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Degrowth in American Ecofictions:
An Ecocritical Study of Joyce Carol Oates's *The Falls*,
Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, and Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang*
—With A Comparison of A Chinese Ecofiction: *Wolf Totem*

Ph.D. Dissertation Theses Booklet

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Abstract

The ideology of development and growth has dominated the world since western societies entered the capitalist age. The imperative of development and growth has become the primary political and economic objective in capitalist and even socialist countries. At the same time, the public debate has been colonized by economism, growthism, productivism, scientism and consumerism. The world has been greatly transformed by the techno-economic activities of human beings. So some critics name the current era econocene or technocene. This kind of techno-economic development has caused serious ecological deterioration and many social problems. As a representation of this social reality, many literary works thematize these transformative activities of nature and ecological deterioration. Ecofiction, as a specific literary genre focuses upon ecological deterioration and social inequalities. It also promotes the politicization of the public debate on development and economic growth and decolonizes economism, productivism, scientism, and consumerism. So degrowth is an important motif of ecofictions. It is of great theoretical and practical significance to explore the degrowth discourses in ecofiction in an era of worldwide ecological deterioration. By using a series of concepts and theoretical hypotheses of degrowth theorists among others such as Giacomo D'Alisa, this dissertation investigates on the degrowth ideas and discourses embodied in three American and one Chinese ecofictions. Four canonized ecofictions have been chosen as research objects: *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975) by Edward Abbey, *White Noise* (1986) by Don DeLillo, *The Falls* (2004) by Joyce Carol Oates, and *Wolf Totem* (2008) by Jiang Rong. This dissertation demonstrates that the chosen novels all decolonize the imaginary of development and express negation of developmentalism (growthism), economism, scientism and consumerism, and thus promote the dissemination of degrowth values and contribute to the transition to degrowth society, which is based

on environmental political beliefs such as environmentalism and social ecologist values. This exploration mainly adopts environmentalist, Marxist, and social ecologist strategies as well as rhetorical analysis for the interpretation of the selected novels. This dissertation reveals the critique of economism and development obsession in American ecofictions, the exposure to dehumanizing effects of modern runaway technologies, and the deconstruction of ideology such as anthropocentrism and consumerism of the productivist societies. This dissertation also highlights the worldwide characteristics of these contemporary problems.

Key words: growth, development, degrowth, decolonization, politicization, autonomy, happiness, conviviality, simplicity

The Topic of the Dissertation

The research objects of this doctoral dissertation are American ecofictions. According to the rationale of degrowth representations, I choose three American ecofictions for the explorations. They are *The Falls* (2005) by Joyce Carol Oates, *White Noise* (1986) by Donald Richard Don DeLillo, and *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975) by Edward Abbey. As growth, development and corresponding ideology are prevailing worldwide and they have been used and misused so far in various economies and cultures, development and growth issue is a global problem; it transgresses national boundaries. In China, the worship of development and other ideologies of productivist obsession are also threatening the local ecology and brings about many social problems, just like in the rest of the world. Even though China is a socialist country, at present it is still in a productivist stage. At the same time, as a member of the world, it cannot avoid the economic, political, and cultural influences from other advanced capitalist countries which dominate the international discourses. These determines that for a long time China will be as subject to the ideology of productivism as other

capitalist countries. In addition, to some extent, socialism is a kind of national capitalism that also requires accumulation and values GDP growth which is considered as development and progress. Based on the consideration above, as a Chinese, I intend to expand the corpus by including a famous Chinese ecofiction, *Wolf Totem* (2004) by Jiang Rong, which was translated by American scholar, Howard Goldblatt, and published in the USA in 2008 for an ecocritical analysis. By this, I want to note the transnational dimensions of the problem that my dissertation addresses, rather than to do a comparative analysis of American and Chinese ecofiction or a cross-cultural extension of the degrowthist exploration of American literature.

The first ecofiction, Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* was written in middle 1970s, and *it* truly documents the early westward economic expansion of the United States. The western part was the new territory in America untouched by industrialization early on. This situation was gradually changed when the development cult extended to this virginal world. The development of the southwest part, the hometown of Edward Abbey, was a process of advancing the commodity frontier westward from the east of America. This expansion was accompanied by environmental pollution and thus social conflicts with local people. The monkey wrench gang are the representatives of the local people which resisted the modification of their land. The second ecofiction, DeLillo's *White Noise* was written about a decade later than *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. With the development of its economy, the US entered a postindustrial era. Economic growth more and more turned to rely on technology since the conventional resources for commodification were exhausted. At the same time, some environmental and social problems began to surface. *White Noise* just demonstrates the ecological risks and social sickness which scientific and consumerist America faces. Similar to *White Noise*, Oates's *The Falls* which was published in 2004 also focuses on the ecological risks and social sickness brought about by the development and progress extolled by American society. But it highlights the evil and cruel side of the growth machine which promotes and supports

the development at the price of environmental pollution, social darkness, and spiritual deterioration.

