

Reconciling Locality and Globalization through Sense of Planet in Kiana Davenport's *the House of Many Gods*

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Abstract

This study positions *the House of Many Gods*, a novel written by Kiana Davenport as a possible area of intersection between globalization and environmental/eco-criticism. The primacy of locality within American environmental discourse hinders the acceptance of global theory under the assumption that embracing the global will lead into the erasure of the local altogether. In her book, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (2008) Ursula K Heise asserts that what she considers as sense of place is incomplete without considering ourselves as a part of a global ecosystem, which she considers as sense of planet. The reading of *the House of Many Gods* contextualizes sense of place and sense of planet through the perspective of Ana, in which she complements her adherence of Native Hawai'ian epistemology of place with a broader outlook of environmental crisis. A global outlook of perceiving environmentalism also aligns with Transnational American Studies which perceives America from an internationalist perspective. The paper concludes that sense of place and sense of planet provides a possible intersectionality of conceptualizing local discourse of place within a global outlook of environmentalism.

Keywords: Sense of place, sense of planet, Hawai'ian literature, ecocriticism

Introduction

Over the last decades, the concept of globalization has emerged as the central term around which theories of current politics, society, and culture in the humanities and social theories revolve. Heise (2012, p. 90) summarizes the shifting focus from the discussion of postmodernity within the contexts of humanities and social sciences into adopting a more global outlook and transnational approach. As argued by Jay, the embrace of globalization and transnationalism has productively complicated the nationalist paradigm long dominant in literary and cultural studies and focused our attention on forms of cultural production that take place in the liminal spaces between real and imagined borders. (2010, p. 15) The focus on negotiation and cultural exchanges have foregrounded ideas as seen in such terminologies such as diaspora, hybridity, migration, and cosmopolitanism to emphasize the transnational turn in literary analysis.

Although the concept of globalization reconfigures the trajectory of literary analysis, it should be emphasized that the intersectionality between globalization and environment/eco-criticism remains in the periphery. Even though both are emerging theories in the 1990's, the prevailing conception positions theory of globalization and environmental criticism in the opposite site of the spectrum. Ecocriticism, which is very influenced by the Romantic movements of Thoreau

and Emerson advocates the importance of locality, rootness, perceiving a sense of belonging through a particular emotional attachment toward particular place. (Bale, 1991; Danbom, 1991; Phillips et al., 2006)

The importance of a 'sense of place' becomes the guiding concept that drives the growth of various environmentalist movement in the United States. Several notable examples of U.S environmentalism that embrace locality are Agrarianism –which celebrates agriculture and rural life for the positive impact thereof on the individuality- and Bioregionalism –in which identity can be derived from their attachment toward a particular bioregion in which they reside (Buell et al., 2011, p. 42) These movements mainly focuses with encountering and immersing themselves in the surrounding landscape and embracing rural/pastoral living to counter modernity and consumerism. The hostility from the dominant U.S environmentalism toward globality manifests in a criticism toward geographical mobility as 'nomadism' or 'vagabondage' and seeks to 'ground or 'root' their philosophy in long-term residence in one place. (Heise, 2006b, p. 22) Within the dominant local outlook in ecocriticism, several terminologies such as borderland, hybridity, displacement, and cosmopolitanism are viewed with skepticism and even downright hostility due to its seemingly incompatibility.

The debate toward reconciling locality/regionalism and globalization within ecocriticism in literary studies is aptly dramatized through *the House of Many Gods*, a novel written by Kiana Davenport, a native Hawai'ian/*Kanaka Maoli*. Davenport's narration focuses on the struggle of her protagonist, Ana to reorient with her ancestral heritage and surrounding landscape after years of being alienated with nature in her life in mainland America urban space. Later in the story, Ana complements her sense of place with a growing awareness of the global environmental crisis in the form of nuclear catastrophe throughout her interaction with a Russian filmmaker, Nicolai. The brief illustration articulates how Davenport's environmental outlook is both rooted in the local tradition of indigenous Hawai'ian while embracing the global which is in line with the emphasis of this study.

