional modes of writing that claim to engage the shaping of someone's life" (Smith and Watson 2001 edition 197). Indeed, with the exception of a brief discussion of collaboration (see Smith and Watson 2001 edition 178), the focus of the entire book is on the individual subject, "someone's life." It is an important point that the individual/collective dyad is sometimes simply invalid (see Kim <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol17/iss3/7>>). Alfred Hornung, for instance, maintains that "nature writing equals life writing, the widely accepted umbrella term for all forms of autobiographical practice" (x). While what we might call "e-cri narratives" (environmental crisis narratives) have become urgent and personal, whether nature writing equals life writing is, perhaps, debatable; even so, there is a clear necessity for a shift in focus away from the highly individualistic focus that has so very often characterized the study of and theorization about life writing.

I argue that especially in Asia, the focus on the individual that characterizes almost every definition of life writing is a culturally specific product. The Western emphasis on the individual is not universal: in East Asia, where collective and communal ethics stand in sharp contrast to the fierce individualism of the West, a broader definition of life writing needs to extend beyond the individual to include writings about what Wong-Chung Kim describes as "collective experience" and collective memory. As Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney explain, "works of literature help produce collective memories by recollecting the past in the form of narratives" (112). Seen in such a way, life writing must come to include "the memories that are shared within generations and across different generations [that] are the public acts of remembrance using a variety of media" (Erll and Rigney 111). More than this, however, such works reveal that the neat definitions of fact and fiction are no longer entirely viable. Narratives of collective memory bleed out of fiction, out of news, and out of ephemeral, but deeply influential media. It is difficult to not over-state the degree to which people in fully industrialized countries have become spectators to a constant barrage of narratives about the state of the world. People are fascinated first with ever-evolving forms of media and second with the dystopian visions and images that they convey. As a result, media borders change and terror groups become more and more repulsive. At some point, the question of how the media and the message converge (an idea that goes back to Marshall McLuhan) must arise. At some point, the question must arise of the effect of the speed at which narratives come into our lives and disappear, the sheer ephemerality of it all, and the implications that this has on our continually divided and partial attention. What are the implications of digital media on how we organize our lives? What are the influences of digital media and the life stories they tell on the genre of more traditional life writing narratives? To what degree do these media and their narratives produce a kind of indifference to the objects of the narrative, and how does the world (environmental and social), therefore, become an object of indifference and ethical inconsiderability?

What is currently happening with Islamic radicalism — as happened with European colonialism before it — is the expression and enactment of a deadly combination of indifferences that grow out of both a sense of exceptionalism and a sense of ethnocentrism. Of course, part and parcel with this sense of exceptionalism is an implied relationship to the natural environment rooted in anthropocentric arrogance, disavowal of inter-dependence, and affirmations of power over life. Without striding blindly into the alley of errors of environmental determinism, it is useful to note that environmental factors have long played a role in migration patterns — not to mention in conflicts. While it is difficult to find empirically reliable facts which show actual relations between climate change, on the one hand, and, on the other, the war, migration, and terror occurring as I write, studies are appearing which show such connections. In his 2015 article "New Study Says Climate Change Helped Spark Syrian Civil War" Eric Holthaus argues that there are relationships between the historic drought (2006-2010) that afflicted Syria to both the events happening within that country and to the creation and movements of the group calling itself ISIS (see also Abrams; Fountain; Strozier and Berkell). But, indeed, making verifiable empirical links despite how much empirical research is still neglected in the humanities, is precisely what we require if we are to do anything, but laugh at the notion that environmental issues

are related with things such as the group that calls itself ISIS, and the problem from there is in "how to write one's life, how to translate empirical knowledge of the world into nonfictional text, and how to portray the impact of the nonhuman world on the human" (Allister 2).

