

# **'Third Place' in Teaching Terry Tempest Williams' Autobiography: *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*<sup>1</sup>**

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This paper examines a lecturer's and students' responses to the depiction of nature in Terry Tempest Williams' *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* in the *Environmental Literature and Criticism* postgraduate module taught from November 2013 to February 2014 at Chulalongkorn University in Thailand. I will use Claire Kramersch's 'third place'<sup>2</sup> in her theory of teaching and learning foreign literature as my theoretical framework. Kramersch defines 'third place' as a symbolic process of negotiation of meaning across different cultures: in the text and in foreign literature classroom context. She regards this 'third place' as a 'challenge' in 'intercultural learning' in which the lecturer facilitates students' understanding of plural cultures. Kramersch develops her concept of 'third place' as 'symbolic competence, an ability that is both theoretical and practical, and that emerges from the need to find appropriate subject positions within and across the languages at hand'<sup>3</sup>. This definition can confirm that 'third place' has a potential to clarify the mediation of meaning in a particular classroom context. I will demonstrate this concept in the Thai lecturer's and students' choices of primary and secondary literature and of their interpretations in the Thai social and cultural context.

My discussion of 'third place' presents how the lecturer interprets and teaches *Refuge*, and how the students respond to the lecturer's interpretation and to the text. The subject matter I focus on is the representation of nature and its meaning. The module I observed is part of the postgraduate degree programme in English. The entire lectures of *Refuge* were given in English language in five periods for nine hours in total. The lecturer made use of critical essays to introduce different approaches to the text. The lecturer started each class by asking students for responses to the reading assignment of either the work or articles about it. The lecturer not only asked students about what happens in the text, but also about how they felt about a particular situation in the text. She then expanded on the students' points and provided them with further explanation and interpretation. She also encouraged them to identify the major arguments in supplementary articles. Sometimes the lecturer asked students to present the critical essays followed by her adding, summarising and highlighting points. Because the lecturer realised that the representation of nature in *Refuge* and other essays was challenging to students, she spent the majority of time in each class explaining. My study of 'third place' analyses the data gained from my pilot interview, all of the lectures, the students' term paper and presentation, and my interview with the lecturer and the students at the end of the semester.

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<sup>1</sup> Terry Tempest Williams, *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991)

<sup>2</sup> Claire Kramersch, *Context and Culture in Language Teaching* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993)

<sup>3</sup> Claire Kramersch, *The Multilingual Subject* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), 200.

## The Lecturer's Presentation of *Refuge*

In class, the lecturer provided students with various ways to interpret *Refuge*. She used Lawrence Buell's 'Toxic Discourse'<sup>4</sup> as a concept to introduce literary features of the text. 'Ecofeminism' and 'autobiography' served to point out ecological problems in association with gender struggle. The three topics were related and reinforced each other. I will demonstrate how these aspects proposed by critics were utilised by the lecturer for her lecture, and how she relied upon criticism to interpret the text. In the first class, the lecturer accepted that Buell's article is challenging and explained the four features of 'toxic discourse'. In her view, 'toxic discourse' is a set of ideas that express anxiety. The fear of toxins in modern society is captured in language. Buell does not deal directly with *Refuge*. The lecturer used the concept of 'toxic discourse' to give examples of a critic's literary analysis and of her own interpretation.

Some examples of her response to Buell's article and to the text are evidenced in her clarification of discourse in the text. The lecturer highlighted that, according to Buell, toxic discourse is concrete representation of contaminated environment, however, Buell also remarks that it is a discourse of allegation. Buell suggests that the accusation of toxin as a cause of illness has not yet been proven. The lecturer then utilised this contradictory idea observed by Buell to analyse *Refuge*. She referred to the following passage of the text where the narrator desperately ponders about her family's disease:

I cannot prove that my mother, Diane Dixon Tempest, or my grandmothers, Lettie Romney Dixon and Kathryn Blackett Tempest, along with my aunts developed cancer from nuclear fallout in Utah. But I can't prove they didn't<sup>5</sup>.

The lecturer explained that the narrator suggests that she is certain that all the cancers that affect her family members come from nuclear tests carried out in Nevada. However, there is no way for her to find substantial evidence to prove this. The lecturer pointed out that the way in which the narrator identifies with 'the clan of one-breasted women'<sup>6</sup> represents her evidence that proves the cause:

It is like she is making connection between the illnesses that take place in her body. She is trying to explain the cause of it pointing out that actually the illnesses of her body and physical body is caused by the illness of the earth itself. However, it all may be an allegation and she is excusing. She cannot find firm proof to tell the people<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2001)

<sup>5</sup> Terry Tempest Williams, *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991), 286.

<sup>6</sup> Terry Tempest Williams, *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991), 281.