Prior analysis of Davenport's fictions, such as *the House of Many Gods* and *Shark Dialogues* focuses more on acquiring a sense of place instead of a global environmental outlook. An article by Toyosato (2000) foregrounds a shifting paradigm from race oriented identity of being Hawai'ian to cultural identity based on identification with the land. Toyosato problematizes this issue through the character of Pono, a pure-blood Hawai'ians and her four granddaughters as a result of mixed - race marriage. She argues that the narrative seeks to negotiate Hawai'ian conception of 'who is indigenous' by a shared value of *aloha aina* (love and respects for the land) which is held by Pono's mixed-race descendants. (p. 75) This ancestral epistemology also becomes a pivotal theme in *the House of Many Gods* as argued through a reading by Indriyanto (2018). His prior study compares Ana's alienation with nature through her life in urban area with her abandonment of *aloha aina* conception, based of love and reciprocity with nature. He argues that acquiring a sense of place is the first step of reorienting oneself within a sustainable environmental outlook. Different with prior analysis of Davenport's narration that emphasizes locality, this paper offers a broader outlook in perceiving environment by foregrounding issues such as nuclear contamination and radiation as a global issue.

Locality and Global Theory in Ecocriticism

Discussing about the skepticism and even outright hostility environmentalist movement and ecocriticism possesses toward theory of globalization is inseparable with the primacy of locality in American environmental thoughts. As illustrated by Heise (2008, p. 28), localism stresses that in

order to reconnect with the natural world, individuals need to develop a sense of place by getting to know the details of their surrounding ecosystem. The necessity of reorienting human with the non-human world in their close proximity criticizes modernity and the resulting alienation from the natural world. This founding concept derives from Romantic tradition that celebrate untamed nature especially through the writing of Emerson and Thoreau. Thoreau famously remarks that “that majority of humankind ‘lives of quiet desperation...and believed that humanity could find truth and happiness in nature’” (in Phillips, Ladd, & Anesko, 2006, p. 18). As a criticism toward the rapidly growing capitalism and consumerist culture, Thoreau advocates for a return of self-sustained lifestyle depended from the land through his example of living in Walden Pond. His worldview, compiled through his book, *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (1854) emphasizes the importance of recognizing the natural world surrounding humanity through his advocacy for the preservation of American wilderness, and as a successful practitioner of a sustainable agrarian lifestyle. (McKusick, 2010, p. 169)

Through her book, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (2008) Heise criticizes the dominance of locality in American environmental discourse and the resulting hostility toward globalization theory. She contextualizes how the primacy of localism in U.S environmentalism restricts the intersection between the local and the global. In her words, the “limited focus on the local ultimately falls short of acknowledging the impact of global forces on specific places and thus runs the risk to miss salient factors that go into the definition and experience of the local.” (2006, p. 225) In Heise's perspective, although U.S environmental movement held firm to the conception that identity is constructed by the local, they merely only limit what constitutes the local into one singular perspective only. In this case, the development in cultural theories which stresses that local and national identities depend on excluded others, that “identities are at their core made up of mixtures, fragments, and dispersed allegiances to diverse communities, cultures, and places” (Heise, 2008, pp. 44-45) has not entered the lexicon of U.S environmentalism which primarily derives from Anglo-American Romanticism.