Whether rooted (at least in part) in environmental issues such as food shortages, resource shortages, or water shortages events such as European colonialism and the more contemporary advance of the group calling itself ISIS are conscripted to compelling narratives which develop a story of collective memory. Each defined by an ethics of exclusion, the anthropocentrism and ethnocentrism delineated in patterns of migration, settlement, and colonization (and therefore our world map) have also revealed the unexpectedly radical reach of mortal dangers. When the group calling itself ISIS kills Christians and when Hamas fires missiles into Israel, it is tempting to wonder "what are these people thinking? How do they sleep at night knowing the pain and suffering that they are producing?" The quickest answer is that they are thinking nothing about these matters, certainly no more than the loggers of British Columbia were troubled with misgivings about cutting down thousand-year-old forests and leaving a denuded landscape. The indifference to the landscape — and, indeed, the conflation of "the human" to a position of ethical inconsiderability and synonymy with the environment — is a precondition for these violent narratives of progress, the effect of which become personal and deeply involved in what we consider our developing life stories. What life writing moves toward in the twenty-first century is to creating an immediacy and felt presence of the inter-relationships among migration, war, and violence toward the natural environment. Collusive with — and, indeed, at times inseparable from — news reportage, autobiographical voices take a stand on environmental matters, a stand difficult to discuss because it is not an explicit topic, but a stand that nevertheless is important. While this stand does reveal ecophobia, such is not their main topic; rather, they exhibit this ecophobia inadvertently. Just as a text need not necessarily be about sexism in order to benefit from a feminist reading or about classism in order to benefit from a Marxist reading or about racism in order to benefit from a postcolonial reading, texts obviously need not be necessarily (and usually are not) aware of the ecophobia they present in order to benefit from a reading that recognizes the issue.

While I define ecophobia elsewhere as a kind of a pathological fear and indifference to or outright contempt for the natural world, I certainly cannot lay claim to being the first to describe what until the mid-1990s had no term to define it. As far back as 1969, Paul Shepard and Dan McKinley in "Ecology and Man: A Viewpoint" expressed what I later would define as "ecophobia":

The anti-nature position today is often associated with the focusing of general fears and hostilities on the natural world. It can be seen in the behavior of control-obsessed engineers, corporation people selling consumption itself, academic superhumanists and media professionals fixated on political and economic crisis; neurotics working out psychic problems in the realm of power over men or nature, artistic symbol-manipulators disgusted by anything organic. It includes many normal, earnest people who are unconsciously defending themselves or their families against a vaguely threatening universe. The dangerous eruption of humanity in a deteriorating environment does not show itself as such in the daily experience of most people, but is felt as general tension and anxiety. We feel the pressure of events not as direct causes but more like omens. A kind of madness arises from the prevailing nature-conquering, nature-hating and self- and world-denial. (8)

These are not words people like to hear: Sean Robisch had a response to my 2009 "Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia" and the resulting "Estok/Robisch Controversy" has become well-known in environmental humanities. In their 2013 article entitled "Reading Latour Outside: A Response to the Estok-Robisch Controversy," Louisa Mackenzie and Stephanie Posthumus review the need for activism as a part of ecocriticism, which was the main point I made in "Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness" and to which Robisch responded creating the "controversy" (see Robisch; Mackenzie and Posthumus). More recently, Patrick Murphy noted that one of the things that has not come out of the controversy is clarification of the kind of "real and active role" that ecocriticism might play in changing the world (3). Part of my contention both in "Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness" and in my argument here is that understanding how ecophobia is connected with virtually all aspects of human life and culture is a necessary part of effecting change. The fact, as Shepard explained nearly a half century ago, is that "the hatred for this world [is] carried out by our whole culture" (6), a point even more relevant today than when it was made.

