

**An Interview with Susie O'Brien
Conducted via email between
February 3 and March 1, 2014¹
Lisa Szabo-Jones**

Abstract: This interview, conducted by email between Susie O'Brien and Lisa Szabo-Jones, discusses issues of nationalism, localism, food movements/security and indigeneity, and the merging of postcolonialism with ecocriticism. In recounting the various lines that O'Brien's research takes, the interview follows the development of her innovative scholarly thinking. The discussion explores the ways in which her projects range from the local to the national to the global and unsettle clear delineations between geographical and political spheres as well as disciplinary fields. O'Brien comments on the challenges, benefits, and necessities of working within a postcolonial ecocritical framework.

Keywords: postcolonial ecocriticism, localism, globalization, resilience, food movements/security, Indigenous studies, nationalism

Susie O'Brien has been recognized as a staple voice in Canadian and international environmental humanities and postcolonial studies since the early 1990s. Her work transgresses national, local, disciplinary, cultural, and political borders, and her teaching and scholarship range across popular culture, the environment and globalization, Indigenous studies, and food movements and security issues. She has been at McMaster University in Canada since 1997 and currently directs the Cultural Studies and Critical Theory Master's Program in the Department of English and Cultural Studies. O'Brien's current research focuses on postcolonialism, the environment, and the concept of resilience in the context of postcolonial culture and ecology. The book that is to emerge

from her project, tentatively titled *What's the Matter with Resilience?*, queries the limits and usefulness of resilience through the postcolonial and ecocritical. Her study interrogates the entrenched position that the concept of resilience has acquired among environmental policymakers, governments, businesses, social organizations, institutions, and individuals as “more than simply a measure of viability in the face of change” and the way “it has come to function as a sign of the fitness, even the moral worthiness, of things in and of themselves” (O’Brien, “Profile”). While she addresses the positive value in resilience thinking—its recognition of the indivisibility between human and other-than-human systems, scales, and temporalities, and how its emphasis on complexity and flux challenges assumptions of fixed identities and singular authority—she interrogates how resilience also serves as a neoliberal catchword to negotiate and justify exploitative practices that naturalize “flux, deregulation, and ‘creative destruction’” (O’Brien, “Profile”). As part of her study, O’Brien looks at “the discipline of scenario planning, a practice used by a range of actors, from military strategists to environmental managers, for coping with a future understood to be rife with uncertainty” (“Profile”). To challenge the knowledge frameworks and politics of scenario planning, she turns to postcolonial literature as a counter-discourse that invites us to envision more equitable futures.

O’Brien’s published works include articles in *Canadian Literature*, *Cultural Critique*, *Mosaic*, *Interventions*, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, *Modern Fiction*, *Postcolonial Text*, *ARIEL*, and *Canadian Poetry*, as well as essays in select edited volumes. She and Imre Szeman co-authored *Popular Culture: A User’s Guide* (3rd ed. 2013) and co-edited *Anglophone Literatures and Global Culture*, a special issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly* (2001).

In this interview, O’Brien and I discuss the trajectories her research has taken and how her work has countered and continues to challenge many of the disciplinary and national oversights and assumptions that emerge in the fields of postcolonialism and ecocriticism, respectively. O’Brien’s work is unique in that, from the beginning of her academic career, she has always thought through the issues of both disciplines by thinking the two fields together (even as ecocriticism was in its nascent

stage). In so doing, she accentuated how the two areas are allied approaches: they are perhaps not always in agreement, but when working alongside one another rather than against their differences they form a sobering and effective partnership. O'Brien's research on food movements and security issues, for instance, and its emphasis on Indigenous social and environmental injustices attests to that alliance and, in the spirit of her current research, proves a resilient opponent of neoliberal and colonialist exploitation.