As aforementioned, the hostility concerning reconciling locality and theory of globalization has been a prevailing factor that restrict the acceptance of globalization in U.S environmental discussions as the central tenet of ecocriticism. In her book, Heise articulates that one solution to solve “the partially essentialist rhetoric of place as well as by its lack of engagement with some of the insights of cultural theories of globalization” (2008, pp. 51) is to incorporate two prevailing tenets of globalization, which are deterritorialization and cosmopolitanism. Heise stresses that in this global world in which everything is connected to everything else, “deterritorialization implies that the average daily life, in the context of globality is shaped by the structures, processes, and products that originate everywhere.” (2008, pp. 54) The idea of deterritorialization then emphasizes how events outside our immediately localities are increasingly consequential to our cultural experience. (Hall & Tucker, 2004, p. 144) The availability of international produced and distributed customer products and the presence of media such as radio, television and the internet cause an in-depth experience of place more difficult to attain. Furthermore, concerning environmental issues, problems such as climate change, depletion of the ozone layer and also the melting of the polar iceberg are no longer a local problem but affect the worldwide population.

Stressing that localism regarding environmental movement can no longer ignore the circumstances that environmental degradation can be experienced globally, Heise articulates her conception of ‘sense of planet’ which complements ‘sense of place.’ Heise considers sense of planet as a sense of how political, economic, technological, social, cultural, and ecological networks shape

daily routine. (2008, pp. 55) In her elaboration, sense of place remains necessary as the point of departure for understanding the global network. She illustrates how

“the shipping out of waste from one’s own city might affect the community where it will be deposited. This inquiry opens the local out into a network of ecological links that span a region, a continent, or the world.” (2008, pp. 56) The challenge of environmental movement, per se, is to recognize that local environmentalist issues are intricately inside a wider system which transcends national and regional boundaries.

In line with the development of cosmopolitanism, Heise criticizes identities which are defined based on nation or nationalism and instead points forward the issue of hybridity, migration, borderland and diaspora as the counter to the hegemonic structure of national-based identity. The significance of cosmopolitanism in the analysis of environmental discourses lies in the way they highlight how attachments to a particular category or scale of place can shift in value and function when considered in different political contexts. (Heise, 2008, pp. 59) In other words such discourses need to be located in a thorough cultural and scientific understanding of the global, which Heise coins as “an environmentally oriented cosmopolitanism or ‘world environmental citizenship’”. She formulates her conception of ‘eco’- cosmopolitanism as “reaches towards the –more than human worlds- the realm of non-human species, but also that of connectedness with both animate and inanimate networks of influence and exchange.” (2008, pp. 60-61) Her theorization regarding an ‘eco’ cosmopolitanism enriches the previous concepts of cosmopolitanism which is too anthropocentric in outlook as only considering the human social experience instead of environment as a whole.

Methodology

This research is a qualitative research in which the primary data is a novel entitled *the House of Many Gods* (2007) written by Kiana Davenport. Qualitative research aims to explore and understand individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. (Creswell, 2009, p. 29) As a qualitative research, the data is not about statistics or numeral account but more on written data such as transcript, quotation, and other written sources. The nature of its data causes qualitative research to better be able to decipher complex analysis regarding phenomena compared to quantitative method. (Strauss & Corbin, 2008, p. 19) Qualitative research is open-ended in which interpretation plays an important role in order to explore and understand the meaning individual or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The analysis is conducted in a descriptive-interpretative way, several quotations in the texts are underlined and analyzed in line with the theory of sense of place and sense of planet as it is elaborated by Heise.

Furthermore, the analysis is conducted within the framework of transnational American Studies. Transnational American Studies is intertwined with the increasing interest in approaching the study of US culture in a more international, in terms of both the questions being asked and the resources deployed to answer them. (Heise, 2008, pp. 381) The increasingly global scope of American Studies challenges the prior conception of Traditional American Studies – as coined by Rowe – regarding a single dominant culture assimilating immigrant cultures in a gradual, evolutionary manner and instead proposes questions regarding negotiation, identity formation, hybridity, cosmopolitanism. (Rowe, 2010, pp. 2–3) It can be asserted that Transnational American Studies is the internationalization of American Studies with a more global outlook in perceiving America. Yet it should also be noted that the aim of Transnational American Studies is not to reconfigure the object of study itself as to bring a different range of institutional, disciplinary, and

cultural perspectives to bear on it. (Heise, 2008, pp. 382) In line with the trans nationalization of American studies, this study offers a more global outlook in perceiving environmental crisis.

