
Book Review

Matthew Schneider-Mayerson and Brent Ryan Bellamy (eds.), *An Ecotopian Lexicon* (Foreword by Kim Stanley Robinson; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), xvi + 327 pp., \$24.95 (pbk), ISBN: 9781517905903.

An Ecotopian Lexicon is a delightful book, conceived and executed with a rare combination of scholarly rigor and heartfelt commitment. With the goal of gathering 'conceptual tools to help us imagine how to adapt and flourish in the face of socioecological adversity' (p. 2), the editors have assembled thirty short essays, each introducing a term or concept from another culture or from speculative fiction that could help English speakers to 'jump-start the critical process of imagining and eventually realizing better futures' (p. 5). The volume is further enriched by fourteen color plates of original art created in response to a particular loanword, accompanied by the artist's statement. At the base of the project is a conviction that the words we use shape our understanding of our reality and of what we might be able to achieve. While recognizing the dangers of cultural appropriation and 'linguistic imperialism' (p. 10), the authors regard loanwords as part of a gift economy which functions to weave communities together. English speakers who accept these gifts are obligated to 'return the favor with gratitude, respect, and equal moral consideration' (p. 9).

The loanwords derive from a wide range of languages: Yucatan, Quechua, Inuktitut, Ancient Mayan; Lugandan and Arabic; Hindi, Thai, Japanese, Chinese, and the Maldives; Gaelic, Spanish, Sami, Norwegian, Swedish, and German; and even 'Dolphinese'. Cultural contexts include environmental activism, speculative fiction, anthropology, philosophy, and religion.

The title for each entry is the term itself. The pronunciation, part of speech, and provenance are then given, along with a sentence showing the term in use. Because these concepts are too complex to be easily defined, each essay serves as an extended exploration of the term's meanings and its potential to inspire new relations between individuals and/or between humankind and the natural environment. For instance, the casual Lugandan greeting *gyebale* roughly translates as 'Thank you for the work you do'. If we were to greet everyone in this way, acknowledging their contributions to the common good, the practice might nurture less oppositional or hierarchical relations. Taken beyond the human, the author speculates that if we practiced daily gratitude to the natural world for the work it does to sustain us, we might be less inclined to harm it. In a parallel case, an ancient Mayan greeting translates as 'I'm another you' and is answered with 'You're another me'. Such a micro-practice affirms 'existential solidarity and co-existence' between people (p. 136); if the same understanding were extended to all creatures and to the earth itself, a more sustainable future might be achieved.

Alternative ways of relating to what we objectify as 'Nature' are found in concepts such as the Mesoamerican belief that every human being shares a soul with an animal alter ego or *nahual*; in this worldview, 'every nonhuman creature might also be human...[existing] in a latent state of possible personhood' (p. 167). The Thai concept of *pa theuan* (wild forest) refers to 'anything that escapes social control' (p. 190). Having agency and subjectivity, it 'can exist on its own terms' (p. 191), and thus, unlike the English 'wilderness', 'cannot be conquered' (p. 190). *Pachamama* is the Aymara and Quechua concept of the 'vital energy that makes human life possible' (p. 194), not a 'benevolent, all-giving mother' (p. 195) but a set of 'capricious earthly forces' (p. 194) beyond human control. The Inuktitut concept of *Sila* expresses 'the interconnection of all phenomena' (p. 256), the very substance of all things material, spiritual, or cosmic. The unique inflections and implications of each formulation prevent any easy conflation into some generalized notion of oneness with nature in pre-industrial societies.

The book is handsomely designed, easy on the eyes, and comfortable to hold. Terms are sequenced in alphabetical order, and one can certainly read the book straight through. However, an alternative table of contents groups terms into seven categories: Greetings, Resistance, Dispositions, Perception, Desires, Beyond the Human, and Beyond 'the Environment'. At the end of each entry, a cue in the margin directs the reader to another entry from the relevant category, thus creating 'Another Path' through the book.

The essays explore many dimensions of the human plight in the Anthropocene. How can we name the loss we are feeling, and then move forward with hopeful action rather than becoming paralyzed with despair? Take, for instance, *solastalgia*, a term from ecopsychology which conveys 'the sense of powerlessness and grief experienced by people when their homeland is under duress' (p. 267). Although this emotion itself might not lead to political action, to acknowledge its existence 'can galvanize political projects' (p. 270), bringing people together in defense of beloved land. In a similar vein, the Arabic concept of *ghurba*, or 'longing for one's homeland' (p. 74), might be extended to describe the sadness we experience at the 'loss of the ordinary' and of 'ontological security' in a world that threatens to undo all our certainties (p. 73). Taking instruction from the many displaced peoples who have persisted despite catastrophic disruption and dispossession, we need to acknowledge our grief while also accepting that it will be necessary to 'leave home' in a psychological sense in order to achieve a more just and sustainable world. Perhaps Ursula K. Le Guin's collective practice of *heyiya* can point the way to 'make our home anew' (p. 100).

These essays offer many models of the courage and wisdom needed to accomplish such changes. There is the catalyzing influence of *ildsjel*, those Norwegian 'fire souls' (p. 127) who live for 'meaning and purpose...vital, alive, and connected to their community' (p. 129). We can reach for the Confucian ideal of *Ren*, or call on the Gaelic virtue of *misneach*, a quality of 'hopefulness, bravery, spirit' (p. 153) that enables one to act in spite of uncertainty. Will it be an attitude of *shikata ga nai*, the Japanese expression meaning 'there is no other choice'? Can we enter a state of *apocalypse*, fusing 'alarm and concern...with a sense of play, togetherness, and critique' (p. 24)? Perhaps indignation at corporate *Terragouging* will lead us to inhabit *Blockadia*, a 'decentralized web of direct actions of ordinary people on behalf of their own survival' (p. 33), or to become *metahuman*, overcoming 'static notions of human nature that prevent us from turning aside our doom' (p. 150).

All of these authors write with urgency of the impending catastrophe of global climate change and mass extinction; yet their faith in human creativity and resilience, and in the transformational power of language, sustains a very welcome sense of utopian hope.

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