Not long after September 11, 2001, you turned to food's conceptual and material significance in relation to issues of post/colonialism, globalization, ecology, and localism. There is an intriguing movement in your work: correlations between nationalism and the United States government's advocacy for and US citizens' consumption of "home-made" food in the wake of post-9/11; North American Indigenous dietary health and a corresponding collective awareness of food politics; and a critique of the Slow Food movement as an example of white privilege. With the rapid globalization and concomitant negative impacts from increased industrialization in the last few decades, the boundaries between these issues can no longer be upheld as mutually exclusive. In this context, the shift in your research seems a natural development from your earlier writings on nationalism within a global framework. On another level, your turn to localism within a globalized network seems not so much a retreat from a focus on the nation but an acknowledgement of sorts of the ineffectuality of the nation as a player (perhaps because we know which team the nation plays for), to borrow Vandana Shiva's terms, in a de-localizing world. The turn to localism indicates that it invites the promise of antidote to globalization. Of course, there is an over-simplification in such an assertion. Can you discuss this shift in your work, and whether this claim of localism holds weight or whether there are aspects of localism that need greater interrogation? From your critique of some local movements' cultural and political oversights, it appears there are aspects of the local that remain suspect.

O'Brien: Food is a rich site through which to think about a number of things: environment, colonialism, culture, affect, subjectivity, among others. One thing that interests me is the way food embodies and also

masks the networks, and what Anna Tsing calls the “frictions” of global ecologies, economies, politics, and culture (*Friction*). So 9/11 precipitated a variety of re-localizing moves in the US, from the embrace of comfort food and home cooking to the promotion of local food as a particularly effective way to advance the goals of food security. Of course this is not all, or even primarily, what local food movements are about: there are, in addition to irrefutable environmental reasons such as reducing food miles and strengthening biodiversity, compelling arguments for local food’s role in enhancing public health, political awareness, and social engagement (Mike Mikulak’s recently published *The Politics of the Pantry: Stories, Food and Social Change* is a beautiful testament to these and other benefits). My quibble with localism concerns the impulse, evident in some iterations of it, to reduce social and political complexity, to celebrate some version of authenticity and unmediated connection to the earth. There are lots of worries here. Most notably, the celebration of an autochthonous connection with the soil has a long and dubious history, documented by Luc Ferry among others. In North America, where the embrace of local food, whether by homesteaders or urbanites, has mostly been a privileged white affair, the problems multiply: in many cases the land that’s yielding the bounty, whether home grown or bought at a farmers’ market, is unceded or still subject to treaty negotiations. Indigenous people, who often live either in food deserts, along with the other urban poor, or on reserves whose soil and water have been poisoned by local industry, ironically end up being farthest away from getting sustenance from the land. Another reason to ask questions about local food movements is tied more explicitly to neoliberalism: one of the benefits of local food that’s often cited is the value of trust, based on the ability literally to know the person who grew the broccoli or raised the chicken you eat (or, even better, to *be* that person). The desire to cut out the middle man, so to speak, falls out in maybe unpredictable but certainly problematic ways: Patricia Allen and Julie Guthman have documented the situation in the US of Farm-to-School programs. An awesome idea in principle, involving schools partnered with individual farmers to provide food for students. In practice, many of these programs end up displacing unionized cafeteria staff with vol-

unteer labour composed of dedicated, entrepreneurial parents (you can guess which kinds of schools have these resources). I'm not saying this is the only way this kind of food network can play out; only that, given the realities of scale, resources, and wider economic relations of public education in Canada as in the US, it's a complicated proposition. So without dismissing the local, I think we need to recognize its implication in broader scales (national, global) as well as its historical resonances and connection.

One of the main criticisms of ecocriticism is its championing of the local over the global. Place-based ecological thinking as the site for developing environmental awareness is crucial, and postcolonialism often stands accused of eschewing the local for the cosmopolitan. The two seem irreconcilable: while ecocriticism plants you in the ground, postcolonialism uproots you from that ground. However, there has been much work in the last few years that has come to challenge that divisibility, largely interdisciplinary work. What do you see as evoking this move to combine the two fields? And why, despite the incursion of global discourse into ecocriticism—Ursula Heise's familiar titular refrain "sense of planet"—and local discourse engaging globalization, there still seems, with the regular few exceptions, to be a slow development (or resistance) to bringing together postcolonialism and ecocriticism?