Sense of Place and Sense of Planet in Davenport's *the House of Many Gods*

Kiana Davenport's *the House of Many Gods* dramatizes the necessity of acquiring a 'sense of place' to reconnect with the world around us and asserts the necessity of realizing ourselves as member of a global ecosystem, 'sense of planet'. Both environmental discourses are portrayed through the depiction of the protagonist, Ana Kapakahi. Although Ana is a Native Hawai'ian/*Kanaka Maoli*, she becomes disenchanted with the situation around her homeland and she runs away to California. Her life in urbanized mainland Amerika starts to alienate herself with the surrounding natural world, symbolizing the detrimental effect of modernity especially among urban dwellers.

Her return voyage back to Hawai'i stresses her growing awareness regarding 'sense of place' and her reconnection with ancestral Hawai'ian epistemology of *aloha aina*. Davenport further stresses that sense of place is incomplete without Ana's recognition of a 'sense of planet'. Through Ana's interaction with a Russian émigré, Nicolai, she realizes how the environmental problems plagued Hawai'i in form of nuclear radiation also occurs to people across Oceania and even faraway Russia. This phenomenon articulates a broader conception of environmentalism to complement the locally based sense of place.

The story mainly takes place in small villages scattered around Wai'nae Coast, East O'ahu. The villagers, overwhelmingly Native Hawai'ians suffers from harsh living condition, having to reside alongside decayed and putrid environment due to the legacy of militarism during the Second World War. "Quonset huts on either side of the road, left over from World War II, when the military occupied the land...where families lived in them now" (2007, p. 21) Ana's status as both *Kanaka Maoli* and resident of rural neighborhood stigmatized her of being "junk kine citizens" (2007, p. 30) by the white citizens of urban Honolulu. Dissatisfied with her situation in Hawai'i, she considers her islands as a cage and becomes fascinated to live in mainland America which is represented by a vast metropolis in San Francisco. In her mind, this city is a 'city dreams of light, in which the city is waiting to offer itself to her as a raw material from which she continually constructs her new identity.'" (2007, p. 26) Her rose-tinted glasses regarding San Francisco is soon shattered as she is forced to doing odd jobs in order to survive. Moreover, her harsh life in the metropolis causes her detachment from the natural world. "Living in San Francisco, she has lost touch with nature, the elements, has become forgetful, almost ignorant, of them." (2007, p. 28).

Davenport positions Ana's return voyage to Hawai'i as a form of reorientation, both with the natural world surroundings her and her ancestral tradition as a *Kanaka Maoli*. The Hawai'ian epistemology of *aloha aina* establishes a familial relationship between the islanders and their environment based on a shared love and mutual respect. (Dessouky, 2011, pp. 254-255) Ana's arrival in her native archipelago symbolizes her growing awareness regarding sense of place, a pivotal aspect in ancestral Hawai'ian epistemology of nature. From her sensory perception and physical immersion in the Hawai'ian landscape, she begins to reintegrate herself into a 'biotic community' (Heise, 2006a, p. 12), fully embraces Hawai'ians' intimate connection with the environment. Her reorientation with the local tradition is symbolized through the sensory perception with the environment, walking barefoot in the beach and her grandmothers' coffee plantation, smelling the aroma of coffee fields and sea air.

Restless, she walked barefoot through starlit coffee fields, her senses reaching out to the land, the land giving itself back to her in luxuriant gifts: smells, night sounds, damp soil underfoot, sea air detonating high in the roof of her mouth.

