



Book Review

Matthew Schneider-Mayerson & Brent Ryan Bellamy (Editors), *An ecotopian lexicon*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2019; ISBN: 978-1-452-96152-1.

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Some people go to the gym to grow their biceps and other muscles. In my case, I have been trying to work on my creativity muscles. Most definitions of creativity focus on novelty and usefulness (Mumford, 2003; Sternberg, 2011), although both novelty and usefulness are context-bound. For guidance on my muscle building, I consulted a book of some fame in the area of creativity, *The Artist's Way* (Cameron, 1992), which says that regularly performing two activities will boost our creativity: (1) write, preferably soon after waking up, three pages a day on any topic; (2) do something fun at least once a week. The latter task is known as the Artist's Date, and dipping into the book *An Ecotopian Lexicon*, edited by Matthew Schneider-Mayerson and Brent Ryan Bellamy, is going to be my Artist's Date for the next few weeks, and quite an enjoyable and hope-inspiring date it is turning out to be.

The book highlights words and short phrases, both long-established and recent, from different languages other than English, as well as invented words, such as the word 'cibopathy' from the comic series *Chew*, which makes reference to the protagonist's power of gaining a grasp of the entirety of a food's history just by consuming a part of it. *An Ecotopian Lexicon's* overall purpose lies in dealing with the reality we face due to the concept embodied in one term not defined in the book: 'Anthropocene.' Invented in the 1980s, Anthropocene has become an increasingly well-known term for the current geologic era in which human action plays a very large role in shaping the Earth's ecosystems, often for the worse. With the goal of enabling us to survive and perhaps overthrowing the Anthropocene, *An Ecotopian Lexicon* provides 30 entries, each with a definition, a pronunciation guide, and an accompanying essay which explains the entry's use in its original context, describing its relevance to our lives in the Anthropocene and suggesting how to apply it in English or other languages. A further section contains artists' responses to 14 of the entries. In a practical move I had not encountered before in an academic work

of this kind, readers can purchase mugs, stickers, t-shirts, etc.¹, with proceedings going to climate justice initiatives. Other innovative ideas included in this publication include the editors' suggestions on what to do with the book after reading, such as leaving it in a library or waiting room for others to find. Once my dates with the book conclude, I plan to pass it on to students at the university of one of the book's editors. I showed the book to them at an open house for an organization that campaigns for reduced consumption of animal-based foods, and they expressed great interest.

I have been impressed by the book's essays so far in terms of the breadth of ideas presented. Linguistics and environmental topics are certain to be found in a book entitled *An Ecotopian Lexicon*, but this volume offers so much more. Ideas originate from fields as diverse as anthropology, biology, chemistry, economics, geology, history, mathematics, meteorology, musicology, neurology, nuclear physics, paleontology, philosophy, photography, poetry and other literature, and psychology. One of the essays is a 10-page essay inspired by the Bengali word 'godhuli' (go-dhu-lee), which refers to the time near sunset when the cattle return home. A quote from this essay speaks eloquently to the purpose of the book and its emphasis on environmental justice (p. 90):

"What is most enticing about this word, 'godhuli', is that it captures the luminescence that underwrites our physical existence on this planet. Like the cattle traversing an Indian field, it reasserts our relationship with and need for a place of refuge". The essay's author, Malcolm Sen, goes on to quote Haraway (2015, p. 6):

"Our job is to make the Anthropocene as short/thin as possible and to cultivate with each other in every way imaginable epochs to come that can replenish refuge. Right now, the earth is full of refugees, human and not, without refuge"².

The most imaginative of the essays I read was the first to appear in *An Ecotopian Lexicon*, by Melody Jue, who chose the term ~*~, as an entry point for presenting thoughts on the communication of dolphins and other creatures who live in the water. Dolphins send sound waves through water to 'tickle' others. The tildes to the left and right of the asterisk are meant to symbolize the waves in the sea through which the sound travels. In another exploration of the lives of our fellow animals who live in the water, *What A Fish Knows* (Balcombe, 2016), reviews research on fish and suggests the ideas that humans might be reminded of by the fish's practices, linguistic and otherwise. For instance, fish utilize a kind of democratic decision-making, e.g., they vote with their fins on whether to follow behind when one member of their group heads toward a potential source of food.

The essay that most spurred me to think about incorporating the selected term into my own idiolect was Jennifer Lee Johnson's work on 'gyebale' (je-baa-leh), a word used as a greeting in some parts of Uganda. Just as in some cultures people greet each other by asking "Where are you going?" or "Have you eaten?", the greeting of gyebale means

¹ www.ecotopianlexicon.com

² Reviewer's note: although the following criticism may be applying a 21st century, developed world perspective to the traditional practice of godhuli, I wonder if Sen might have challenged the fact that while the cattle were offered refuge from nonhuman predators, they remained the property of humans.

“Thank you for the work you do,” thereby acknowledging each person’s contribution to society, regardless of how high or low that person’s place in the social hierarchy. It reminds me of the work that often goes underappreciated in the society where I live, work such as housekeeping, childcare and eldercare (Lam & Garcia-Roman, 2017). As I was reading the essay, the question occurred to me: what about people whose work is seen as doing harm? Later in the essay, Johnson addresses this question, citing the work of the Ugandan military who violently stifle freedom in order to advance exploitation of natural resources. Should these people be greeted with *gyebale*? Yes, Johnson contends, in the interest of maintaining dialogue: “by failing to say *gyebale* in moments when it is expected and appreciated, conversations about the potentially harmful work of another may never begin” (p. 96). I need to remind myself of this wisdom.

While Schneider-Mayerson and Bellamy’s introduction cites statistics showing a rapidly worsening climate crisis, Kristof (2019) cites other statistics that paint a brighter picture, such as increasing numbers of people with access to electricity, piped water and internet, along with reductions in child mortality, extreme poverty and such diseases as AIDS, polio, leprosy, river blindness and elephantiasis. Sadly, global heating could erase all this progress, but at the same time, the climate crisis provides opportunity and impetus for humans to make some of the changes, big and small, that we need to continue to progress. *An Ecotopian Lexicon* provides us with some of the creativity, language and concepts we need to make these very necessary changes.

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George M Jacobs serves on the boards of the International Ecolinguistics Association, Centre for a Responsible Future, Kampung Senang Charity & Education Foundation and the Extensive Reading Foundation. Among his latest works are Perspectives on a 2019 tiger-human interaction incident in Malaysia, with Fong Shong Jian, in press with Eco-Rebel, and Student-Centered Cooperative Learning, with Willy A Renandya, 2019, Springer.