Different from the above three ecofictions, the fourth novel, *Wolf Totem*, published in 2008, reflects the utilitarian worship of development happening on Inner Mongolia grassland in north China which can be considered as an epitome of the development progress of the whole country. This ecofiction spans more than forty years, ranging from the end of the 1960s to the beginning of the 2000s. In fact, the economic development on the pastureland is a process of commodifying the grassland on which the herdsmen live. This is also a process full of conflict between the local herdsmen and the outsiders supported by the development-worshipping authority; of course, it is also a process of environmental injustice, to some extent. This development ended up with the complete destruction of the ecosystem of Inner Mongolia grassland and the oblivion of the nomadic culture in 2000s. Generally speaking, this is a story about the productivist obsession and its destructive consequence. It serves as an extension of the three American works to show the universal critique of development and its supporting ideology in the world.

The Aims of the Dissertation

This dissertation explores the representations of degrowth philosophy in American ecofictions. In fact, the philosophy of degrowth -- founded by André Gorz, Serge Latouche, and others -- is a system of a set of thought, core theories and concepts, and strategies of action that aims to realize ecological sustainability and social justice. Its thought includes political ecology, development and growth critiques, environmentalism, etc. The main discourses include decolonization of the imaginary of development, decolonization of economic ideology which dominates in capitalist society and productivist socialist society, politicization of modern technology, etc. There are some core concepts in the theoretical system, including autonomy, conviviality and simplicity. As an activist theory, it also includes a series of strategies

such as eco-communities and post-normal science. As this is not an exhaustive study, I have selected three novels among American ecofictions and one Chinese ecofiction as the corpus for the exploration. The four novels have different focuses in representing the degrowth philosophy.

In the following, I will provide more details about the content and structure of the dissertation.

The Structure and the Methodology of the Dissertation

The dissertation begins with an introduction to ecocriticism, degrowth theory, cultural ecology, the corpus for exploration, and the overall structure. Including Chapter 1, the Introduction, there are six chapters in the dissertation.

Chapter 2, “Edward Abbey’s Degrowth Discourse and Strategy in *The Monkey Wrench Gang*: Critique of Development, Ecocentrism, and Ecodefense” will introduce and analyze Edward Abbey’s masterpiece *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. Edward Abbey is famous for his calling for eco-defense, and *The Monkey Wrench Gang* is a literary exemplar of his degrowth discourse. After the introduction I will expound his critique of development, commodification, and developmentalism with instances of textual evidence from *The Monkey Wrench Gang* and other relevant works or literature. Then in the third part, I will elaborate on Abbey’s decolonization of anthropocentrism with his ecocentric claim of the intrinsic value of nature. The fourth part will discuss Abbey’s advocacy of “ecodefense” and “ecosabotage” in *The Monkey Wrench Gang* in order to resist the commodification and economic development. This chapter ends with a conclusion.

In Chapter 3 I explore the politicization of modern technology and decolonization of consumerism in Don DeLillo’s toxic novel *White Noise*. First comes the introduction to DeLillo and his famous novel featuring daily wave radioactive pollution and an ecological crisis: an airborne toxic event. In *White Noise* it is a capitalocenic world where one can find runaway modern technology and their

products, for example, television, radio, microwaves, computer, camera, refrigerator, etc. The technology of mass media is permeating in daily life and brings about wave pollution. The Dylar is a kind of high-tech-based medicine with exquisite design and workmanship. But it turns out to be an unlicensed hazardous medicine. The chemical waste, Nyodene Derivative, spilled in the airborne toxic event is also a byproduct of pesticide chemistry, a kind of modern chemical industry. The runaway modern technology is the root of ecological deterioration and crisis. The television and radio bring about wave and radiation. The airborne toxin of chemical waste causes an ecological crisis threatening human health, life and wealth, regardless of lower class or higher class. The use of microorganism to eradicate the toxic cloud is another high-tech attempt without knowing its consequence to the environment. In such a polluted environment, individuals usually have low happiness.

Besides the environmental degeneration caused by modern science and technology, there are also other dehumanizing effects of the runaway technology. Modern technology may cause individuals to lose autonomy. People living in the postmodern period suffer a lot from psychological problems such as crisis of belief and distrust to families, human alienation, fear of death, technological fetishism, and incompetent behaviors. Consumerism presented in this novel also causes heteronomy and commodity fetishism.

Chapter 4 takes a close look at Joyce Carol Oates's ecofiction: *The Falls*. The first part is an introduction to Oates (1938—) and her ecofiction, *The Falls*. In this novel, Oates interweaves the fictional story with the real-life environmental scandal occurring in the US, mercilessly exposing the ecological crisis and other problems resulted from economic development. By this she expresses her critique to the economic development in American society and thus decolonizes the imaginary of development. The first part of my exploration focuses on Oates' disclosure of the physical harm caused by the economic development in *The Falls*. Economic development destroys the local ecology and causes most local people's health to be impacted or damaged. The second section explores the social and political problems

accompanying the economic development in the Niagara Falls area. In a capitalist society development is a process of producing inequalities and political and judicial injustices. The third part examines the negative effects of economic development on the individuals in *The Falls*. The characters in the novel usually suffer from psychological problems and live without happiness, autonomy and conviviality.