She hears the blending of Pidgin and Hawaiian Mother tongue that in the mouth of soft-voiced elders become intrinsically poetics. One night, hearing the wounded music of the sea, she runs barefoot to the beach and dives into moon-shot waves. She feels the harmony of things, the bliss of letting go.” (Davenport, 2007, p. 36)

Her burgeoning relationship with the land causes Ana to further embrace her local tradition which is based on emotional attachment with *aina*. She re-learns the traditional dance of *hula*, a sacred ritual dance which contains ancestral genealogies, chants, prayers, and traditions. Davenport contextualizes the essence of *hula* as an affirmation of a holistic relationship between *Kanaka Maoli* and the natural world, “This dance and its accompanying chants tied us to the universe, made us one with the powers and currents of nature and the gods.” (2007, p. 114) This passage affirms the holistic relationship of Hawai’ian indigenous people with their surrounding based on a shared genealogy. Ana’s recollection of her past ancestry and traditions through her reconnection with nature reflects the necessity of having a sense of place to realize our position in the natural world. The following passage aptly summarizes this phenomenon,

“When we’re here, my body changes. I feel my blood thicken. There is this sense of merging with the land, the sea, I don’t feel separate anymore...” In those moment she understood that these people, and this house, would always be her solace. Her language. And her place” (Davenport, 2007, p. 117)

Davenport asserts how Ana’s recollection of her surrounding –sense of place- is further complemented with her growing awareness of being a part of global ecosystem. This conception is highlighted through two main aspects. Firstly, Ana’s celebration of her Hawai’ian landscape and also her venerable tradition does not lead into a chauvinistic position that denigrate other environmental perspectives and secondly, realization that environmental issues is no longer a local/regional problem but is borderless and global. These two aspects underline how Davenport advocates not only sense of place, but also a sense of planet. As briefly explored, this second environmental outlook, the sense of planet is often overlooked due to the primacy of locality in American environmental movements.

Through Ana’s interaction and eventual companionship with a Russian filmmaker, Nikolai Volenko –Niki, Davenport contextualizes the necessity of acquiring a sense of planet. These two characters represent two side of the spectrum, Ana represents a local perspective of Hawai’ian rootedness to place and Niki, a worldly traveler who venture all over the globe to document environmental crisis, not just in his native Russia but also around Oceania. The narration describes Niki as “a documentary filmmaker, for several years he’s been shooting footage all over the Pacific, people sick, their children sick...even the seas are poisoned.” (Davenport, 2007, p. 222-223) The prior passage summarizes the contrasting discourse of local and global from the differing perspectives of Ana and Niki.

“Please come, Ana! I invite you. You will see how I make film”

She wanted to go, she thought she did. “I’m sorry Niki. I can’t”

His voice changed, sounding almost challenging. “Ana. Can it be you are afraid?”

“Of course not. I flew to Kaua’i for the hurricane.”

“And that is the only place you ever been. Only time you stepped off this island. Perhaps you are afraid of newness? Afraid to.... expand? (Davenport, 2007, p. 225)

Through the prior dialogues, Davenport underlines how Ana's environmental outlook, her sense of place is incomplete without considering a more global outlook. In the quotation, Niki challenges Ana to come out of her comfort zone, as she is only confined in her native landscape without venturing to perceive the world outside. The narration recounted by Ana later states how “meeting him was the beginning of awareness, of how small her island world was. (Davenport, 2007, p. 48) In another words, Davenport argues how Ana's sense of place should be complemented also with acquiring a sense of planet. The recognition that Hawai'ian archipelago is intricated within a global network and ecosystem is the beginning of Ana's awareness toward sense of planet.

Through Ana's dialogues and interactions with Niki, Davenport contextualizes a more global outlook in perceiving environmental crisis. Ana increasingly adopts a broader environmentalist discourse and becomes deterritorialized –not in a sense that she becomes alienated with her surroundings as she was in San Francisco but instead recognizes that her conception of Hawai'ian environment is also shaped by the outside factors. Shared environmental issue in the form of toxic exposure to nuclear radiation that binds the two characters become the defining factor in conceptualizing a global sense of planet. A conversation between Niki and Ana underlines how the environmental crisis experienced in Hawai'i, especially areas around Wai'nae coast is also shared by other people worldwide.