O'Brien: Postcolonialism and ecocriticism certainly took their time to come together, and the global versus local bias is part of this. But in the last decade, postcolonialism and ecocriticism have really begun to coincide in productive ways. This has, I think, to do both with developments in the fields themselves, and with the complex nature of problems in the world, which are in turn expressed in the literature and culture. In ecocriticism, the conversation has expanded to include more, differently situated voices; or maybe a better way of putting it is that it has begun to forge networks with places and disciplines that have long been concerned with intersecting problems of culture, politics, and environment, such as environmental history, political science, anthropology, science studies, and law. For example, one of the plenary speakers at the 2013 meeting of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment

(ASLE)—an organization that in its early years focused on a relatively untheorized “nature” in US literature— was Maxine Burkett, a law professor whose research focuses on climate change, poverty, and race. Postcolonialism, for its part, has weathered challenges to its continuing relevance to highlight connections between colonialism and contemporary processes of economic globalization and neoliberalism—both of which have enormous impacts on the environment at local and global scales. Rob Nixon’s work on “slow violence,” his term for the kind of environmental damage that constitutes “political violence both intimate and distant, unfolding over time and space on a variety of scales, from the cellular to the transnational, the corporeal to the global corporate” (48) has been really useful in helping to produce the kind of vocabulary that’s needed to articulate social and environmental justice problems together. And of course this kind of work is spurred by processes like climate change and disasters like Bhopal, which exceed the capacities of the individual disciplines—any individual disciplines—to comprehend. Not all of these studies begin at sites that obviously engage the global: some terrific articulations of postcolonial and ecocritical concerns have also occurred in work that, conversely, begin at the micro-local scale and move outward. I’m thinking here of studies such as Anna Tsing’s study of mushrooms that folds out into a discussion about histories of food production, colonialism, and attendant practices of race, gender, and species demarcation, and the productive interspecies relations that proliferate in the “seams of empire” (“Unruly Edges” 151). And there are writers here in Canada, like Rita Wong, who have always begun from the intersections, illuminating the threats posed by colonialism and neoliberalism to the densely entangled webs of Indigenous sovereignty, environmental health, and global justice.

You wrote in 2010 that “the environment still too often enters the conversation as an adjunct to the apparently richer, more progressive (more urban?) debates about postcolonial Canada: that is to say, it gets mentioned in the context of lists of things we should be concerned about, but is not often engaged” (“Canadian”). You are, in this instance, writing specifically about Canadian ecocriticism and postcolonial criticism, but do you

find this is still the case? Does this apply at an international scale? Can we foresee a change in this dismissal of the environment as secondary to other debates? Particularly with the urgency of climate change and its attendant consequences—war, refugees, famines, floods, severe weather, droughts—why do you think literary studies is so slow to engage environment as central? Similarly, with ecocriticism, as you mention in the same article, it is “impossible to talk about the environment in a meaningful way without addressing the history of colonialism” and, by extension, neo-imperialism.

O'Brien: It seems to me that, in lots of ways, things really have changed at the level of scholarship. Interestingly, the sites at which I saw a surprising lack of traffic between postcolonial and ecocritical ideas—such as Canadian Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (CACLALS) and Association for Literature, Environment, and Culture in Canada (ALECC)—have become really productive arenas for dialogue. Indigenous Studies has played a leading role here, which is interesting, because neither postcolonialism nor ecocriticism has much of a track record of taking Indigenous issues seriously. But the growth of Indigenous Studies over the last few years has brought to the forefront fundamental insights about the connection between environmental stewardship, health, and political sovereignty. CACLALS and ALECC have both become meeting places for Indigenous creative and scholarly work (a prominent feature of ALECC's forthcoming conference in Ontario at Lakehead University, Thunder Bay in August 2014). Not that Indigenous work is reducible to postcolonial or environmental concerns, but I think it does address and complicate them in important ways. But to return to your question about a “dismissal of the environment as secondary to other debates,” where we haven't seen a lot of change is at the institutional level. Though a healthy list of course offerings in ecocriticism was recently compiled on the ALECC listserv, we're still not seeing a lot of job ads for Ecocriticism and Environmental Humanities, except as add-ons in Social Science postings.