Chapter 5, “Politicization of Economism in Jiang Rong’s *Wolf Totem*: The Expenses of Development in Inner Mongolian Grassland” will explore the English version of Chinese writer Jiang Rong’s ecofiction *Wolf Totem* which was translated by American sinologist Howard Goldblatt. The first part is an introduction to Jiang Rong (author), Howard Goldblatt (translator), and the *Wolf Totem*. The second part enumerates the economic exploitation based on homocentrism and egocentrism in *Wolf Totem*: homocentric (or anthropocentric) over-farming, and blind mechanization on the Inner Mongolia grassland, overhunting of wolves including wolflings and marmots, and consequential egocentric despoiling of nature: hunting swan and wild geese and ducks. The third part focuses on the aftermath of the humans’ despoiling of the grassland: wolf’s attack on the herd of warhorse and livestock, mice and rabbit disaster caused by wolf reduction and extinction, human spiritual decadence and other spiritual morbidity caused by wolf extinction, desertification by farming and grassland regression, drying-up of thousand-year-old river, sandstorm in Beijing, and the most important: extinction of the nomadic herding society in Inner Mongolia. The fourth section is the holistic idea in *Wolf Totem* expressed through Chen Zhen, Bilgee, and Uljii. The fifth section elaborates on the degrowthist actions of Bilgee and Chen Zhen including their program of protecting the wolves on the grassland against corporate hunting, Bilgee’s endeavor to protect the grassland from over-grazing and over-farming, and Yang Ke’s attempt to protect swan from being overhunted.

In the conclusion part, Chapter 6, I give a summary to all the degrowth discourses embodied in above-mentioned works, and compare their rhetorical features in conveying these discourses. I will also discuss the necessary premise of the degrowth enterprise and the effective strategies and approaches.

Latouche has noted that degrowth theory derived intellectual inspirations from ecocriticism, social imaginary theory of Cornelius Castoriadis, and the anthropological critique of imperialism (2015, 190). In my opinion, imaginary here is not enough because one needs to extend it to the philosophical realm of “ideology”. The fact that degrowth is at odds, with capitalism which is established on a series of ideology and power relations, is good evidence of this argument. In the three intellectual origins, ecocriticism provides the main theoretical bases for degrowth philosophy, while the other two are of methodological importance. This point is proved by the degrowthers’ core claim of ecological sustainability and social justice, and also the demand of social ecology. In this examination, the theoretical discourses and some basic concepts of degrowth theory will be applied. As degrowth derives inspiration from ecocritical theories, the interpretative discourses of this thesis may involve relevant ecocritical theories supportive to my argumentation besides the discourses and concepts unique to degrowth theory at the present stage. This may also be considered as a helpful experiment to perfect the theoretical framework of degrowth as it is still developing. This means I use multiple interpretive strategies, and the theories involved are various.

Because degrowth strategies and actions involve very complex economic issues that may involve technical explorations, they, to a great extent, are less fit for literary presentation; this is why few ecofictions touch upon this aspect of the degrowth topic. More commonly most ecofictions try to demonstrate the philosophical discourses of degrowth such as critique of development, growth, and their supporting ideology, namely anthropocentrism, developmentalism (growthism), etc. It is worth mentioning that Marxist criticism, psychoanalytic criticism, and some rhetorical analyses including narratological and Bakhtinian considerations will be used in the specific elaborations.

Results and Contributions

My explorations conclude that in American literature great many ecofictions present the ideas of degrowth that emerged several decades ago but has only recently been systematically formulated. Nonetheless, different ecofictions present different degrowth discourses. This, on the one hand, shows the diversity of the genre of ecofiction, on the other hand, indicates the complexity of degrowth theory as a philosophical system of both epistemology and activism.

According to my research, the exploration of the representations of degrowth philosophy in American ecofictions is a completely new topic in literary criticism. This determines that there is no existing paradigm to follow in this area. On the one hand, it follows that this dissertation will only be a starting point instead of a final culmination in the research on this topic due to the complexity of the degrowth topic and the evolution potential, on the other hand, it can also be concluded that this dissertation is also a pioneering work in this research field.

Publications Pertaining to the Topic of the Dissertation

Degrowth: An Ecocritical Study of Joyce Carol Oates's The Falls. Beau Bassin: Scholars' Press (OmniScriptum Publishing Group), 2018, pp. 45.

“Edward Abbey’s Critique of development and Ecodefense as Degrowth Strategy in *The Monkey Wrench Gang*”. *Americana, E-Journal of American Studies in Hungary*. Forthcoming in 2021. (cc. 10000 words)

Other Publications

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Conference Presentations during the PhD Program

2017, September. *The American Short Story: New Horizons* hosted by Johannes Gutenberg University, Germany. Title of presentation: “Six Features of American Short Stories.”

2017, November. *Transnational Americas: Homes, Borders and Transgressions* hosted by University of Szeged; 2017.11 Title of presentation: “The Ecocritical Idea Embodied in Willa Cather’s Frontier-pioneering Novels.”

2018, May. *5th IDEAS English Students’ Conference* hosted by Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic. Title of presentation: “On the Internalization of Patriarchal Values Embodied in ‘The Lady of the House of Love.’”