I argue elsewhere that ecocriticism needs a broad scope for the term ecophobia ("Conceptualizing," "Ecocritical Theory," "An Introduction," "Theorizing," *Ecocriticism and Shakespeare*). I first proposed the term in the early summer of 1995 as a part of the first draft of the final chapter of my dissertation (independent of and in no way derived from the manner in which it is used in psychology and psychiatry) "to denote fear and loathing of the environment in much the same way that the term 'homophobia' denotes fear and loathing of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals" (*Reading the "Other"* 213). The fact that Sobel and I seem to coin the same term at roughly the same time and independently is perhaps more than coincidental, perhaps indicating a felt need for a viable ecocritical terminology in the mid-1990s. But it is more complicated than that. Indeed, conservative US-American journalist George F. Will seems the first to have used the term outside of its psychological meaning in a *Chicago Sun-Times* article of 18 September 1988 entitled "The Politics of Ecophobia." Will defines ecophobia simply as "the fear that the planet is increasingly inhospitable" (n.p.). Will's definition is also the position from which I start, but from which Sobel departs. For Sobel, ecophobia is more a fear of the environmental effects of human actions: "fear of oil spills, rainforest destruction, whale hunting, acid rain, the ozone hole, and Lyme disease" (5), but these are more properly the results of ecophobia rather than examples of it. Ecophobia is what allows humanity to do bad things to the natural world. No one would say that homophobia is the fear of the corpse of a gay man who has been bashed over the head with a bat; homophobia is cause of the bashing. Similarly, ecophobia is the cause of the environmental

despoliation that Sobel describes. For Sobel, "fear of ... whale hunting" is (by his definition) ecophobia, but it seems more sensible to see that whale hunting is a result of ecophobia, of a generalized indifference, fear, or contempt for the natural world and its inhabitants. The epic frustrations of not being able to hold and control nature are at core ecophobic and have variously found their way into production of literature and have been important and influential in how some genres have developed.

Edmund Russell's argument in his 2001 *War and Nature: Fighting Humans and Insects with Chemicals from World War I to Silent Spring* is "that war and control of nature co-evolved: the control of nature expanded the scale of war and war expanded the scale on which people controlled nature" (2). Isomorphic similarities between war and the control of nature abound abetted by the fact that companies such as Dow and Monsanto have long been involved both in military deaths and environmental destruction. Agent Orange, a defoliant used for at least ten years in Vietnam was produced by both companies. Not only did it strip the trees of leaves and thereby remove the cover of Vietnamese soldiers: according to one source, it has also crippled, killed, or otherwise harmed as many as seven million civilians (see Stocking). Monsanto now produces the most popular pesticide/herbicide ever sold, Roundup. The environmental and health impacts of Roundup are many (see, e.g., *organicconsumers.org* <https://www.organicconsumers.org/old_articles/monsanto/roundup.php> for a brief list; see also Robin). Engaged variously in the businesses of killing people and of killing bugs and weeds, Monsanto has a lot to answer for (see, e.g., Robin), but for the purposes of my study here, it is sufficient to acknowledge and build on Russell's point that "wars on human and insect enemies both focused on enemies, especially enemies that did not respect *boundaries*" (232; emphasis in original). Transnational terrorism and the march of the group calling itself ISIS comes to mind again as I write this. The environmental effects of war, although not my topic here, are themselves terrifying for the boundaries they cross. Jurgen Brauer offers a nuanced analysis of such material in *War and Nature: The Environmental Consequences of War in a Globalized World*, acknowledging at the outset that while "on the whole, environmental measurement is fiendishly difficult in war" (xv), there are indeed environmental consequences to war. Of course, we can try to calculate the energy used in war: Charles Clossman comes up with a figure of 344 million metric tons of oil equivalent in 2005 (2).