“Contaminated soil. Leaking waste. They are calling it ‘toxic exposure’ Old-fashioned word is poison”

“We have it here, too. On a smaller scale.”

“Da. That is why I am going to your Wai'nae coast. Why I go to Kaua'i. Is all across Pasific. Everywhere, and never ending” (Davenport, 2007, p. 207)

As environmental issues in Hawai'i in form of nuclear radiation has become a global concern, Davenport points out the necessity of transnational collaboration to solve the environmental crisis. This transnational view is highlighted through the depiction of a multi-national conference in *the House of Many Gods* which advocates the danger of nuclear radiation and the necessity of a nuclear-free zone. The novel depicts how the speakers come from diverse regions such as Tahiti, French Polynesia, Kwajelein and Rongelap in the Marshalls and even Aborigines from Australia, binds together by the urgent necessity of combating the impact of nuclear radiation, especially toward the indigenous residents. Under the assumption that the isolated islands in Oceania resembled a contained space of a laboratory, this archipelago suffers from years of Western militarism. (DeLoughrey, 2011; Firth & Strokirch Von, 1997; Taitingfong, 2019) The global environmental outlook of nuclear radiation is employed through the recounting of several characters. Firstly, Niki recounts recollection of his past, living in close proximity of Chelyabink-65 military complex in which the populace are unaware of contaminated water.

For decades, workers at the complex had poured wastes containing millions of curries of radioactivity into the Techa river –so that even now riverbanks and fields were still alive with long-lived cesium and strontium. And for decades, people had swum with their children in the river. For the Techa, they had irrigated their field and taken their drinking water while scientists studied them and told them nothing. (2007, p. 131)

Critique toward the ongoing devastation on the environment is further addressed through a speech by native Hawai'ian activist, Lapaka. He underlines the existence of polluted waters around Makua Valley and Wai'nae Coast due to American militarism.

“our beach waters are lifeless. No fish do you see here, and very little *limu*. Dolphins and whales long ago left these waters. It will take decades to bring them back. And for the valley, we must never turn our backs. *We must be kahu o ka 'āina*. Guardians of the land” (Davenport, 2007, p. 340)

Summarizing the prior utterances, it can be underlined how Davenport advocates the necessity of acquiring a sense of planet in the light of current environmental degradation. As environmental issues vastly become worldwide problem, collaborative efforts are needed to solve the crisis. Through her narration, Davenport advocates eco cosmopolitanism, cross cultural understanding should also be complemented with ecological awareness of environmental crisis in a global scale. *the House of Many Gods* represents how environmental devastation experienced by *Kanaka Maoli* through nuclear radiation, toxic waste and sea water contamination also impacts other ethnicities regionally and even globally. Reading on *the House of Many Gods* contextualizes possible area of intersectionality between global theory and environmental criticism. The two paradigms complement each other in outlook, possessing a more global outlook in perceiving environmental discourse through sense of planet complete a sense of place which is locally oriented. A global outlook of perceiving environmentalism also aligns with Transnational American Studies which perceives America from an internationalist perspective.

Conclusion

Reading on Kiana Davenport's *the House of Many Gods* posits sense of place and sense of planet as possible area of intersectionality between globalization and environmental criticism. This intertextuality rejects assumption that embracing the global will lead into the abolishment of the local altogether. Adopting a broader outlook of environmentalism helps to comprehend environment not only in our immediately proximity but also as an interconnected system. As seen from the narration, acquiring a sense of place by itself is incomplete without realizing our position as a member of a global ecosystem. Sense of planet provides an avenue to realize that local places, ecologies, and cultural practices are intricately positioned within global networks. Furthermore, an eco-cosmopolitan outlook of environmentalism connects experience of local ecological problems to a shared understanding that environmental issues cannot be confined based on geographical or cultural boundary.

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