Yes, I agree with your last point, and I would add that this continues, too, to be mentioned as a side speciality in English Department job postings that call for national, genre, or period studies. In your 1998 article (we're going

back here, but not too far) “*Nature’s Nation, National Natures? Reading Ecocriticism in a Canadian Context,*” we can see already the beginning of your disaffection with nationalist discourses—or perhaps, suspicion of their capacity to address environmental concerns. In the article, you challenge the US-centricism of early ecocriticism, particularly as Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm’s foundational text *The Ecocriticism Reader* represents the field. You provide an overview of Canadian contributions to the field and conclude that though there was a modest output during and leading up to the publication of the collection, and despite its inclusion of one Canadian contributor, the scarcity wasn’t just a case of lack of work or being overlooked beyond Canadian borders but that Canadian ecoliterary writing “might actually be invisible” beyond its national borders. But, from the scarcity of other non-US works in the collection this can be said of many other nations as well. Of course, your observation plays on the irony of Glotfelty’s “conviction that in the future the ecocritical field would become more international” (qtd. in O’Brien, “Nature’s”). How has this changed since the book’s publication? Has ecocriticism opened up global discussion? Or has the crossover with other fields, such as postcolonialism, been partly responsible for widening ecocriticism’s international scope? And, as you asked then, should nationalist profiling matter? Should we still be trying to assert literary sovereignties (South African, Canadian, Australian, American, and so forth)? If not, what is the alternative? Are the conjoined “everyday practices of ecocriticism and nationalism” (O’Brien, “Nature’s”) as difficult to separate now as then in the context of globalization today? Or are there now other dynamics we need to consider?

O’Brien: I think part of what was going on back in the 1990s was that, while something called “ecocriticism” was being hailed (modestly) within the US as a new move to read literature through an environmental(ist) lens, similar work was going on in places not in the US, or just not under that name. Rebecca Raglon, Laurie Ricou, and Sylvia Bowerbank are among the Canadian scholars who had been talking about bio-regionalism and the “greening” of literary studies, just not under the name “ecocriticism”. And Australian work that went under the heading “Environmental Humanities” had been going on for a few years at the

time *The Ecocriticism Reader* was published in 1996. Until recently there has still been some wariness around taking up the term “ecocriticism” outside a North American context. For example, William Slaymaker once characterized ecocriticism as the latest in a long series of attempts to “white out’ black Africa”—this time “by coloring it green” (232). But then, Byron Caminero-Santangelo and Garth Myers’ 2007 collection *Environment at the Margins: Literary and Environmental Studies in Africa* argues for the centrality of environmental along with social and political concerns in contemporary literary studies in Africa. As to whether it makes sense to think not just regionally or continentally (or globally) when it comes to ecocriticism, but also nationally, I think it does, for a couple of reasons: first, the nation is a site among others that continues to shape the environmental imaginary (think: the changing salience of the Canadian North, the way we understand the relations between wilderness, rural and urban areas, etc.). Second, literature, which remains the chief site of analysis in ecocriticism, though now joined by a raft of other creative productions, continues to be taken up, both inside and outside the university (e.g., the CBC’s “Canada Reads”), by a canon defined along national lines. And finally, the non-human world may go about its business indifferent to national borders, but the laws, policies, and regulations that regulate the circulation and protection of environmental resources still operate primarily at the level of the nation state. Given the unprecedented hostility of our current (Harper Conservative) government to the environment and environmental advocacy, it’s particularly imperative that ecocriticism take up questions about how the environment gets articulated (or doesn’t get articulated) in official and popular discourses about what it means to be Canadian. This isn’t exactly the same as asserting literary sovereignty, but it might be an aspect of citizenship. So it’s good that we have a growing number of platforms through which to articulate the particular concerns of ecocriticism in Canada (including Wilfrid Laurier University Press’ *Environmental Humanities* Series, and the recently launched Digital Environmental Humanities site <dig-eh.org>) that will link Canadian environmental humanities scholarship and creative work with other projects throughout the world.

In one of your most recent pieces, “No Debt Outstanding: The Postcolonial Politics of Local Food,” you tackle the privilege and undesirable politics that surface in local food movements, particularly the Slow Food movement. You take its advocates to task for their unwillingness to engage with or off-hand dismissal of local racial or cultural injustices or exclusions, particularly those that emerge out of colonialist histories. You focus specifically on Indigenous peoples and white Anglo invader-settlers and question why they reject “the fuller, more complex story” of local food politics. Some Slow Food advocates, in their efforts to revitalize local communities through food and local ecological awareness, seem to have created, to a large extent, a variation of the old colonial narrative. The food movement becomes a means to advance other concerns and neglects the diversity of alternative place-based food movements that promote more equitable, cross-cultural, and inclusive practices.