<sup>7</sup> Lecture 2

In this particular lecture, the lecturer used secondary literature to provide students with an example of how to read the novel with an awareness of existing secondary literature. She showed how the representation of the narrator as victim corresponds with Buell's toxic discourse. The lecturer further pointed out that the discourse is used by the author in *Refuge* in order to challenge the American government of the writer's actual context, too.

The 'third place' the lecturer occupies in her responses to toxic discourse in *Refuge* is her association with the environmental issues in Thailand. After the above quoted reference to the writer's political message for the American government, she describes:

Here, if we live, you know, we live in Map Ta Phut and we happen to have some kind of rashes, symptoms, headache, nostril. And if your house is surrounded by different kind of factories, how could your doctor tell you that all these rashes, symptoms come from a particular chemical? How do you know right from that particular factory? There is no way to do that, right? You can say that: 'I am sure that my illnesses are related to the cause of some kind of toxic waste, toxic disposal that come from this factory'. But you cannot really pin point that factory and that chemical cause these symptoms. So in some works that deal with toxic discourse, sometimes, scientific or medical statistics have also been used as a way to create the cause of links between physical illness and the physical environment outside<sup>8</sup>.

The lecturer's strategy to make concrete toxic discourse suggested by the text is to relate it to the contamination condition in the Thai society. In my view, this explanation functions at two levels. First, the lecturer helps students to comprehend toxic discourse in *Refuge* on the basis of the Thai context they are familiar with. Second, she suggests to them the common problems in America and in Thailand as consequences of the ignorance of the government to cope with health issues of people living in the risk areas. As Suthichai Wankaew points out, Map Ta Phut has been the site of the largest industrial park on the east coast of Thailand since the country's industrial revolution and development in 1988<sup>9</sup>. Wankaew criticises that the environmental policy and management system have failed to protect people living in that area from the factories' toxic waste and occasional chemical explosions. He asks the Thai government to take responsibility and to deal with this problem and to educate people to become aware of this issue<sup>10</sup>.

My interview with the lecturer clarifies 'third place' that she symbolically constructs in her interpretation and response to toxic discourse in *Refuge*. The process is that the lecturer acknowledges the representation of the victim in *Refuge* and in the American society, and compares this aspect with the Thai context. In our pilot interview, the lecturer explained to me the reason for her text selection and her intention to point out ecological problems in Thailand:

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<sup>8</sup> Lecture 2

<sup>9</sup> Suthichai Wankaew, 'Thai Society at Risk: Reflections in 10 Years after Chemical Warehouse Explosion in Klongteay' (My translation) in *Chemical Explosion: A Tragedy of Klongteay*, ed. Sukran Rojphaiwong, (Bangkok: Pimdee, 2001), 17-18.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 20.

The text that I have chosen would also somewhat reveal, for example, how the life of the privileged, I mean this is the whole issues of class as well, you know, people like us living in Bangkok could affect the lives of those people who live near the factories. We may never ever imagine this kind of relationship between ourselves – walking in Siam Paragon, doing shopping and those people who live for years in Map Ta Phut, for example. And this text that I have selected aims to make them to create this connection seeing their role as being complicit to the environmental problems<sup>11</sup>.

The opinion the lecturer shared with me reveals that her text selection and interpretation are significant for the need of the Thai students to learn from *Refuge*. According to her, Thai people lack ecological awareness and have wide socio-economic gaps. These factors hinder the connection between people living in the city and in the country. In addition, the way in which the lecturer views herself and students as a 'privileged' group suggests the 'symbolic self' in foreign literature study. Kramersch defines 'symbolic self' as 'the self that is engaged in intercultural communication'<sup>12</sup>. According to her, 'third place, third culture and sphere of interculturality' symbolises 'a process of positioning the self both inside and outside the discourse of the others'<sup>13</sup>. This definition is to suggest that the perception of the lecturer is the interplay between toxic discourse in *Refuge* and in the Thai context. In my opinion, the 'third place' is the process that the lecturer identifies herself and classroom from higher education context, and analyses ecological problems in the text while relating it to the similar crises in Thailand. I put this lecturer's effort into Kramersch's concept, the lecturer's strategy suggests 'symbolic dimension of intercultural competence', which is 'an approach to research and teaching that is discourse-based, historically grounded, aesthetically sensitive, and that takes into account the actual, the imagined and the virtual worlds in which we live'<sup>14</sup>.

Another example of the lecturer's interpretation is evidenced in her lecture on the topics of autobiography and ecofeminism. She read *Refuge* as an autobiographical text that presents the transformation of the self of the female protagonist into an empowered sense of self. In class, the lecturer highlighted the narrator's opening statement in *Refuge*:

I am telling this story in an attempt to heal myself, to confront what I do not know, to create a path for myself with the idea that 'memory is the only way home' I have been in retreat. This story is my return<sup>15</sup>.