The environmental footprint of war is large and it seems to get bigger over time and Agent Orange continues to produce collateral damage as the years wear on. There is unexploded ordinance, there is radiation from nuclear tests, and there are untold tons of toxic waste from military exercises and engagements. What we see in post 9/11 narratives that write our collective memories of the present for the future is fear and loathing of what seem increasingly permeable boundaries. We see this in the two senses in which we can talk about post 9/11 literature — in the literal sense of what has been written after 9/11, and in the sense of literature written about the event, literature that "takes the measure of [the] sense of crisis that has seemed to haunt the West, and the United States in particular, ever since the destruction of the World Trade Center" (Gray 39-40). In the former, Cormac McCarthy's 2006 *The Road* offers a particularly grim and gray vision of a post-apocalyptic world where the sharpness of everything has diminished. Color is absent and boundaries disappear. Home as a conceptual material reality is gone as is civilization. A man and his son walk through a devastated landscape, the prey of what remains of humanity. In danger of becoming victims of cannibalism, the man and the boy are indistinguishable from the nonhuman, in an environment that is palpably hostile. The "human" is as readily prey as predator. The very concept of "the human" has collapsed in this story of "someone's life" (as Smith and Watson would say), a story to come that is really ours. It is a fictional story, like the 2009 film *The Age of Stupid*, a kind of parable that tells a story from our current trajectory, a warning for humanity no less potent and personal than the images and stories about terrorism about which Borradori writes (xiii). In a post 9/11 world, writing the lives that are likely to happen has become more urgent perhaps than writing those that have already happened. The didactic pressure motivating it, certainly, is an urgency of survival. Our trajectories are grim.

Since 9/11 environmental crises and terror have vied for ascendancy, sometimes fusing, in our narratives of future ruin. At the time of my writing, there have been 136 songs written in response to 9/11, sixty-five different filmic releases in North America and twenty-two in South Asia, Middle East, and diasporas about 9/11. There have been ten pieces of literature and poetry in Europe, thirty-seven pieces of literature and poetry in North America, and there have been significant responses in Australia and South America, too. These numbers list works that are overt responses to the catastrophe and do not include the less overt response of a novel such as McCarthy's *The Road*. Nor is post-9/11 work a unified body in what it addresses. The range of topics covers an immense area, each category of which is multi-faceted. Among the literary critiques of responses to 9/11 alone, for instance, are condemnations of censorship, of discriminatory backlash, of unjust military actions (indeed, of war crimes by the United States Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* is the most famous). Critiques of response are only one of a range of 9/11 literary responses. Other responses include attempts 1) to understand the politics of what happened and the political fallout to it (both in terms of domestic American and international politics), 2) to recreate a mimetic repetition of the experience of the chaos for those who were not there, 3) to understand 9/11 as an event in the daily lives and activities of average US-Americans, and 4) to "understand the longer-term psychological effects of terrorism on families, communities, and nations" (Aronstein <<http://www.themillions.com/2011/09/recovery-in-pieces-a-study-of-the-literature-of-911.html>>), of which Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* are perhaps the more prominent examples.

In conclusion, the trauma of erasure effected by the attacks, the chaos brought to the city (and a city such as New York no less), and the timing of the event (a millennial moment with associations to The Revelation) conducted by people who purportedly acted out of religious motivations: all of these things position post 9/11 narratives in the Western imagination within a tradition evocative of apoca-

lyptic narrative. Coverage of Hurricane Katrina had similar epic, biblical overtones to those of narratives about 9/11. As I argue elsewhere, "unpredictability has become the new norm for an increasingly anxious global community and how it sees both social conflict and environmental events" (Estok, "Ecocriticism" <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2182>>). Rightly so. Control over the environment or over groups that want to reformulate and rearticulate global configurations of power, inhabitation, and life are and always have been illusory and temporary. Recognizing not only the ecological implications but also their causal relation to war and terror is vital. Jared Diamond argues that "collapses for ecological or other reasons often masquerade as military defeats" (13). Understanding current migrations of war and terror groups such as Boko Haram, the group calling itself ISIS, or al-Qaeda and of the death and life writing surrounding them must occur within a context that recognizes the interdependence of seemingly disparate and disconnected topics. War, migration, ecophobia, and life writing increasingly must be discussed together if we are to understand better the production and effects of post 9/11 narratives.

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