O’Brien: I would distinguish a bit here between local and Slow Food. Both are problematic in different ways that have primarily to do with their strong associations with privilege; however, one thing that distinguishes Slow Food is its attempt (whether successful or not) to facilitate projects of ground-up globalization. So even though the Slow Food movement is concerned to preserve local foodways, it has also been active in facilitating fair, environmentally sustainable trade, for example between producers in the global South and consumers in the global North. Of course, like all consumer-based movements, it has significant political limitations; however it is important to acknowledge that it is explicitly global in its outlook and recognizes complexities of scale and circulation in a way that local food movements often do not.

If this interview is partly an “Intervention” part two, referring to your short piece on ecocriticism in 2010, is there anything else you would add now? Reading your more recent work, it seems that economics need to be considered in ecocritical thinking if it is to engage with globalization with any effectiveness. Has ecocriticism become more postcolonial because of the exploitative economic demands of globalization and the attendant environmental and cultural consequences of that exploitation? And, what of the inverse? What does ecocriticism have to offer postcolonialism? Or, as you hint

above, are these terms, postcolonialism and ecocriticism, even valid terms anymore? Should we be turning to terms like environmental or climate justice? And, if you see advocacy as a critical component of ecocritical and postcolonial criticism, how useful are these terms to non-academics? The terms stay within academia, remain insular and have no relevancy outside of the institution, hold no value. Is it worth creating terms that have value, are in synch with the public?

O'Brien: As my earlier remarks hopefully suggest, I do think a lot has changed since 2010. I do think that in addition to paying attention to economics, ecocriticism needs to engage more deeply with other disciplines including political science and, of course, science studies. In my own work currently I'm looking at the cultural politics of resilience, as a concept that has incredible currency right now as a way of talking about the capacity of ecosystems, organizations, communities, and individuals to cope with change. It's one of those ideas that's attractive because of the way it allows us to think ecology and culture together—in fact it insists that we do, and because of its capacity to reach beyond worn out binaries, such as conservation versus deterioration, balance versus chaos. But it is also dangerous because of its strong resonance with neoliberal self-help nostrums like “thriving through turbulence,” and the economic ideologies of creative destruction crisis capitalism. I'm interested in how it can articulate the intersecting projects of environmental and postcolonial literary and cultural studies. As to the continued relevance of terms, I'm not so invested in ecocriticism; I've always been a bit suspicious of its smoothness and seeming ungroundedness: the critic is everywhere and nowhere. I like “environmental humanities” both because of the politics it gestures to in using the word “environment” in place of “ecology,”² and because of its identification—kind of an awkward identification—of an institutional location whose project continues to haunt and pester our work even as we struggle to dig our way out from its foundational exclusions. And I'm still attached to the term “post-colonial” in spite of its apparent obsolescence in favour of new forms of domination. I like it because it reminds us that, in spite of living through a period of significant upheaval and change, it's not

that easy to move on: the social and environmental formations that colonialism, in all its myriad modes, sought to consolidate have proven hard to dislodge. All abuses of power can't be described as colonialism, but it's hard to overestimate its tentacular reach and entanglement with the dynamics of racism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and economic globalization. You're right that these terms don't have currency outside the academy. I'm not sure how worried we should be about that. The problems to which we address ourselves are enormous and they need to be tackled on lots of fronts. It is important for scholars and activists to talk to one another, and for that we need to work to find common vocabularies. However, I don't think that eliminates the need for theory or the need to continue to think about and use language in a way that's potentially estranging (for academics as well as non-academics). Messing with common sense is part of our job.

Thank you for taking the time to think through these questions, some of which deserve greater space for thought and debate.

Notes

- 1 Interview edited by the author with O'Brien's permission; additional edits made by *ARIEL*.
- 2 I am indebted to Cheryl Lousley for this observation.

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