The lecturer used this excerpt to identify the narrator's intention to heal herself on two levels: her mind and the ecological problem in her community. By healing the

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<sup>11</sup> Pilot Interview

<sup>12</sup> Claire Kramersch, 'The Symbolic Dimensions of the Intercultural', in *Language Teaching* (Cambridge Journals: Cambridge UP, 2011), 354.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 359.

<sup>14</sup> Claire Kramersch, 'The Symbolic Dimensions of the Intercultural', in *Language Teaching* (Cambridge Journals: Cambridge UP, 2011), 354.

<sup>15</sup> Terry Tempest Williams, *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991), 4.

mind, the lecturer meant the interaction with the natural world which allows the narrator to cope with her mother's and grandmother's death. The lecturer explained that:

Here you could see how the narrator is presenting herself as a person who has undergone losses, painful experience, traumatic experience. And through this process of writing, the reconsideration of her writing, her attempt to seek meaning of what happened to her life, she is able to re-emerge – recreate herself as a more powerful, more unified sense of self<sup>16</sup>.

In the lecturer's view, writing is an important process because it helps the narrator to learn from her life, unify her scattered sense of self, and eventually acquire her sense of self in connection with the natural environment. This new realisation of self, according to the lecturer, provokes the narrator to be aware of her role as a writer to tell her life-story to represent the destructive consequences of the nuclear fallouts and to challenge the American government.

The lecturer explained the characteristics of the narrator's new identity through the representation of self in nature. She interpreted the narrator's various interactions with nature as the 'revision' of woman and nature suggested by ecofeminist writers and critics. Her strategy to teach ecofeminism derived from Donna Haraway's 'Situated Knowledge: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privileged of Partial Perspective'<sup>17</sup>. The lecturer pointed out that, according to Haraway, ecofeminist critics identify the relationship between humans and the environment as being shaped by patriarchy. They propose 'revision' in form of narratives that tell different stories to form an alternative relationship with the natural world. The lecturer clarified the following points to students. Haraway asserts that nature is not as passive as depicted in many male writers' works, and therefore cannot be comprehended through any fixed images or generalised metaphors. In contrast, nature for Haraway is an elusive and multi-faceted agent that determines a variety of interactions and relationships with humans.

In my opinion, the lecturer's approaches to *Refuge* in light of autobiography and ecofeminism are following Glotfelty's survey of 'American literary ecocriticism'<sup>18</sup>. That is, the representation of nature in *Refuge* is constructed by a woman writer as a means to critique and reconstruct the representation of landscape in the American canon as depicted by male authors. According to Annette Kolodny's 'Unearthing Herstory'<sup>19</sup> the portrayal of the land as woman distinguishes the American pastoral from that of the Europeans. Kolodny explains that the Europeans' settlement in America has shaped their literary imagination of landscape as a woman, as an object to be colonised and subdued. What is significant in Glotfelty's and Kolodny's investigation for my study is that they consider the issue of gender in a similar way to the lecturer's engagement with the text. These two American critics deal directly with ecofeminist criticism whereas British

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<sup>16</sup> Lecture 5

<sup>17</sup> Donna J Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Women* (New York: Routledge, 1991)

<sup>18</sup> Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, eds. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens and London: U of Georgia P, 1996)

<sup>19</sup> Annette Kolodny, 'Unearthing Herstory'. in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens and London: U of Georgia P, 1996), 170-181.

ecocritic Garrard<sup>20</sup> views it as part of the history of the Western literary tradition and analysis. That is to say, in the Thai context, the lecturer's response to *Refuge* is due to reasons of practical orientation. By this I mean that, for the Thai lecturer, the ecofeminist way to interpret the text is more tangible than Garrard's history of rhetoric. To put it in Kramsch's concept, American representation of nature is the 'target culture' in the Thai 'intercultural learning' in foreign literature in this specific case. The lecturer thus tends to minimise the 'interculturality' in her interpretation.

### Students' Interpretation

My study of how the student occupies 'third place' is based on one of the student's term papers and the student's response to *Refuge* in his presentation. The assignment was a 5,000-word literary analysis of his selected text that was studied in the class. It counted 30% in the assessment of subject knowledge. The student was free to choose both the text and the topic by himself, and was allowed to either focus on one text or compare two texts. The student was encouraged to consult the lecturer on a tentative outline before writing. This term paper was assigned at the beginning of the semester and due in the final exam period. In the last class, the student had to present his paper orally. My view is that the student's interpretation does not deal with the Thai ecological problem. However, it reflects the metaphor of 'third place' in his selection of topic and his interpretation according to his gender background.

The student's title of his term paper is "'This story is my return": The Reconstruction of Self through Autobiography in Terry Tempest Williams's *Refuge*'. In this written report, the student adopts the lecturer's guideline based on her interpretation that she shared with the class. His thesis is that:

Terry's memory and identity are tied together to reintegrate her new sense of self, and her use of ecobiography to draw upon nature in the process of reforming Terry's identity which later leads her to environmental activism<sup>21</sup>.

The student points out the importance of memory in facilitating the narrator's self-recovery. This response corresponds with the lecturer's reading of the text. He refers to James Olney's *Memory and Narrative: The Weave of Life-Writing*<sup>22</sup> to guide his interpretation. According to the student, Olney identifies memories in two forms: 'the archaeological and the processual' in autobiographical text. The student then relies on this idea to demonstrate how the two features of memory are interwoven in the narrative text. He writes:

The reader is taken into Terry's healing narrative in which she is fighting with cancer. She employs her memory and reconceptualises it to cope with her illness, 'Perhaps you can help me visualize a river – I can imagine the chemotherapy to be

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<sup>20</sup> Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004)

<sup>21</sup> Term Paper: page 3

<sup>22</sup> James Olney, *Memory and Narrative: The Weave of Life-Writing* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1998)

a river running through me, flushing the cancer cells out'<sup>23</sup>. Terry recalls the conversation with her mother to visualize her chemotherapy as a river running through her. It is something natural that heals her body<sup>24</sup>.

The student highlights the representation of nature in the narrator's memory to point out this process of healing which involves bringing together remembering and writing. While the lecturer's selection of essays in her interpretation is deriving from an ecofeminist approach to autobiography, the student concentrates on the significance of memory, restoration of identity and expansion of self in nature in a gender-neutral way.

The omission of gender issue from the student's analysis implies his 'third place' where he negotiates the meaning between lecturer's interpretation and his response to *Refuge*. Kramsch considers the 'learner's third place as a place that preserves the diversity of styles, purposes, and interests among learners, and the variety of local educational cultures'<sup>25</sup>. This student shared with me in our interview his reasons for choosing to analyse *Refuge*. He said that the tone of narratives that can create the peaceful feeling made him appreciate the text. However, he felt quite uncomfortable to describe some scenes that depict the landscape as female body in the text. Another male student shared a similar feeling in his presentation. He said that:

*Refuge* incorporates the idea of gender into the text, right? For me, it's quite radical in some ways because we see at the end of the novel that a lot of women come out to fight against the patriarchal society – patriarchal government that suppresses both women and nature. But what I don't like about *Refuge* is that in her grand project to fight against the government, she does not include male members of society – she includes only female and I think that she is still stuck into binary opposition – male and female, right?<sup>26</sup>

Although the student's response was rather challenging the lecturer's interpretation, she accepted his opinion. In my view, his rejection of the narrator's ecofeminist protest indirectly calls for the male inclusion in environmental activism. This response also reflects his 'symbolic self' which is 'part of our personal and social identity'<sup>27</sup>. Kramsch, Levy and Zarate explain this construction of self in terms of the 'intercultural competence' as a consequence of the 'circulation of values and identities across cultures, the inversions, even inventions of meaning'<sup>28</sup>. The metaphor of 'third place' is that the student makes a comment on the ecofeminist values that tend to prioritise woman over man from his gender position. This gender perspective then influences his thought thinking that ecofeminism has some limitations in the dichotomy

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<sup>23</sup> Terry Tempest Williams, *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991), 39.

<sup>24</sup> Term Paper: page 6

<sup>25</sup> Claire Kramsch, *Context and Culture in Language Teaching* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993), 247.

<sup>26</sup> Presentation

<sup>27</sup> Claire Kramsch, 'The Symbolic Dimensions of the Intercultural', in *Language Teaching* (Cambridge Journals: Cambridge UP, 2011), 354.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 354.

itself. The gender struggle which is used to eliminate man's role retains gender boundary and inequality in his mind.

In conclusion, 'third place' in the Thai teaching and learning of ecocriticism involves the lecturer's and the students' interpretation of *Refuge* based on American literary criticism and on the Thai society and culture. My analysis of the lecturer's interpretation suggests that the lecturer selects and interprets *Refuge* according to the need to address 'toxic discourse' in the text and in the Thai context. That is to say, she negotiates the concept of 'toxic discourse' in the American context in association with the ecological problems in Thailand. Her discussion of ecofeminism and autobiography has an impact on students' engagement with the text. In the students' symbolic space, they present their own interest and choose to analyse the text from their social and gender identity, and slightly revolt against ecofeminism. Kramsch's theory of intercultural learning is useful in interpreting the Thai literature classroom and its responses to *Refuge* because the concept clarifies the process of making meaning and understanding of the interculturality.

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